

**Symposium**  
**LIFE-WORK**  
**Alternative Forms of Life Writing**

Maastricht University  
Centre for Gender and Diversity  
(Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences)

Thursday 17 November 2016  
13:00-18:00

Spiegelzaal (Soiron building), Grote Gracht 80-82 (first floor), Maastricht.

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On 8 December the British novelist A.S. Byatt will be awarded the Erasmus Prize 2016 for her contribution to life writing. To mark the occasion, the Centre for Gender and Diversity of Maastricht University and the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation are hosting a symposium on alternative forms of life writing.

Biography and autobiography are more popular than ever. Biopics and biographical television serials draw masses of viewers while even scholarly biographical tomes such as Maaike Meijer's biography of the poet *M. Vasalis* (2011) become unexpected bestsellers. But writing and re-writing our lives' stories, by ourselves and by others, is a process that also takes place in many other forms than the traditional biography or biopic. And even within these forms many unorthodox approaches are gaining currency. In this symposium we will highlight a number of the new and unexpected forms that life writing is taking in the 21st century. We investigate the challenges posed to such life-work by the arts and the new media, but also explore the opportunities for re-inventing ourselves that they offer.

Presentations will enquire into the performative character of biopics; the challenges of inter-country adoption for (re)-constructing a coherent life story; forms of life writing in film, in the visual arts, and in performance art; the articulation of collective memories in post-communist Romania; the challenges of articulating the self for people with autism or people suffering from dementia, and many other aspects of contemporary life writing outside the traditional forms of the (auto)biographical narrative.

Attendance is free but please register through [r.wennek@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:r.wennek@maastrichtuniversity.nl)

**Programme**  
**LIFE-WORK**  
**Alternative forms of life writing**

13:00 Registration and coffee.

**13:20 Opening remarks** (Christophe Van Eecke and Lies Wesseling)

**Part 1: In Art...**

13:30 Christophe Van Eecke, *Performing Genius: Ken Russell's 'Gothic' (1986)*

14:00 Sandra Kisters, *The Life of Jackson Pollock on the Big Screen*

14:30 Louis van den Hengel, *Writing Life Itself: On Trans-corporeal Autobiography*

15:00 Maaïke Meijer, *In the Eye of the Storm: F. Harmsen van Beek and Jagtlust*

**15:30 Coffee**

**Part 2: ...As In Life**

15:50 Lies Wesseling, *Realigning Family and Nation: Life Writing by Transnational Adoptees*

16:20 Codruța Pohrib, *Nostalgia and Online Identity in Post-Communist Romania*

16:50 Leni van Goidsenhoven, *Donna Williams: Looking for 'the Place in the Middle' at Jessica Kingsley Publishers*

17:20 Aagje Swinnen, *Participatory Art Programs For People With Dementia*

**17:50 Closing Remarks** (Christophe Van Eecke and Lies Wesseling)

**Drinks**

## **PRESENTATION ABSTRACTS**

## **Christophe Van Eecke**

### ***Performing Genius: Ken Russell's Gothic (1986)***

Ken Russell's film *Gothic* (1986) dramatises the night in 1816 when Mary Shelley claimed to have invented the story for her novel *Frankenstein*. Russell's film is an adaptation of Shelley's description of this event in the Introduction to the second edition of the novel. However, rather than simply offering a biopic approach to this biographical fact, I argue that Russell has made a film that performs the very creative processes that Shelley writes about. In doing so the film acquires a self-reflexive performativity: it is a film that performs the very creative processes that it is about, exemplifying that which it represents. This means that the film also becomes an important text for understanding Russell's own performance as a creative artist through his work.

Dr. Christophe Van Eecke (°1977) is the author of *Pandaemonium: Ken Russell's Artist Biographies as Baroque Performance* (Maastricht, 2015), which was awarded the Research Prize 2016 of the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation, and of *Only Connect: Five Exercises in Aesthetics* (Breda, 2011), and is the co-editor (with John Hill and Karel Vanhaesebrouck) of a Ken Russell issue of the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015). He holds a double doctorate from Maastricht University and the Université Libre de Bruxelles and has contributed countless essays on film, philosophy and the arts to many journals and books. His current research is focused on the heritage film and on representations of inter-generational sexuality in children's literature. His latest article is 'Camp Heritage: *The Lair of the White Worm* as Neo-Victorian Spectacle' (in Mel Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, eds., *Neo-Victorian Humour*, Rodopi, forthcoming February 2017) and he is currently writing a book on Ken Russell and the heritage film.

