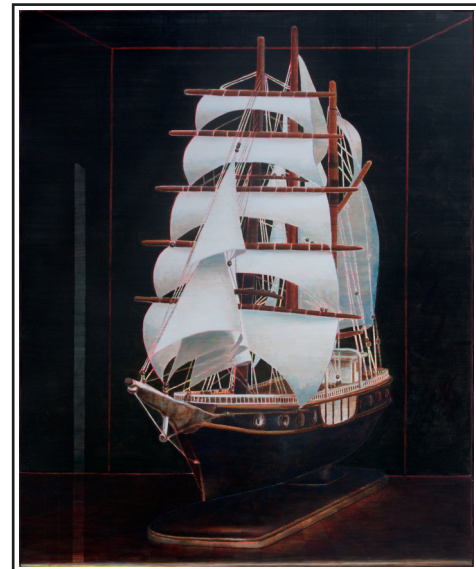


# 1987

# FENDRY EKEL



12.02 - 21.02.2016

Galeri Nasional Indonesia  
Jakarta

# 1987

## 1987: Man and Memory

By Astrid Honold

Fendry Ekel Solo Exhibition  
curated by Suwarno Wisetrotomo

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**1987: Man and Memory**

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1987 was the year in which painter Fendry Ekel, as a teenager, followed his mother's emigration to the Netherlands. He left behind not only Indonesia, his country of birth, but consequently almost everything that is vitally important to a young man in search of identity: school, confidants, first girlfriend perhaps, and – what is more – continent, mother tongue, and culture. In other words, he lost an overall system of reference that he could blindly trust, and on which he could base his daily activities, values, and future aspirations. To lose all that within the duration of a 16-hour flight is a high price to pay, one might say, even for being reunited with one's mother. On the other hand, the artist we know today may never have existed if it weren't for that significant rupture in his life; one might speculate that it was the desire for a universal language or system of reference which drove Fendry Ekel towards the decision to become an artist in the first place.

Equally, before leaving Indonesia, Fendry Ekel's life was marked by regular displacement. Descending from a military background (both his grandfathers and his father were in the Indonesian army), Ekel moved with his grandmother between Banda Aceh, Medan, Manado and Jakarta on three different islands within Indonesia. In an early statement from the late 1990s, the artist wrote: 'On

one of thousands of islands somewhere in Indonesia I was born. [...] The moving at that time felt like a travel without destination. [...] There was never any intention to go back to the old place, every step that I took was one step further. The necessity of travelling now has become my passion.'

1987 is also the title of one of Ekel's recent paintings (2014, Fig. 1), depicting a three-mast clipper sailing vessel seen in three-quarter view from the front right and executed in oil and acrylic on a monumental canvas of 250 by 200 cm. For those acquainted with the painterly oeuvre of Fendry Ekel, this excursion into naval painting doesn't come as a complete surprise. Portraiture, still life, architecture, text: because Ekel's paintings are based on photographic depictions, there is no limit to what he paints, as long as the original image intrigues and interests him intellectually and conceptually.

Much could be said about marine painting as a distinct tradition. It is closely connected to Dutch Golden Age painting, reflecting the importance of overseas trade and naval power to what was then the Dutch Republic. In Romanticism the sea and coastal areas were claimed by landscape painters, such as Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), and to this day works such as German painter Gerhard Richter's powerful Seascapes (Fig. 2) are evidence of the abiding force of the genre. Although specific aspects such as national identity and power, the relationship between man and nature, faith, alienation or displacement certainly cannot be disconnected from the genre – and these resonances must have been at the

forefront of the artist's mind in the process of editing the painting's source material – 1987 doesn't seem to be solely about these. After all, we see no sky, no sea, no flag, no crew, no cargo. No movement whatsoever is painted. It seems that difference rather than conformity with the genre's typical iconography holds the key to how aura and meaning are constituted in 1987.

Aesthetic thinking, or 'aesthetic behaviour', as Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969) puts it in his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), 'is the ability to see more in things than they are. It is the gaze that transforms empirical being into imagery.' Nowadays we are surrounded by a myriad of images that, whether we like it or not, reach us in the form of a continuous stream of contingency. It has therefore become impossible to invest the kind of gaze which Adorno says separates the 'image' from 'empirical being'. Perhaps we must ask whether 'imagery' (in the form of unfiltered daily reception) has not long since become part of 'empirical being'. Perhaps with the ubiquity of digital photography on the internet, a distinction between 'empirical being' and 'image' no longer suffices. The question would then be whether representation itself has not become part of the empirical experience and whether we do not need to update our thinking by specifying the kinds of representation we face when dealing with images in different contexts.

