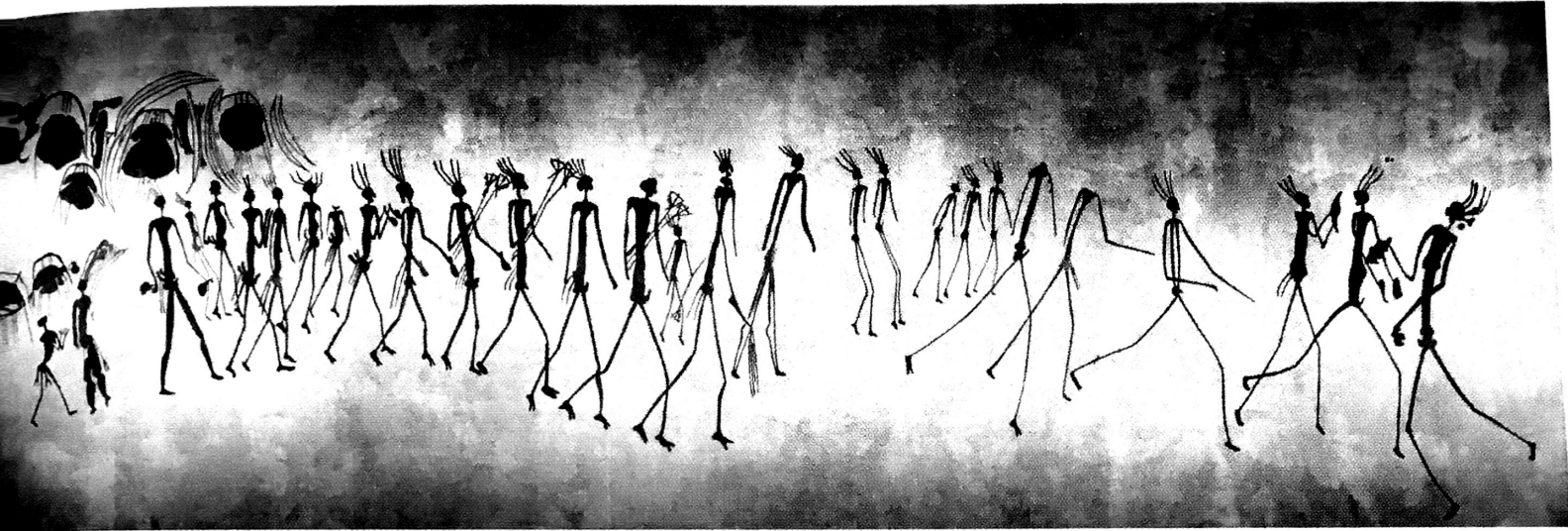


## RETURNS OF THE STONE AGE

Sven Lütticken on the exhibition publications for  
“Kunst der Vorzeit” and “Allegory of the Cave Painting”



“Procession,” Zimbabwe, Chinamora, Massimbura, 8000–2000 B.C., reproduction by Elisabeth Mannsfeld, 1929

**On the one hand the cave painting, on the other hand it's painted copy; both works – each an “original” in its own right – throwing into relief the other's particular ideations of art and its representation. In modernity, this could be likened to classic discussions of interest in the “other.” But copies and simulations (namely, here, of 40,000 year-old cave paintings and their 20th century reproductions) also speak to text-book post-modern ideas of the simulacrum.**

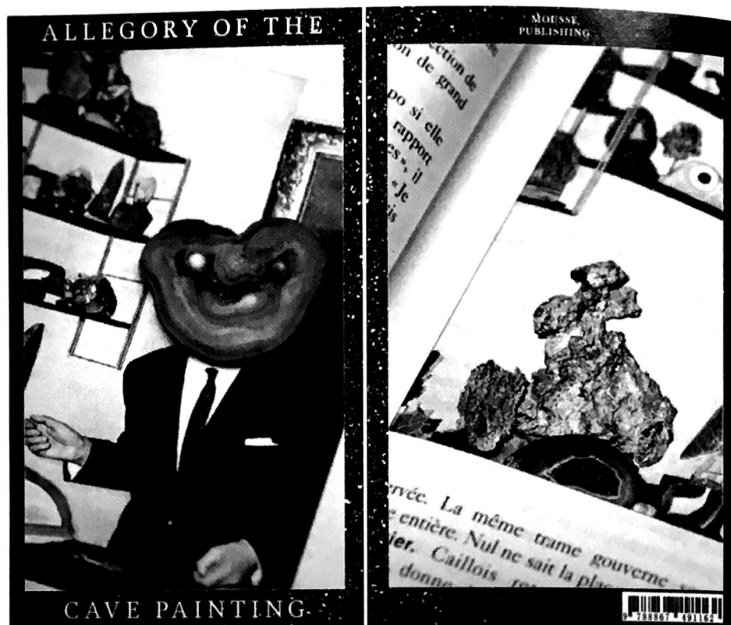
**Here, Sven Lütticken takes stock of two recent publications – as it were, the printed records of two shows dealing with prehistoric art – that take up just this matrix. Lütticken takes special interest in the moments when cave paintings, in their refusal of chronological time, evade these all too contemporary readings.**

