‘GAAF’, Fiona Tan’s 2019 exhibition at Museum Ludwig in Cologne, included several works by Tan and a selection of photographs from the museum collection. Among the selection were 150 6x6 colour photographs from the archive of the Agfa photo company’s advertising department that is in the Museum’s collections. The Agfa photos were the starting point for ‘GAAF’, the title of which is both an anagram of Agfa and the Dutch word *gaaf*, which I will discuss below. Tan selected Agfa photographs taken between 1952 and 1968 that all feature women apparently

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1 ‘GAAF’ was part of the Artist Meets Archive series initiated by Internationale Photoszene Köln
enjoying outdoor leisure activities in both summer and winter. The photographs were taken by anonymous professional photographers to promote Agfa film to amateur photographers as a product that would enable them to shoot perfect images, just like the professionals. In fact, only a few of these photographs were actually used in advertisements; most went straight into the archives, by-products that were too good to be thrown away and for which there was no direct use until Tan publicised them as part of her exhibition more than fifty years after they were made.

Looking at how women are framed in these photographs, and with Griselda Pollock’s *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum* (2007) in mind, I have to wonder why Tan decided to retrieve the Agfa images, how they relate to her artistic practice, and what this tells us about the position of women in museums today. Reflecting about her concept of the Virtual Feminist Museum, Pollock concedes that, for now, such a museum is a fantasy, because the patriarchal capitalist system in which we live and work would never allow it to exist. Yet the concept is still very inspiring, because Pollock’s Virtual Feminist Museum is not simply an imaginary place for the display of women’s art and history. Instead, she frames it as a ‘research laboratory’ that ‘challenges the assumptions of class, race and gender that underpin the current social system’, a place where art historical and museum rules are broken in favour of ‘argued responses, grounded speculations [and] exploratory relations’. As such, the Virtual Feminist Museum would ‘tell us new things about femininity, modernity and representation’. Tan’s exhibition was a reminder of how much I desire new and daring stories about representation and modernity in museums and how exhausting it is to continually encounter variations of the ones that continue to adhere to the old rules.

The Agfa photographs show relaxed, cheerful and carefree young white women engaged in supposedly enjoyable activities like sun-bathing, playing on the beach with men, on a skiing holiday, or posing with expensive cars, all while dressed in fashionable, casual outfits. The women are obviously enjoying themselves and the unseen person behind the camera – a male amateur photographer – is both witness to and participant in these moments of pure pleasure. Thanks to the Agfa company and the conservation conditions in the Museum, more than fifty years later the pictures are still glossy, sharp and certainly better preserved than any real amateur photographs from the period. Tan presented about 140 small prints in rows on the wall of the largest of the four rooms the Museum gave her for this exhibition. The presentation of photographs next to each other in a row accentuates the repetition of the models’ poses, so that the exhibition visitor quickly understands that the images are the result of staged professional

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3 Ibid
photo shoots instead of spontaneous amateur snapshots. Tan decided to have some of the photographs enlarged and they appear in frames on the wall next to some shelves stacked with Agfa photo boxes and file cases, a curatorial insertion of decor to enhance the exhibition’s archival aesthetic.

When I first saw the photographs, what struck me was the strategic nature of the Agfa company’s involvement with the creation of the image of heterosexual women and men conforming to the pattern of the West German system of the male breadwinner. Writing of gender-determined power relations in connection to the economic prosperity that came to West Germany in the late 1950s, the historian Christine Von Oertzen notes that ‘increased male wages made it possible for families actually to live solely on the income of the male breadwinner’. This prosperity continued in the 1960s, and married women who did work became a threat to their husbands’ social reputation. Work was only considered appropriate for women who ‘needed’ it because of their precarious economic situation. Von Oertzen observed that politics reinforced the male breadwinner ideology in people’s lives in West Germany through a tax system that was

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constructed in order to render it financially unprofitable for married women to have jobs. Agfa’s advertising strategy for photographic products targeted middle-class, heterosexual, male amateur photographers who wished to create visual proof of their ability to make their wives happy.

