Christine Litz

Foreword

On the occasion of his contribution to the exhibition dedicated to the painter and graphic artist Hans Thoma (1839–1924) at the Augustinermuseum in 2024, we visited Marcel van Eeden in his studio in Karlsruhe. The year before, he had been awarded the Hans-Thoma-Prize of the State of Baden-Württemberg. In the exhibition in Bernau in the Black Forest associated with this prize, van Eeden engaged with the racist influences that antisemitically shaped circles from the milieu of befriended art and cultural theorists exerted on Thoma.

Motivated by these contexts, van Eeden deepened his artistic engagement with the emergence, dissemination, and impact of völkisch[1] -national ideologies, as well as with racism and colonialism. A further historical point of reference and departure was provided by the town of Schwetzingen in northwestern Baden-Württemberg, where van Eeden realised another exhibition project in the town's impressive palace and palace gardens. In this context, the extensive work cycle entitled *6 August 1870* was created, which the Museum für Neue Kunst was able to acquire for its graphic collection.

In this work, several references intersect the Franco-Prussian War, the geographical proximity between Freiburg and Alsace, the connections between the collections of Freiburg's museums – the Museum für Neue Kunst, the Augustinermuseum, and the Ethnological Collection Freiburg – and the problematic anatomical-anthropological collection initiated by Alexander Ecker (1816-1887), now housed at the Albert-Ludwigs-University of Freiburg. Past and present history, and their respective blind spots, unfold their own dynamics: they render the forgotten visible and place the familiar in new contexts. In his artistic practice, Marcel van Eeden examines these complex entanglements, whose effects extend into our present.

We are delighted to introduce diverse spaces of resonance with this exhibition. We thank Marcel van Eeden for his artistically compelling and historically trail-blazing research work that underlies the work cycle *6 August 1870*. The first part of the work was presented in an exhibition at the Orangery in the Schwetzingen palace gardens, developed in collaboration with his class of art students. In Freiburg, he now continues the collaboration with students, who are developing an artistic mediation engaging with the themes of the exhibition. We would also like to thank the students for their artistic contributions under the direction of Prof. Dr. Christina Griebel and Israel Schmid. For their cooperation with the exhibition, their expert advice, and the great trust placed in us, we thank the University of Freiburg, in particular the Vice-Rector for University Culture, Prof. Dr. Sylvia Paletschek, and the Provenance Research team on colonial scientific collections, Dr. Christoph Balzer and Prof. Dr. Dieter Speck. A sincere thank you also goes to Isabel Herda for the thoughtful presentation and contextualisation of this work cycle. Likewise, we are very grateful for the collegial exchange with Nicole Landmann-Burghart, head of the Ethnological Collection at the Museum Natur und Mensch. Beate Reutter was responsible for the educational programmes. The conservation supervision of the project was in the hands of Dorothea Spitza and Lisa Beyer.

1. völkisch: a German term denoting an ethnically defined, often exclusionary concept of "the people," associated with nationalist ideology.

Isabel Herda

6 August 1870

On Marcel van Eeden's Artistic Historiography

From whose perspective is history told, which stories are left out in the process, and why? How can artistic research help to make forgotten, ignored, and suppressed histories visible? How can concealed contexts of violence be uncovered, and how can repressed colonial and racist violence be brought to light?

In his artistic work, Marcel van Eeden takes established historical narratives as his starting point and poses questions such as these. Using artistic means, in extensive cycles of works comprising images and texts, he creates his own forms of historical narration. For several years now, he has been using photography as his artistic medium for this endeavour. He photographs with an old lens and processes the photographic negatives using the gum bichromate technique, a printing process that dates back to the mid-nineteenth century. The gum bichromate print, which allows the photographic image to be shaped and interpreted through soft, slightly blurred contours, became widely known primarily through its use in art photography around 1900. Van Eeden is drawn to this aesthetic because it renders visible the image between photography and painting. The gum bichromate print lends the photographic image its own distinct temporal dimension, connecting the photographic present with an imagined past, and making it visually tangible that we always view the past from a present-day perspective. With the painterly softness of black-and-white printing, the images convey a timeless, sombre, weighty atmosphere. Every hand-pulled print bears traces of its making and handling, imperfections and gaps, as though the artist wishes to strip photography from the outset of its attributed authority of this is how it is. Interspersed among the sequence of gum bichromate prints, on an equal footing, and of the same dimensions, are text panels displaying historical quotations. All traces, the visual and the text-based, the present and the past, run alongside one another. The artist leaves it to the viewer to draw connections between word and image. Van Eeden's artistic practice can be understood through Eva Kernbauer's concept of "anachronic historiography": an approach that breaks open the chronologically linear sequence of past, present, and future by interweaving different temporalities.[1] For Kernbauer, anachronic historiography is a tool that makes it possible to understand history not as closed, but as open, contradictory, and politically potent. She conceives of it as an approach in which historical narratives are linked to contemporary debates and overlooked histories are reactivated.