The 2015–16 exhibition “Kunst der Vorzeit: Felsbilder aus der Sammlung Frobenius” at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin, and its accompanying catalogue, highlight the crucial role played by the reimagining and reimagining of prehistorical art in the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> A co-production with the Frobenius Institut in Frankfurt/M., the project focuses on the expeditions mounted by Leo Frobenius from 1904 up to his death in 1938 – particularly in Africa, but also in Southern Europe and later in Australasia. As Frobenius's modern project is being reassessed, we witness a contemporary return of cave and rock painting in exhibition and publication projects such as, for example, “Allegory of the Cave Painting,” which was on view at Antwerp's Extra City Kunsthall in 2014–15. Once again, prehistory enters into an anachronistic constellation with the present.

### THE MODERNITY OF CAVE ART

As self-made ethnologist and chairman of the institute that would later be named in his honor, Leo Frobenius shifted his focus from contempo-

"Allegory of the Cave Painting,"  
exhibition catalogue, Extra City  
Kunsthall, Antwerp, 2015



rary African cultures to prehistoric rock and cave paintings and drawings. In conjunction with the South European cave art of Altamira (Lascaux was only rediscovered in 1940), the North African paintings seemed to demonstrate the existence of a widespread prehistoric culture that had reached great heights and that had later degenerated and decayed. The descendants of this Stone Age *Hochkultur*, however, could still be seen in African tribes, even if in stunted form. Thus, Frobenius, while affirming European superiority over contemporary Africans, could still interpret their cultural habits as potential keys for unlocking the mysteries of prehistoric art.

With a small army of mostly female artists, he embarked on extensive copying campaigns: these works, drawn and painted full-scale *in situ*, he then assembled as a *musée imaginaire*, which he showcased not just in Germany, but also in Paris (at the Salle Pleyel in 1930, where Picasso and Bataille would be among those invited to the opening) and in New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1937. Richard Meyer discussed the latter case in his 2013 book "What Was Contemporary

Art?"; and in the "Kunst der Vorzeit" catalogue, Richard Kuba subjects the MoMA show to a detailed analysis – especially its complicated politics. Whether Frobenius was entirely happy with the situation is another matter, but in effect he came to MoMA as the scientific representative of a Reich that waged war on modern art.<sup>2</sup> But Alfred Barr considered prehistoric art to have an affinity with the modern and it is telling, perhaps, that that Frobenius published an article in (the surrealist journal) *Documents*. Frobenius may have been a conservative nationalist who hobnobbed with Emperor Wilhelm II, and who later profited from Nazi patronage, but the avant garde recognized a now-time in these prehistoric works – which is the focus of art historian Rémi Labrusse's essay for the catalogue. Where Frobenius saw cycles of growth and decay, the avant garde posited a deep time of anachronistic affinities; a stock of actions and forms that was transhistorical and transglobal and that could be activated in Brassai's photos of graffiti or in Miró's paintings. In avant-garde circles, it was Georges Bataille who developed the most complete and complex account of prehis-

Trevor Paglen, "The Last Pictures," 2012, detail



toric art – his response to the 1930 Frobenius exhibition at the Salle Pleyel, unpublished at the time, is included in the "Kunst der Vorzeit" catalogue in German translation. While this early text contains some general remarks on the stunning "negation of man" in prehistoric art (in which the animal is central), Bataille would present his mature assessment of cave art in his 1955 coffee-table book on Lascaux.

For many who bought this volume, the main attraction was probably not the Bataille text, but rather the high-quality color photographs of original prehistoric sites. At MoMA in 1937, the Frobenius copies were likewise accompanied by photographs, albeit in black-and-white. In "Kunst der Vorzeit," art historian Bärbel Küster presents a nuanced discussion of the Frobenius paintings' rather ambiguous status in the context of early twentieth-century controversies about the role of copies in museums. While Küster rightly emphasizes that they had unique, specific qualities vis-à-vis other reproductive media, the modernist emphasis on authenticity and originality was, on the whole, bad news for the handmade Frobenius copies. While there were a few exhibitions of Frobenius's renderings in the immediate postwar

period (such as the tellingly titled "40,000 Years of Modern Art" at the ICA London in 1948), photographs, ultimately, seem to have been more acceptable in a modernist framework: unlike the drawn copies, the photographs did not share the same scale and method (painting by human hand) with the "originals," and therefore invited less confusion.<sup>3</sup> These days, of course, visitors flock to Lascaux II, a (partial) life-size copy of the actual cave containing the original paintings – which suffer from visitors' exhalation and are perilously beset by microbes and fungi. In a further Baudrillardian twist, a mobile second copy, Lascaux 3, is currently on tour.<sup>4</sup>