What seems to be certain: it is only in art that the stream of existing images can be brought to a halt. 'Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees.' When art – and this applies

especially to painting – is a priori about representation (of the world, of art itself, or both) but at the same time no longer truly about that, what we mean to say is that the quality of representation must have changed. The use of existing images as source material for painting implies that we are dealing with representation of a second degree; one which represents representation itself.

Ever since Marcel Duchamp introduced a cerebral conception of art which calculates on the intellectual activity of the viewer as an indispensable part of the genesis of an artwork's realm of meaning, images no longer represent only the objective world, but ideas and concepts, too. Most likely, this has always been the case in art. As German cultural philosopher Alexander García Düttmann put it so aptly in his paper 'Aesthetic Thinking', 'It is as if the image didn't expose the world but the relation with the world and therefore distanced the world and loosened its consistence and its coherence.'

In the light of the prominently absent elements, the ship portrayed in Fendry Ekel's 1987 clearly presents itself as a model. Not unlike a globe on a stand, the ship's keel sits on a firm wooden base plate. Its many sails are filled as if in full wind, yet the yards and masts are proportionately much too large to represent a real, life-size vessel. We know from early photographic records that marine painters like Hendrik Willem Mesdag (Netherlands, 1831–1915) painted their naval scenes using model ships (Fig. 3). We even know (from a letter by the artist) that Caspar David Friedrich painted his mountain in the famous 'Tetschen Altar' piece (1807), titled *The Cross in*



the Mountains, after a model of the mountain in clay or wax. That is to say, while we might consider Friedrich's work a poetic-sentimental example of atmospheric painting, the use of a model proves that it was at the same time a conceptual painting (Fig. 4). The famous 'Ramdohr dispute' indeed suggests that the painting was able to stir up rather hostile reactions in its own epoch, which can be attributed to its departure from the well-trodden paths of academic tradition to 'walk on its own feet', as Friedrich himself put it in the very same letter.

However, Fendry Ekel takes the next step. Instead of painting from a model, he is showing the model *id ipsum*, i.e. the very thing itself (after a photograph he has taken of it in his studio). A fascination with the model as a phenomenon is already present in early works from the mid-2000s, for example when the artist painted *Grosse Halle* (2007), the 'dystopian' yet aesthetically seductive model of Albert Speer's megalomaniac convention dome for Adolf Hitler's so-called world capital, 'Germania', contained within a museum glass case (Fig. 5).

A model is an abstract mental device to help us understand something else, such as causality or power: in other words, things we are simply not able to observe directly. But when thought and concepts or ideologies have been transformed and condensed into imagery, why cannot the image itself serve as a model? Gerhard Richter claims just that when in a text for the catalogue for *documenta 7* (Kassel, 1982) he writes: 'When we describe a process, or make out an invoice, or photograph a tree, we create models; without them we

would know nothing about reality and would be animals. Abstract pictures are fictive models, because they make visible a reality that we can neither see nor describe, but whose existence we can postulate.'

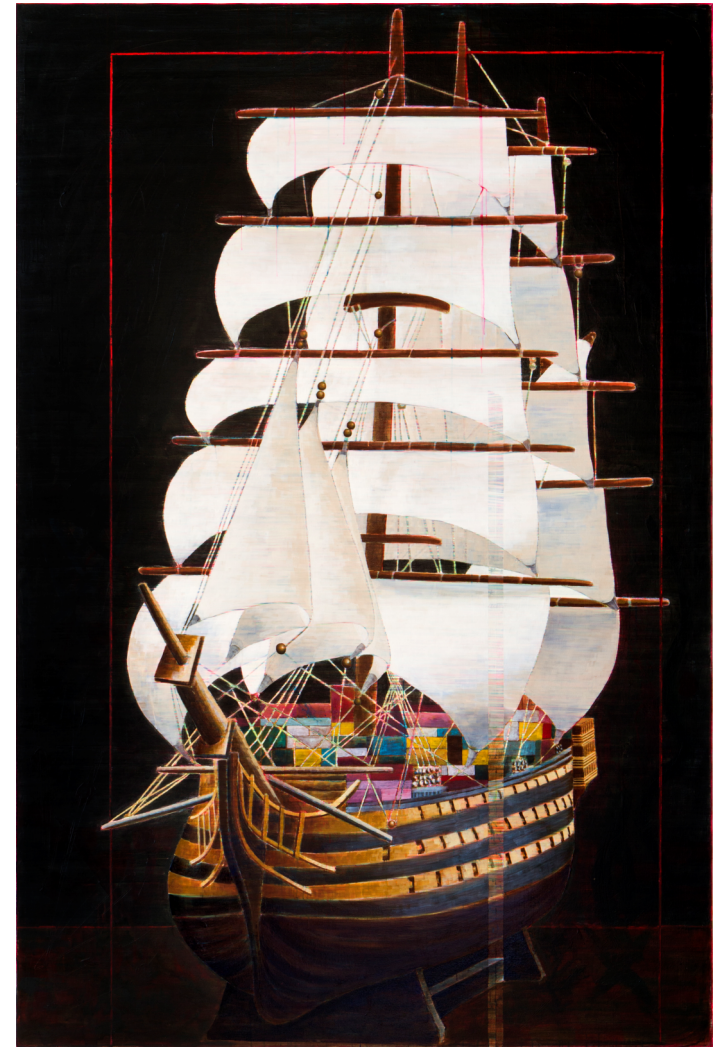
It doesn't take a great leap of imagination or much historical knowledge to recognize in a sailing ship the kind of metaphor art has developed, in almost every genre over the centuries, for painting itself. Not only did many of the pigments come from the colonies by ship in overseas 'trading' excursions, financed by rich merchants or nobles; not only do the white canvas sails resemble the painter's medium; but human existence itself can be read into the metaphor of the ship. There is no steady ground and no escape once you're aboard; you must go on no matter what; you must keep your balance no matter what else is on board. While this may be true for every human being, it is especially true for the existence of an artist.