In this sense, van Eeden's new cycle of works, *6 August 1870*, can also be understood. In it, the artist examines the Franco-Prussian War (1870/71), in which North African colonial soldiers fought for the first time alongside France against German troops, and in doing so follows the life story of the Algerian soldier 'Abdel Kader Ben Ladsche', whose traces extend into the present day.[2] The spelling of his name proves to be an act of appropriation, since we do not know what he called himself. Van Eeden cites various documents: he is referred to as "Abdel Kader Ben Ladsché" in Albert Schinzinger's 1873 report and similarly without the French accent mark in Alexander Ecker's 1878 catalog; in the International Red Cross register from 1870, he is listed as "Abd-el Kader-Laoché. No source bearing

his original name in Arabic script has yet been found. A possible historically-critical modern spelling of his surname would be ‘Ben Lahcen’, and that interpretation is followed here.[3]

What becomes apparent, however, is how the question of naming reveals the problematic nature of engaging with historical documents, a tension the artist continues to uncover in the course of his artistic research. Drawing on reports, documents, and conversations, van Eeden pieces together elements of Ben Lahcen’s biography. He traces the routes of his regiment and follows the verifiable and attributed traces to seven locations: from Freiburg to Schwetzingen and Wœrth, then onwards via Tunis to Algiers, and further to Oran and the neighbouring Mostaganem.

Freiburg–Schwetzingen–Wœrth

The exhibition of Marcel van Eeden’s work begins with images of a stele outside the Anatomical Institute of the University of Freiburg. Until 2021, it bore the bust of Alexander Ecker (1816–1887), an anatomist and anthropologist, both in teaching and research. The bust had been created in 1890 by the sculptor Hermann Volz (1847–1941), who was then highly regarded and taught at the Karlsruhe Academy of Fine Arts. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter Movement, it was spray-painted in 2020/21 and ultimately dismantled by the university. Alexander Ecker had come under political scrutiny because the collection he founded, and which was continued into the twentieth century, also contained the remains of people from contexts of colonial violence. The spray-tagged stele with its inscription was, however, left as it stands, and is now to be placed under heritage protection: without the bust – as a memorial to colonial crimes and those committed in the name of racial theory.

In 1878, Ecker had published a catalogue documenting the holdings of his twenty years of collecting activity. Among those holdings were the remains of Ben Lahcen, who had died in 1870. He had fought on the French side in the Franco-Prussian War. On the eponymous 6 August 1870, he was wounded in the Battle of Wœrth/Frœschwiller in Alsace and taken prisoner by German troops. Three months later he died in the field hospital in Schwetzingen. His body, however, was not buried in the soldiers’ cemetery; instead, it was dissected and preserved, and his skull and hip bone were sent to the anatomical-anthropological collection in Freiburg.

This doubly tragic fate of Ben Lahcen – the death owed to the war and the undignified treatment of his corpse – is the subject of the first part of van Eeden’s cycle, which moves from Baden to Alsace. The occasion for this engagement arose from an invitation by the Schwetzingen Palace Garden administration to hold an exhibition – together with his class at the Academy of Fine Arts Karlsruhe – in autumn 2024. There, van Eeden’s interest was captured by the garden mosque, constructed in the late eighteenth century, which was not built as a place of worship for Muslims but as a decorative garden structure serving as a projection surface for European Orientalist fantasies. During the Franco-Prussian War, the garden mosque and the Zirkelbau (semicircular crescent building) were used as a military hospital.[4] Among those housed there were French colonial soldiers from North Africa, including Ben Lahcen.