**Sandra Kisters**

***The Life of Jackson Pollock on the Big Screen***

In the genre of the biographical motion picture, visual artists are not the most common subjects; usually politicians or athletes are chosen as the main characters. When artists are the protagonists they are usually represented stereotypically: as destructive, promiscuous, tragic or failed geniuses. The focus is more on their personal troubles than on the art. By comparing Ed Harris' biopic *Pollock* (2000) with the documentary film Hans Namuth made of abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock's artistic process (1950), the concept of fact and fiction, in particular related to artistic processes, in biopics will be examined.

Dr. Sandra Kisters is Head of Collections and Research at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. In 2010 she completed a PhD on the (Self)-Representation of Modern Artists at VU University. Forthcoming publications include *The Lure of the Biographical. On the (Self)-Representation of Modern Artists* (Valiz, 2017) and co-edited with Rachel Esner the anthology *The Mediatization of the Artist* (Palgrave 2017).

**Louis van den Hengel**

***Writing Life Itself: On Trans-corporeal Autobiography***

This lecture explores, and affirms, the capacity of contemporary biotechnological art to act as a critical practice and imaginative model of life writing in the twenty-first century. Specifically, I will examine how the transformations of living matter in bioart projects trace the shifting definitions of life in a bioscientific world. Drawing on Stacy Alaimo's notion of "trans-corporeality", I will approach bioart as a creative technology of storying lives *across* human and nonhuman bodies, selves, and environments.

Louis van den Hengel is Assistant Professor at the Department of Literature and Art and the Centre for Gender and Diversity of Maastricht University. His current research examines the aesthetics of contemporary performance art with a special focus on affect, materiality, and time. In addition, he is interested in the interchanges between feminist new materialism, posthumanism, and life writing.

**Maike Meijer**

***In the Eye of the Storm: F. Harmsen van Beek and Jagtlust***

The Dutch poet and multi-artist Frederike Harmsen van Beek became the centre of a media-hype in 1965. It was the year of her debut as a poet - with the appearance of *Geachte muizenpoot*, her first widely acclaimed volume. It was also the year in which she was cast as a beautiful, promiscuous, heavy drinking eccentric, a bad mother, as well as the attractive and enigmatic centre of an avant-garde circle of painters and writers coming together at her villa Jagtlust between 1954 and 1971. Her reputation was mythical - the stories surrounding Harmsen van Beek were repeated in ever more detail for forty years - and could not be eradicated, even if half of them were untrue. It bothered her tremendously, yet she would never be able to get rid of her reputation.

How are media-hypes born, which needs do they fulfil for the audiences that partake in them? Are they harmful? And is it at all possible for a biographer such as me, writing the life of Harmsen van Beek - to go beyond such a long-established, mythical image?

Life is a story: an interrupted one, a fragmented one, a multiple one and an unknowable one. Many stories are possible. Yet does it matter which stories are believed to be true?

Maike Meijer is emerita Professor of Gender Studies at Maastricht University, where she was director of the Centre for Gender and Diversity and the first person to hold the Opzij Chair in Women's Studies. She has published widely, especially on Dutch women poets (*De lust tot lezen*, 1988). Her biography of the poet *M. Vasalis* (2011) was a major critical success and a bestseller. Among her recent publications are *Rieu: maestro zonder grenzen* (2015; with contributions from Peter Peters and Jac van den Boogard) and *Stoeten ritseldingen* (co-author, 2015). She is currently writing the biography of Frederike Harmsen van Beek.



**Lies Wesseling**

***Realigning Family and Nation: Life Writing by Transnational Adoptees***

Life stories are usually sparked off by the question: 'where are you from?' The family and country of origin tend to shape individual identities. This presentation dwells on life stories by persons whose origins are obscure: transnational adoptees. They need to somehow relate themselves to two families and two nations. This forces them to develop new narrative strategies for writing their life stories, continually balancing off the relative merits (or curses) of their birth families and nations and their adoptive families and nations, as I will illuminate by dwelling on autobiographical movies by Korean-American adoptees. This presentation will argue that, although intercountry adoption is hardly significant from a quantitative point of view, its symbolic import is enormous. While transnational adoptees only constitute a small percentage of the populations of receiving countries, the cultural work involved in the kinning of little strangers of from abroad and in adoptees' struggles with origin stories compel us to rethink conventional alignments of 'family' and 'nation'. As such, life writing by transnational adoptees is of direct relevance to identity issues faced by migrants, refugees, and related diaspora groups.