From a more formal perspective, the subject of abstraction is addressed by large portions of white surface resembling the sails. The figure-ground problem and other aspects of representation like light, the illusion of depth and gravity are exemplified in a direct cause-and-effect relation between the 'pose' of the ship and how its surrounding 'elements' are configured by the painter; a show of force, so to speak, between matter and the ability of the artist to make visible the otherwise invisible and immaterial. For all these painterly questions, a ship really seems to be the perfect vessel.

But as we have stated earlier that difference rather than

conformity with the genre defines what kind of model (rather than metaphor) for the art of painting Fendry Ekel is suggesting here, we must continue our search. When no wind, no source of light or sea are shown in Ekel's 1987, then energy, force and power – Kraft, according to Gottfried Boehm quoting Hans-Georg Gadamer, the central category of the historical view of the world – have apparently made way for something else. If this portrait of a ship is no longer about the relation between man and nature (or artist and matter), it is instead, I'd like to suggest, about the relation between man and memory (or artist and image, to complete the analogy).

No wind, no outer force fills the vessel's sails in 1987. Instead, a complex network of colourful strings or 'synapses' seems to be causing the ship's specific orientation. Its lines do not remind us of disegno as a first step in a long sequence of actions, ultimately leading to the constitution of a representational image. In fact, they imply the very opposite: at an early stage of the painting process, Ekel 'scans' his canvas with a broad brush, creating a 'sea' of fine, parallel, coloured stripes, which are to form the basis of both figure and background. The lines which hold the sails in place in 1987 are in fact formed by this kind of background, left unaltered. Instead of drawn lines, they become veins that transport between them some sort of vital content; the effect of the colourful horizontal stripes on them is also reminiscent of endlessly coded strands of DNA. Formally these 'open' spaces allow us to look right down to the image's 'bones' and therefore also resemble, as it were, the skeleton of its construction. If this painting presents itself as 'made' in



**Carpe Diem**, oil and acrylic on canvas 300 x 200 x 4,5 cm, 2015

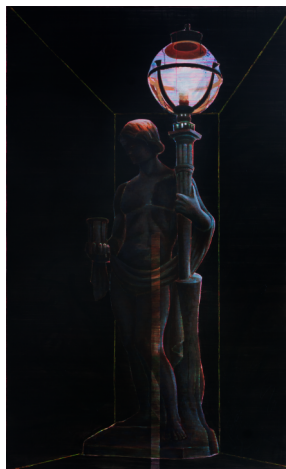




**Quo Vadis**, oil and acrylic on canvas, 260 x 220 x 3 cm, 2015



**1987**, oil and acrylic on canvas, 250 x 200 x 4,5 cm, 2014



**Untitled (1987)**, oil and acrylic on canvas, 60 x 75 cm, 2014  
**Investigation #7**, oil and acrylic on canvas, 225 x 160 x 3 cm, 2013  
**Republic**, oil and acrylic on canvas, 270 x 160 x 4,5 cm, 2014

any way, it is not in the constitution of outline filled in by solid shapes. Rather, its genesis is like a process of growth in a field of pre-existing information, revealing itself on the surface throughout figure and ground in different levels of intensity.