The artist’s book opens with images of Schwetzingen – the starting point of the artistic project. Van Eeden begins with a photograph of the Zirkelbau’s display depot, where the original garden sculptures are kept. The brightly lit labels attached to the plinths, bearing each work’s identifying text, make the contemporary museum context visible, while the painterly interplay of light and darkness inherent to the gum bichromate process lends the images a sense of timelessness. Van Eeden has framed the image so that the foreground is dominated by a diagonally positioned sphinx figure, a form combining the head and upper body of a woman with the lower body of a recumbent lion. In eighteenth-century Europe, the sphinx was the very embodiment of the Orient. Through the image of the sphinx, the artist introduces a racist pattern of thinking that is deeply intertwined with a song lyric quoted within the cycle of works, in which African Tirailleurs are compared to apes.[5]

Van Eeden’s photographic gaze into the Schwetzingen Palace Gardens is marked by ambivalence: the rigidly composed garden layout and the 18th-century building reminiscent of a mosque, alongside empty café furniture and a delivery van parked in front of the Orangery, or a skull lying as if placed there by chance. Many questions arise: What here is fiction? What is the present, and what is the past? And which past is being remembered? Non-linear entanglements between past and present are continued by van Eeden in his series of gum bichromate prints from Wœrth/Frœschwiller, a small town in Alsace around which the battle of 6 August 1870 took place. To this day, that terrible event, in which approximately 20,000 soldiers in total were killed or wounded,[6] continues to shape the identity of the area. Van Eeden’s gum bichromate prints, made in this area, show monuments to troop formations, isolated gravestones, wooden soldier figures, the annual torchlit procession on 6 August, and the uniforms and helmets of soldiers recovered over 150 years ago now displayed in a museum. In his sequence of images, van Eeden focuses above all on today’s culture of remembrance, and the horrors of the war recede entirely into the background.

Only the quotations accompanying the Schwetzingen and Wœrth picture sequences bring to light the context of violence within which the fate of Ben Lahcen was determined: van Eeden drew the sparse details – name, age, wound sustained at Wœrth, death on 16th November 1870 in the Schwetzingen field hospital – from the catalogue compiled in 1878 by Alexander Ecker and from the post-mortem report of Albert Schinzinger, who had directed the reserve field hospital in Schwetzingen during the Franco-Prussian War and became Chair of Surgery in Freiburg in 1871. This context of violence was long disregarded; on the contrary, the dehumanising procedure was even justified by the scientific interests of the time. The language of supposedly objective science permits no ambivalence, no indeterminacy, and therefore no doubt regarding the very practice that reduces the human being to an object. The practice of typologising, cataloguing, and archiving human skulls, developed by Ecker, is understood by van Eeden as a significant stage in a development that contributed to the construction of a racist conception of humanity and later gave rise to a worldview shaped by Social Darwinism. Eugen Fischer (1874–1967), the forerunner of National Socialist racial theories, who himself directed the anatomical-anthropological collection in Freiburg until 1927, cited Ecker as his role model.[7] The dehumanisation was continued and reproduced in the teaching collection for decades. It was not until 2001 that the University Archive, and subsequently the Provenance Research Unit, took over responsibility for the holdings, and has ensured that the deceased now rest in a purpose-built space.

Tunis – Algiers – Oran – Mostaganem

Van Eeden engages with the question of how a person’s dignity was violated through colonialist and racist practices, and how his artistic research can contribute to making this suppressed history visible. He therefore inquires into the origins of Ben Lahcen, turning his gaze from death back to the beginnings. The historical source material is sparse and contradictory, a circumstance that led van Eeden to pursue further traces himself, to seek information from military archives, and to exchange views with historians. In doing so, he was able to piece together small fragments and bring Ben Lahcen’s membership of the second regiment of Tirailleurs, originating from Oran/Algeria and garrisoned in the barracks at Mostaganem, into

the discussion within the series.[8] The interspersed quotations from the 1880s also allow Ben Lahcen's origins to be recognised as part of colonial history. The regiments of colonial soldiers "[…] serve as volunteers under certain conditions," van Eeden quotes from a text of the 1880s.[9] The quotations encourage a critical engagement with the historical texts: what does 'as volunteers' mean, and what are 'the conditions'? And what might that have meant for a young Algerian who entered the French army at the age of seventeen?[10]