One of the enlarged Agfa photographs in the exhibition was used as the press image and disseminated via the websites of *Artforum* [https://www.artforum.com/interviews/fiona-tan-80319](https://www.artforum.com/interviews/fiona-tan-80319) and *E-flux* [https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/251737/fiona-tangaaf/](https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/251737/fiona-tangaaf/), for example. It shows an athletic blonde woman laughing and kneeling on the back of an equally athletic white man, who is also on all fours, in front of a sunny landscape with a river. Despite the fact that his hands, knees and feet must hurt immensely from crawling on the rocky riverbank, the man is also smiling into the camera, showing off his perfectly white teeth. The woman is literally using him as a support and they both appear to be enjoying the situation. They obviously have no worries and sufficient income to keep themselves in perfect shape and enjoy their leisure activities. In the exhibition, this photograph was presented in a row with three other photographs of the same size, all depicting the same setup of a man on all fours with a woman kneeling on his back before a beautiful landscape. All the other images from the Agfa archive on display in ‘GAAF’ also equally subject women to the standards of the ideals of beauty and femininity as set by famous women of the period – such as Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy, for example.

![Fiona Tan, ‘GAAF’, installation view, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, photo courtesy of the artist, Museum Ludwig and Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln / Nina Siefke](image-url)
The Museum Ludwig is located in Heinrich Böll Platz, a square named after the Cologne-based writer, who, in his poetic, documentary-style novel *Group Portrait with Lady* (1971), and in sharp contrast to the Agfa images, portrayed a woman very unlike any happy breadwinners’ wives. In the novel, Böll describes the life of Leni Pfeiffer, an unmarried, penniless and unemployed woman living in West Germany whose character has been shaped by her upbringing in the national socialist era, the experience of World War II, the consequences of war on her life in a destroyed city, and the social context that treats her like a misfit because of her consecutive relationships with a Russian soldier and a Turkish Gastarbeiter. Leni is the very opposite of the carefree women in the Agfa images. The cheerful and colourful mock experiences depicted by the image industry were utterly unattainable for Leni. Agfa’s potential sales market consisted of affluent male amateur photographers and (potential) breadwinners who desired some female jauntiness to distract them from their work routines, while women like Leni Pfeiffer were thought of as social outcasts or ‘rubbish’ – *Abfall*, as Böll would have it in German.

In ‘GAAF’, photographs of women ‘in need’ were placed in a small room adjacent to the one where Tan displayed her findings from the Agfa archive. These images bring us a bit closer to life as experienced by the likes of Leni Pfeiffer. For this room, Tan chose a few black and white prints from the Museum’s collection made between 1950 and 1960 by the professional photographers Heinz Held, Ernst Haas and Chargesheimer (Karl Heinz Hargesheimer). The photographs depict street scenes in Cologne, a city that was heavily bombed during World War II. One photo by Hass, *Return Home* (1950), depicts a seated woman whose head is covered by a dark scarf, her barely visible face hidden in shame and despair in her hands. Another photograph by Held, *Professions – Women: Canteen* (c. 1960), shows a young woman at work in a canteen. At eye level with the photographer, she gazes uncomfortably, distrustfully, yet curiously out of the image, right into the camera as if she is wondering why the photographer would be interested in showing her at work.

After seeing the photographs by Held, Haas and Chargesheimer, I began to doubt that ‘GAAF’ was an appropriate title for this exhibition. The word *gaaf* is an anagram of Agfa.
and a Dutch expression that means something like ‘cool’ or ‘perfect’ in English. In informal usage, the word connotes enthusiasm for something, but the word’s primary meaning is ‘unscathed’ (ongeschonden) or ‘undamaged’ (onbeschadigd). The women in Held, Haas and Chargesheimer’s photographs, and working women like Leni Pfeiffer, lived in precarious situations and were sometimes even social outcasts; they hardly qualified as being gaaf in West Germany at the time their pictures were taken. The exhibition setup confirmed this dichotomy by placing the images of the ‘needy’ women in a separate, very small room, while the gaaf ones were given most of the space and attention.