#### MICROBE CULTURE

If in Lascaux an infestation of microorganisms is a harmful consequence of the cave's rediscovery, the case of the prehistoric Gwion Gwion (or Bradshaw) rock paintings in the Kimberly region of Australia presents a curious reversal. The colors and outlines of these paintings are remarkably fresh due precisely to the existence of microorganisms, a coating containing black fungi and red cyanobacteria. Dating back approximately 46,000–70,000 years, the Gwion Gwion paintings



"Funeral scene with mummy in oxskin," Zimbabwe, Rusape, Fishervall, 8000–2000 B.C., reproduction by Joachim Lutz and Leo Frobenius, 1929

depict humans, or rather, mostly human-animal or human-plant hybrids. These living paintings are the point of departure of the publication "Allegory of the Cave Painting," which is a pre-cipitate of Extra City's eponymous exhibition. The book includes texts by academics as well as artists or artist-writers, including Susanne Kriemann and Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, both represented in the show.<sup>5</sup>

The subject has all the makings of a very twenty-first-century droolfest: A proto-post-humanist collaboration between humans and microorganisms! An anti-Platonic cave allegory! Living paintings as an anachronic challenge to Western chrono-colonialism! Although "Allegory of the Cave Painting" occasionally collapses into self-parody – some contributions are infested by unbearably precious and faux-poetic prose – the editorial composition of the overall publication is highly successful. The first contributions focus on the Gwion Gwion paintings and Jack Pettigrew's discovery of their living pigment (including an interview with Pettigrew by the editors, Mihnea Mircan and Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei). Subsequently, the publication branches out into reflections on Platonic and other "conceptual"

caves, on Blanchot and (here, too) Bataille – with a fascinating reading, by Lucy Steeds, of the photographic component of Bataille's Lascaux book. "Allegory of the Cave Painting" does its best to shatter modern Western historical concepts and timescales. In another archaeological excavation of modern prehistories, the architectural historian Adam Jasper discusses the diffusionist theories with which nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors tried to demonstrate that the Gwion Gwion paintings were not aboriginal in origin. The paintings must be products of a culture that emanated from elsewhere (Africa), they claimed; one which was only later replaced by aboriginal cultures: shades of Frobenius. While the Gwion Gwion images are markedly different from other cave and rock art in the region, the hypothesis of a pre-aboriginal culture has often been a politically motivated endeavor. In any case, the Gwion Gwion have long been part of aboriginal culture and mythology, and Jasper asserts that in this context, the paintings are framed in a radically different manner. In indigenous culture, events that happen once do not take place. Time is cyclical or it is not; all rock and cave art functions within this nonlinear view. Continuing the anachro-

nistic revolution, "Allegory of the Cave Painting" reprints a 1984 text by Georges Didi-Huberman on the Shroud of Turin, stains, and indexicality.

#### ANACHRONISTIC AGENCY

One curious point about Georges Bataille's role in this publication – Steeds hints at this in "Allegory ..." – is that Bataille is relentlessly anthropocentric, albeit in an anti-idealist register. After the base materialism of "Documents," Bataille blended Kojève's interpretation of Hegel with Mauss and Nietzsche to develop an account of the human as a fallen animal, mired in self-consciousness, toil, and utility, which can be transgressed in excessive expenditure of energy – in ritual, eroticism, and art. Bataille's focus on transgression is an index of his anthropocentrism; to transgress is to be human. Animals do not calculate and toil, and obey any law; they are truly sovereign, hence their superiority in the eyes of early humans, to which the cave paintings attested. If the toiling *homo faber* was a first negation of the animal, of immanence, the Lascaux paintings show a further dialectical step: *homo faber* becomes *homo sapiens* by negating the world of tools and toil.<sup>6</sup>

Ten years later after Bataille's Lascaux book, in 1965, Raymond Queneau appears to have responded to his longtime interlocutor in his novel "Les Fleurs bleues."<sup>7</sup> Queneau's seemingly deathless protagonist, the Duc d'Auge, lives from the Middle Ages right up to the postwar present. An unbeliever, the duke starts producing fake cave paintings in the eighteenth century to rile and undermine the church. His campaign stalls temporarily with the outbreak of the French Revolution, but he goes to visit a Spanish friend in a place called Altamira. In Queneau's fiction, we are led to believe that the whole extension of art

history and human history was one big hoax; all cave paintings are presumably the Duc d'Auge's work. Faking the prehistorical monuments so dear to Bataille, the Duc, as it were, pulls the historical rug out from under all modern theories of prehistory and early history. Prehistory is *now*. It is being rewritten and reimaged in real time, and the originals are copies to begin with – they are modern projections of the prehistorical on ancient cave walls.