The research takes van Eeden to Tunis,[11] Algiers, Oran, and Mostaganem, where he photographs urban life, streets, buildings, and people. What do we see in this? Which histories, and which histories of violence, constitute our present? The accompanying historical texts strike a colonial-racist tone, but how are other cultures and ethnic identities spoken about today?

Why do certain histories remain hidden, what structures of power are at work – and what is artistic historiography capable of achieving? The photographs taken in the course of this search for traces, and the texts cited, bring past and present together in a complex configuration that permits questions, places contradictory statements side by side, and thereby calls into question the supposed objectivity of scholarly research. Even where they make a failure visible in the sense of historical research, substituting ambivalence for certainty and creating a diffuse, indeterminate atmosphere, van Eeden's artistic practice opens up new spaces for memory and reflection – a coexistence of "artistic, historical, and scholarly worlds," as Eva Kernbauer describes it – which eludes the otherwise customary strict separation between them.[12] In this sense, one may also regard the gum bichromate print from the series depicting the University of Mostaganem, not far from Oran, which once served as the barracks where Ben Lahcen was stationed. Today it houses the city's University and Academy of Fine Arts. Van Eeden has made initial contacts there.

1. Eva Kernbauer, Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions Since 1990, New York 2022, p. 8.
2. Eberhardt Kettlitz, Afrikanische Soldaten aus deutscher Sicht seit 1871. Stereotype, Vorurteile, Feindbilder und Rassismus, Frankfurt am Main 2007, p. 64.
3. This spelling we discussed with Arabists is also only one possible option.
4. Albert Schinzinger, Das Reserve-Lazareth Schwetzingen im Kriege 1870 und 1871, Freiburg 1873, p. 6.
5. Philipp Nickel, Ein gefangener afrikanischer Turkos. Komisches Lied, Nürnberg ca. 1870, p. 2, cited in Marcel van Eeden, 6 August 1870, p. 57.
6. https://www.alsace-verte.com/de/lalsace-verte/terre-dhistoire/la-guerre-de-1870-les-champs-de-bataille-des-4-et-6-aout-1870/ [last accessed: 17 April 2026]
7. Cf. Daniel Möller, Die Geschichte der Anthropologischen Sammlung Freiburg. Entstehung, Zusammenführung, Verlust, Marburg 2015, p. 14.
8. Eric de Fleurian email to Marcel van Eeden, 7th February 2025.
9. Bernhard Schwarz, Algerien (Küste, Atlas, Wüste) nach 50 Jahren französischer Herrschaft, Leipzig 1881, p. 368, cited in Marcel van Eeden, 6 August 1870, p. 82.
10. I am grateful to Dieter Speck for sharing this information from his recent research.
11. A first trace led van Eeden to Tunisia, as Ben Lahcen's remains were initially recorded in the University of Freiburg's documents as "Cranium from 'Tunis'."
12. Cf. Eva Kernbauer, Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions Since 1990, New York 2022, p. 14f.

Fabian Goppelsröder

Reeling at the Abyss...

Marcel van Eeden's Gaze into History

I

"Temporal vertigo" (Zeithöhenangst) was the term the Dutch director and author Dick Tuinder gave to the underlying mood, the driving force of Marcel van Eeden's artistic work.[1] The past as an abyss that makes one's head swim. The Schopenhauerian shudder, not at the prospect of non-existence after death, but when looking back at the history that preceded one's own birth. For three decades, van Eeden's painterly charcoal drawings have unfolded the dark cosmos of a prehistory in whose shadow we disappear, one's own biography seeming nothing more than a marginal anecdote within the uncontrollable totality of human stories.