Fiona Tan’s choice to work with the Agfa advertisement images could have constituted a starting point for a really important examination of the visual culture that provoked artists such as Valie Export, Jo Spence or Cindy Sherman in the late 1960s and 1970s to rebel against the social norm that dictates, in John Berger’s words, that ‘men act and women appear’. Yet, in the next gallery space, Tan decided to make a rather incomprehensible transition from the Museum’s archive to her own oeuvre and some other photographs from the collection. Among the works on

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display were a gelatin silver print of Man Ray’s *Gräfin Casati* (c 1922) and Karl Blossfeldt’s *Arbeitscollage, Tafel 42* (1910). Tan’s *Lift* (2000) shows the artist herself hanging on to gas-filled red balloons and hovering over the treetops; next to it was a smaller print of a photo from the Agfa archives of a woman with balloons in a snowy winter landscape. The oldest work by Tan in this exhibition was the video *Linnaeus’ Flower Clock* (1998), a reflection on the passing of time and the documentation of life in which Tan herself appears every now and then. This gallery space also included *Vox Populi London* (2012), a project for which the artist asked friends in London to give her a photo from their private archive to display in museums or galleries as part of her work.

As so often in her practice, Tan uses the exhibition as a means to draw parallels between the current moment and other historical periods by exploring the means of their respective image production, distinguishable by the different technological means available to image producers at a given time. Archival material thus functions like a time machine that lets the viewer’s imagination travel between periods and geographies. Photographic prints or films become modules with which Tan creates parallels between our contemporary experience of looking and the ways in which people recorded viewing experiences in the past. She employs artistic strategies such as appropriation, juxtaposition, framing and seriality to emphasise visual similarities and differences between the present and the past, the personal and the private. For Tan’s artistic practice, collaborations with museums as the holders of visual archives are indispensable. Those who preselect the content of the archive ensure that their ideology is projected into the future. Archives determine what we remember and commemorate on both individual and social levels. The fact that the Agfa archive is today a part of one of the most important art museum collections in Germany speaks of the once powerful role of the company in the field of image technology. Its retrieval as part of a contemporary artist’s exhibition projects the old company’s view of women into the present.

Tan told an interviewer that when she was conceptualising the exhibition, she chose to work with images from the Agfa archive because they reminded her of a photograph of her mother ‘taken in Australia in 1960 – I recognized the clothes, the makeup, the pose’. Perhaps that is why she included her work *Provenance* (2008) in this exhibition. The relation between public and private has driven Tan’s artistic practice for some time now, and showing the video installation *Provenance* as part of ‘Gaaf’ in the last room (or the first, depending on which of the two entrances you chose) confirmed this. *Provenance* was produced for an exhibition in the Rijksmuseum and is inspired by seventeenth century portraits from its collection. For *Provenance*, Tan recorded people in her neighbourhood and family members at home in Amsterdam. The recordings are presented on seven framed monitors. Minimal movement and strong chiaroscuro make them

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6 ‘Fiona Tan on Artifice and Archive’, Fiona Tan interviewed by Hiji Nam, *Artforum*, 23 July 2019
https://www.artforum.com/interviews/fiona-tan-80319
appear initially to be still photographs in the style of a seventeenth century painting. *Provenance*, and the artist’s statement about the similarities between the Agfa photographs of women and her mother in Australia in 1960, reveal something about Tan and her family’s social economic status: Tan does appear, with this exhibition, to be effectively aligning her own visual production with the archives of the privileged and powerful.

Fiona Tan’s display of some of the Agfa archive could be said to be rather a reactionary confirmation of conservative power structures, instead of an encouragement of the redistribution of power that connects to visual culture from a feminist perspective. ‘GAAF’ provided a thought-provoking glimpse of the technology industry’s engagement with the creation of the male gaze on women from the 1950s onward, and with her own work, and that of the other (male) photographers, Tan created a charming counter piece to Agfa’s representation of women as men’s playmates or (potential) wives. However, by playing by the rules of the patriarchal capitalist system, she missed the chance of clearly breaking with the sexist side of it. With their central position in society, museums ensure that archives contribute to their visitors’ identity formation. Omitting any critical note on the gender divide and the powerful role given to men in the production of images of women, the exhibition failed to spark any strong inspiration for change. In a society where the ideology of the male breadwinner still prevails, that is a missed chance.

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