The entire model in 1987 is situated in a simple grid of red lines, depicting a kind of Cartesian space, one 'without hiding places which in each of its points is only what it is, neither more nor less, this identity of Being that underlies the analysis of [two-dimensional art]'. Yet even a representation of space this primitive is aborted by Ekel in that the vanishing point perspective of the 'walls', suggested in the upper half of the painting, is counteracted by a continuous horizontal line below. Further establishing this intention is a vertical strip on the painting's left side, generated by the application of masking tape during the painting process with the sole aim of ensuring the viewer's awareness of the unquestionable flatness and objectivity of any painting.

1987 from the 'Title Painting' series (2014–2015) is another painting by Fendry Ekel, apparently referencing the same complex of investigation (Fig. 6). On a similar dark background we see what looks like a photographic record of a shimmering blue neon sign that reads '1987', taken at night in frontal close-up, neatly cropped to appear symmetrically and monumentally within the rectangle of the canvas. On closer inspection, the 'neon' numbers, with their nimbus of cold diffusion, allow for a three-dimensional reading only from a certain distance, as in their highlighted centres they too reveal the fine

stripes of Ekel's practice of horizontal 'scanning'. These stripes can be followed from the centres of the letters into the background, causing flatness to predominate over the illusion of three-dimensionality.

There is a thread of 'text as image' running through Fendry Ekel's oeuvre. When first studying art at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, the artist's ability to paint with ease, as well as his specific cultural and visual background, earned him much attention and recognition from his teachers. The only dilemma, according to Ekel, was that he himself didn't really have a clear concept of what he was doing. 'It was not a matter of what or how to paint but why to paint.' In order to explore exactly that, he took a period of several years in which he completely stayed away from painting and developed in other media what he had to say as an artist with the visual means of painting. Even in his two years as participant at the Rijksakademie Amsterdam in the late 1990s, where he was accepted by the Belgian painters Narcisse Tordoir and Luc Tuymans, he didn't touch the medium of painting in a traditional sense. Once he returned to the efficiency of painting, it was painted text that enabled this transition. The installation F.E.A.R (2004, Fig. 7), consisting of beautifully painted 'demonstration panels', each forming an acronym of the word 'FEAR' (e.g. 'For Everything A Reason'), was his last truly three-dimensional work.

Painting the titles of his own figurative paintings is yet another way in which Fendry Ekel challenges representation. This practice is present throughout his work in different guises, whether it is portraying someone

as someone else, the multiplication of personages, or visual quotations from his own or other artists' paintings. Ekel once stated: 'For me images, just like human life, have a past as well as their own shadow.' Most likely the 'Title Paintings' have an early predecessor in the work *The End* (2006, Fig. 8), a painting from the series 'Century 21', showing a crop from the façade of the Millenium Hilton hotel in New York. Here, the letters 'THE' appear in such an abstract way that it truly prepares for the conceptual step Ekel took with 'Title Paintings'.

Of course, the date paintings of artist On Kawara (1932–2014) come to mind. Kawara has always fascinated Ekel for his discipline and precision in projecting something personal, and for his ability to use representational means (dates, in his case) to reach a point where abstraction and figuration start oscillating into multistable figures, constantly reflecting on one another.

While we have suggested that 1987 seems to bear autobiographical connotations – even if we left it at the simple act of referencing an earlier painting – the way in which 'text' is processed into painting in Ekel's case allows for its perception as a monument or a sign. For any given year, there is a pre-existing collective memory that the artist can tap into. This universal ground enables him to create a zone in which his own personal memory remains unspecific and safely contained.

From the very beginning of his career, Ekel has referred to his entire oeuvre as a self-portrait: 'Look at my work



and you will know who I am.' One may wonder what this means, for his works are clearly so distant and all about projection; not at all sentimental but constructed (rather than taken from a personal photo album in an analytical process). But when talking about memory in the context of Ekel's work, indeed we do not mean to refer to autobiographical sentiment at all. Instead, remembering and forgetting are two sides of the same coin and together make up the currency of political attitude.

If, as stated earlier, force is a central category of the historical view of the world, and Ekel's portrait of a ship is no longer about that, we might now add that memory has become 'the central category of cultural theory construction and the discourse of cultural politics'. Memory as an attitude (remembering as well as not forgetting) is certainly central to the works of Fendry Ekel. It is in that sense that his works are to be read as 'monuments': to more or less specific events or people, to places, but also to political thinking itself.