Yet "temporal vertigo" is also the consequence of that dread which Walter Benjamin described, only a few weeks before his suicide on 26th September 1940, in a brief reflection "On the Concept of History": "There is a painting by Klee called Angelus Novus. It shows an angel who looks as though he is about to move away from something he is staring at. His eyes are wide open, his mouth is agape, and his wings are outstretched. This is how the angel of history must look. He has turned his face towards the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. He would like to stay, to awaken the dead, and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise (...). This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm."[2]

During the 1930s, Benjamin set down these thoughts in the face of European fascism and a political left that appeared helpless against it. After the Second World War, the catastrophe of the twentieth century then revealed itself in its full dimension: the industrial mass-murder of the Holocaust as the singular culmination of a deeply rooted antisemitic and nationalist disposition; civilisational and cultural progress as a disaster at which one stares at always too late, eyes wide-open, mouth agape.

At the latest in his engagement with the work and persona of Hans Thoma, van Eeden's artistic practice condenses thematically around the socio-aesthetic significance of this völkisch*[3] -influenced mode of thought. Thoma's journey from Karlsruhe to Amsterdam for the great Rembrandt exhibition of 1898 is more than merely a touristic event. Rembrandt's prominence in Germany was also bound to the publishing success of the cultural-pessimist völkisch antisemite Julius Langbehn, whose book "Rembrandt as Educator" distorted the painter into a romantic "Ideal German" and set him in opposition to a rational, "Jewish" modernity. Thoma was a close friend of Langbehn and shared similar worldviews. Like the painter's Black Forest landscapes, his journey in 1898 appears in a new and decidedly problematic light against this backdrop. Van Eeden seeks to uncover this historically subcutaneous tension. In place of drawings - too subjective, too closely bound to the artist's own hand - he substitutes his own photographs of places Thoma must have passed through on his journey, printed as gum bichromate prints. Photographic present mingles with the blurred nature of a printing technique from the mid-nineteenth century, creating an additional third time-state that eludes historiographical order and atmospherically persists throughout van Eeden's images. In a quasi-Benjaminian method-

ology, the works form, as a series, a constellation in which the overlooked and the unconscious become visible. The abyss of history is part of a historical complexity in which the interpolated antisemitic quotations from Thoma bear witness above all to a world whose multilayeredness resists any simple judgement.

Van Eeden's artistic collection of traces is thus far more than the self-righteous indictment of one fortunate enough to have been born after the abysmal event of the Shoah. It concerns itself with the rupture within what appears to us as progress, with the abyss of historical narrative that produces in us a temporal vertigo.

II

In November 1870, the soldier Abdelkader Ben Lahcen died in Schwetzingen, near the Odenwald, some 2,000 kilometres from his home in the region of Oran, Algeria. Ben Lahcen was part of a Colonial Troop that fought on the French side in the war against Prussia and his allies. Three months before his death he had sustained a gunshot wound in combat and was eventually transferred to the field hospital set up in the palace gardens at Schwetzingen.

"Abdelkader Ben Ladsche [Lahcen[4]], wounded 6 August, transferred from Mannheim October 15th. Gunshot wound through the left back at the level of the tenth thoracic vertebra; the tenth rib fractured, the pleural cavity opened, pleuritic exudate extending into the intercostal space of the third rib; from the wound poured putrid pus; toward the end of October, hectic fever and colliquative diarrhea set in, to which the patient succumbed on November 16th.

Behind the horrors of war, the case of Abdelkader Ben Lahcen also reveals a history of cruelty deeply woven into Western culture. After his death, his body was not buried, not repatriated; it was not returned to his family. Instead, it was dismembered and parts of the skeleton were handed over to the Alexander Ecker Collection. Alexander Ecker was a professor at the University of Freiburg in the mid-19th century and one of the leading German anthropologists of his time. Perhaps his best-known project was the creation of an anthropological collection that eventually came to include more than 1,500 objects. The bones, predominantly skulls, were brought in from around the world. In doing so, Ecker also benefited from the imperialist access afforded by the colonies, obtaining amongst other means crania from Egypt through a doctor practising in Cairo, or indirectly through the Imperial German Consulate General, skulls "from the caravan cemetery of Tunis," all shipped to Freiburg.[5] A large proportion of what were originally more than 1,300 skulls remains at the University of Freiburg to this day – no longer in the university museum or archive but in a specially created room. Among them is the skull of Ben Lahcen.