Lies Wesseling is professor of gender studies at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS) at Maastricht University, and the director of the Centre for Gender and Diversity, at FASoS. She works on the intersections between age (childhood) and gender, focusing on the cultural remembrances of colonial practices of child removal in contemporary postcolonial societies, with a particular interest in the Dutch Indies and memorial practices in the contemporary Netherlands. She has published on the postmodern historical novel (*Writing History as a Prophet: Postmodern Innovations of the Historical Novel*, 1992), on coping strategies of contemporary female scholars who combine a scientific career with motherhood (*Geleerde moeders*, 2001), on the Gothic novel, with Rosemarie Buikema (*Het heilige huis: De gotieke vertelling in de Nederlandse literatuur* 2006), and on childhood studies (*The Child Savage: From Comics to Games*, 2016 and *Reinventing Childhood Nostalgia in Contemporary Convergence Culture*, forthcoming at Taylor & Francis). She has published numerous articles on postcolonial perspectives on childhood studies and children's literature in international peer-reviewed journals such as *The Lion and the Unicorn*, *Children's Literature in Education*, *Children's Literature Quarterly*, *International Research in Children's Literature*, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, *Arcadia*, etc.

**Codruța Pohrib**

***Nostalgia and Online Identity in Post-Communist Romania***

Since the 2000s an alternative engagement with the communist past has emerged across media in Romania in the shape of a generational discourse, which negotiates a post-communist generational identity for individuals growing up in the 1970s-1980s. My talk focuses on the online memory practices of this self-dubbed 'latchkey generation' by investigating an emerging life writing genre – the Facebook *generatiography* (cf. Bohnenkamp 2009, 2011; Weingerten 2013) – and its reliance on the archiving of communist memorabilia in the shape of photographed objects. How do generational frames of remembrance, members of a specific generation, and the sociotechnical affordances of Facebook pages interact to produce this genre? And what does it 'do' in the context of post-communist Romania? I will set about answering these questions while arguing for the renewed need to think about generations as generically actualized discursive strategies in the age of social media.

Codruța Pohrib is a Ph.D. on an NWO grant at the University of Maastricht currently carrying doctoral research into post-communist generational remembrances across media, with a focus on Romania. She has an M.A. in British Cultural Studies from the University of Bucharest. She takes an interest in memory politics, materiality and memory, mediations of nostalgia and generation and sexual citizenship in post-socialism.

**Leni van Goidsenhoven**

***Donna Williams: Looking for 'the Place in the Middle' at Jessica Kingsley Publishers***

In order to examine the complexity of the autism memoir boom, I investigate published autie-biographies as part of a production cycle that has to negotiate between the demands of the individual's unique story, the expectations of a community and a commercial rationale. More precisely, I focus on Jessica Kingsley Publishers (JKP), a leading international niche publisher in the field of neurological and cognitive differences. I look into the oeuvre of one of JKP's star-authors, Donna Williams. By combining textual and paratextual analysis with qualitative data from interviews I will show how Williams exemplifies the quest and triumph ethos underlying the (commercial) disability memoir, while at the same time undermining and resisting the notion of progress on different levels in her work.

Leni Van Goidsenhoven is a doctoral researcher of the FWO- Flanders at KU Leuven (Belgium), connected to the research unit Literary and Cultural Studies. She is preparing a PhD on autism and self-representation. Her research interests cover illness and disability life writing, disability studies, the institutionalization of the self-help culture, and outsider art.

## **Aagje Swinnen**

### ***Participatory Art Programs For People With Dementia***

In contrast to reminiscence activities that aim to improve the memory and reinforce the life story of people with dementia, participatory art programs claim to appeal to the imagination and offer a role other than that of patient. This presentation will focus on two such programs, TimeSlips and the Alzheimer's Poetry Project, and their implementation in two nursing homes in Maastricht from Huizinga's perspective on the meaning that human beings derive from playing.

Aagje Swinnen is assistant professor at the Center for Gender and Diversity of Maastricht University and Endowed Socrates Chair in International Humanism and the Art of Living at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Originally trained as a literary scholar, Swinnen has broadened the scope of her research to cultural studies of aging, focusing on the workings of age ideologies and the intersection of age and other markers of social difference in a wide variety of cultural texts such as photography, film, and television. She has published on the representation of age, gender, and disability in *The Gerontologist*, *Dementia*, *Journal of Aging Studies* and *International Journal of Aging and Later Life*, and co-edited the volumes *Aging, Performance and Stardom* (with J.A. Stotesbury) and *Popularizing Dementia* (with M. Schweda). Swinnen advocates the integration of social sciences and humanities approaches in the study of aging and later life. This is illustrated by her work on the sexuality of older people (cf. volume *Seksualiteit van ouderen*) as well as her project on poetry and storytelling interventions in person-centred dementia care. Committed to stimulate dialogue among disciplines, Swinnen is co-founder and current deputy chair of the European Network in Aging Studies as well as co-editor of the new journal *Age, Culture, Humanities*.