In the context of his project "The Last Pictures," which involves a collection of images being shot into orbit around earth on a communications satellite, Trevor Paglen has claimed that "The idea that we can 'communicate' anything whatsoever to anything outside our own social and historical context is preposterous. But that doesn't change the material fact that our communications satellites will, in all likelihood, really be in orbit around Earth for the next four or five billion years [...]."<sup>8</sup> "The Last Pictures" includes images of twentieth-century events and structures as well as of cave paintings, which have an allegorical function. They have been included precisely because they are irreducible to their original (unknown) context, being an anachronistic presence that communicates by refusing to be decoded: "All images are ultimately cave paintings."

Like the cave paintings of Queneau, "The Last Pictures," too, are fake. It is not that the images themselves are faked, but rather that the post-human future audience of alien space lizards that Paglen ironically envisages is; their potential future existence a big gamble compared to the contemporary reality of those who today have access to Paglen's project, in mediated form. "Allegory of the Cave Painting" insists that the alien

is already among us, and has been all along. We have never been (purely) human. Furthermore, the project goes against the by now conventional focus on context – contemporary art is nothing if not contextual – by basing itself on the assumption that un-decodable and virtually un-datable stains (living blots, in this case) can have an anachronistic agency. They can intervene in contemporary culture, rather than merely being the subject of projection.

The lesson to be drawn from Didi-Huberman's work is surely that anachronistic communication may be defined precisely by the breakdown of its legibility, its faltering of codes, and/or the process of its decoding – as formalized in iconology, semiology and so on. In a way, Frobenius acknowledged the need to pay attention to such breakdowns: while interpreting prehistoric art with imperial German goggles on, he was fascinated by the nonfigurative shapes he called “formlings,” which were resistant to decoding. Today's exited incorporation of the Gwion Gwion into the post-humanist theories du jour is far from unproblematic. In the process of trying to actualize the paintings, they become encrusted with contemporary tropes and talking points. Perhaps, however, the process is at least somewhat reciprocal. The more relevant artistic and theoretical responses to the Gwion Gwion, or to prehistoric art in general, are indeed *responses*. Informed by contemporary preoccupations, they are attentive to what is resistant, obtuse, other, in the object at hand.

Kunst der Vorzeit: Felsbilder aus der Sammlung Frobenius, exh. cat., ed. by Karl-Heinz Kohl/Richard Kuba/Hélène Ivanoff, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, 2016.

Allegory of the Cave Painting, exhibition reader, ed. by Mihnea Mircan/Vincent W. U. von Gerven Oei, Extra City Kunsthall, Antwerp, 2015.

#### Notes

- 1 Kunst der Vorzeit: Felsbilder aus der Sammlung Frobenius, exh. cat., ed. by Karl-Heinz Kohl/Richard Kuba/Hélène Ivanoff, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, 2016. This, the catalogue of the exhibition at the Martin-Gropius-Bau (January 21–May 16, 2016), was supplemented by a second volume titled “Kunst der Vorzeit: Texte zu den Felsbildern der Sammlung Frobenius”. All references in this review are to the catalogue volume.
- 2 Richard Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?*, Cambridge, Mass/London 2013, pp. 128–162. Richard Meyer argues that, according to MoMA's official records, Barr in fact showed specially made copies of Frobenius's copies.
- 3 As institute director Karl-Heinz Kohl points out in his introduction (p. 16), the paintings also became obsolete as scientific tools after World War II.
- 4 See also Martha Buskirk, *Creative Enterprise: Contemporary Art Between Museum and Marketplace*, London 2012, pp. 147–151.
- 5 Mihnea Mircan/Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei (eds.), *Allegory of the Cave Painting*, Milan 2015. The exhibition took place at Extra City and the Middelheim Museum in Antwerp in late 2014 and early 2015.
- 6 Bataille's fullest exposition of this two-step model is perhaps in his 1948 “Théorie de la religion,” though he does not deal with cave art here; the focus is on religious rituals as transgression of the world of utility. In “Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art” (Geneva 1955), Lascaux is presented as the “birth of the human” precisely because the paintings are superior visual articulations (or performances) of this breakthrough. See also Lucy Steeds, “Unhinging Prehistory, Unbecoming Humanity: Bataille on Lascaux,” in: *Allegory of the Cave Painting*, pp. 95–114.
- 7 Raymond Queneau, *Les fleurs bleues*, Paris 1965. Like Bataille, Queneau is also responding to Kojève's philosophy.
- 8 Nato Thompson, “The Last Pictures: Interview with Trevor Paglen,” <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-last-pictures-interview-with-trevor-paglen/>.