Van Eeden understands Ecker and his collection as a sign of the formation of a völkisch* racism whose foundation is not crude chauvinism but ostensibly objective science. A development that, by the end of the century, had established "scientific racial research" in leading institutions of the German Reich. During the Colonial Exhibition of 1896 in Berlin, people from the colonies in particular were measured in minute detail, photographed and catalogued. Only a short time later, skulls of killed Herero from the Reich-occupied territory of present-day Namibia enabled the kind of anthropometry on the basis of which those "races" were constructed to which peoples and cultures could then be accordingly assigned. In continuation of eighteenth-century Enlightenment, this form of anthropology understood itself as a further step out of the immaturity of mythological thinking. What is in fact already visible here is what Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, against the backdrop of National Socialist crimes, sought to elaborate as the dialectic inscribed within the Enlightenment itself: the relapse of our striving for reason and progress into barbarism. Benjamin's catastrophes at the very centre of history.

With a series of more than fifty gum bichromate prints and twenty interpolated quotations, van Eeden retraces Ben Lahcen's path in reverse from Freiburg via Schwetzingen to France and Algeria, as a kind of restitutive gesture that does not heal what has been broken but renders it visible in its own way. The inhumane war, the undignified death in the field hospital, all of this is continued in its own manner by the dehumanising reification of Ben Lahcen's corpse. The degradation to the object of an ostensibly scientific, in reality scientifically racist, measurement of his skull; the classification as a specimen within the grid of an anthropology for which measurement data severed from individual life forms are the sole basis of its research. Van Eeden locates the true horror of history in this seamless connection between the wartime biography of Ben Lahcen and his fate after death. War and the practice of measurement share the same aim: domination and control, power over the Other. It is precisely in this respect that Ben Lahcen's case extends far beyond his own history. It is an example of the close binding of empowerment to structural exclusion and suppression. It points not only to the entanglement of the knowledge practices of scientism with a politics of imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century. In van Eeden's engagement with the case of Ben Lahcen, the connection between sociological objectification and quantitatively based criminalisation also resonates, as does that between self-optimisation by means of "trackers", as we know it today, and the rise of a new, cybernetic fascism. One must draw the arc this far in order to understand where temporal vertigo truly unfolds here. Perhaps Benjamin's conception of history as a backward glance at the catastrophes of the past can be transposed into the idea of traversing a narrow ridge. A narrow ridge between creation and destruction. To the right and left, endless depth. Ahead and behind, nothing but the sight of an uncertain path. It is not a storm from Paradise that drives us forward. Rather, it is the fear of looking down, falling.

In his work, van Eeden's artistic research compels himself to investigate this abyss; and to keep shifting the gaze, in series of images, texts and exhibitions, ever further. "Temporal vertigo" does not lead here to a state of paralysis in the face of history's horrors. It becomes the condition of an artistic new beginning.

1. Dick Tuinder: „De moleculen die ik nu ben, waren er altijd al". Marcel van Eeden, kunstenaar met tijdhoogtevrees, in: De Groene Amsterdammer (5th July 2003) no. 27.
2. ...as Walter Benjamin formulated it with reference to Paul Klee's Angelus Novus (Walter Benjamin, On the Concept of History, Frankfurt am Main 1988, p. 12).
3. völkisch: a German term denoting an ethnically defined, often exclusionary concept of "the people," associated with nationalist ideology.
4. Here we use a possible modern spelling, cf. Isabel Herda, p. 7.
5. Cf. Julia Rensing's article "Fest auf dem Sockel. Der Schädelsammler Alexander Ecker wird in Freiburg noch immer geehrt" in: iz3w, November/December 2020, pp. 14–16, as well as the catalogue compiled by Ecker himself, now available as a digital facsimile at: https://dl.ub.unifreiburg.de/diglit/freiburg1878 "Catalog der Anthropologischen Sammlungen der Universität. Nach dem Stande vom 1. April 1878", p. 41. Daniel Möller's study "Die Geschichte der Anthropologischen Sammlung Freiburg. Entstehung, Zusammenlegung, Verlust" (2015) also provides important insights here.