Challenging the obviousness of representation in art, and finding ways of doing so without relying on formulas, is part of that very attitude. Just as a spacecraft jettisons its own parts piece by piece in order to arrive at a planned destination despite the pull of gravity, Fendry Ekel discharges painting from its burden of first-degree representation. However, this doesn't imply that the constructed image is a stranger to us. Quite the opposite: the use of existing imagery, fully charged with meaning, is our doorway to Ekel's paintings, if only we agree to pause and remember. The price, on the other hand, is that we

are held responsible for our involvement in the construction of meaning. Just like the artist himself, we need to invest x amount of energy in 'wanting to know'.

While the deconstruction of images allows us to see everything more sharply, their reconstruction should help us to understand. Or, as Dutch cultural philosopher Jan van Heemst wrote in 'One Way Ticket', the very first essay on the work of Fendry Ekel from 2002: 'The fragile reconstruction of origin, journey and destination [...] can be perceived as a thoughtful rendering of the way in which identities are being staged. The stronger the representation, the more will be suppressed.'

### Figures

1. Fendry Ekel, 1987, 2014, oil and acrylic on canvas, 250 x 200 cm
2. Gerhard Richter, Seascape(Sea Sea), 1970, oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm, © Gerhard Richter 2015
3. Studio of painter Hendrik Willem Mesdag (between 1869 and 1915) on the Laan van Meerdervoort, Netherlands Institute for Art History, The Hague
4. Caspar David Friedrich, The Cross in the Mountains, 1807–1808, oil on canvas, 115 x 110.5 cm, Galerie Neue Meister, Dresden, Germany
5. Fendry Ekel, Grosse Halle, 2007, gouache and acrylic on paper, 166 x 213 cm
6. Fendry Ekel, 1987, 2014, oil and acrylic on canvas, 60 x 75 cm
7. Fendry Ekel, F.E.A.R., 2004, gouache and acrylic on plywood, various sizes
8. Fendry Ekel, Century 21, The End, 2006, gouache and acrylic on paper, 181.5 x 130 cm

## Notes

Fendry Ekel, *Handstad*. 1997, artist's book, mixed media, 29.7 x 42 cm, collection of the artist.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Routledge, 1984), 453. Emphasis by the author.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 123.

Alexander García Düttmann, 'Aesthetic Thinking or the Small Cold Breasts of an English Girl', unpublished manuscript, presented at the Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICI) during the event 'Alexander García Düttmann & Victor Burgin: Art and Visual Thinking', Berlin, 15 November 2012.

'Schreibt er doch als ob er's gesehen hätte, wie F. vor dem aus Thon oder Wachs gekneteten Berg gesessen und gezeichnet!' English: 'Indeed, he [Ramdohr] writes as if he had seen F. [Friedrich] sitting and drawing in front of the mountain moulded from clay or wax', Caspar David Friedrich in a third-person letter to his friend Professor Johannes Karl Hartwig Schulze, 8 February 1809. Published in *Künstlerbriefe über Kunst: von der Renaissance bis zur Romantik*, ed. H. Uhde-Bernays (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1960), 141-44.

Art critic Basilius von Ramdohr seriously criticized Caspar David Friedrich's landscape painting *Cross in the Mountains* in an article for being unacademic. Because of its self-sufficient spontaneous expression and calculated aesthetic impact, he saw it as unworthy of being an altarpiece. See Frank Hilmar, 'Der Ramdohrstreit: Caspar David Friedrichs Kreuz im Gebirge', in *Streit um Bilder: von Byzanz bis Duchamp*, ed. Karl Möseneder (Berlin: Reimer, 1997), 141-60. See footnote 5, p. 141.

The artist photographed the model in the German Historical Museum in Berlin. Another example is *Place of Birth* (2007), a depiction of the model of architect Walter Gropius' Bauhaus Siedlung, a progressive social housing project from the 1920s.

Gerhard Richter, *Text 1961 bis 2007: Schriften, Interviews, Briefe*, ed. Dietmar Elger and Hans Ulrich Obrist (Cologne: Verlagsbuchhandlung König, 2008), 121.

Gottfried Boehm, 'Abstraktion und Realität: Zum Verhältnis von Kunst und Kunstphilosophie in der Moderne', *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 97 (1990): 234.

Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, 134.

Fendry Ekel in conversation with the author, Yogyakarta, 26 February 2015.

For his F.E.A.R. installation Fendry Ekel was inspired by a song by former Stone Roses singer Ian Brown on his 2001 album *Music of the Spheres*. Ekel had heard Brown perform this album in concert at the Melkweg, Amsterdam on 24 April 2002.

Fendry Ekel in conversation with the author, Amsterdam, 2001.

Fendry Ekel in conversation with the author, Yogyakarta, February 2015.

Fendry Ekel in conversation with the author, Amsterdam, 2001.

See Ulrich Borsdorf and Heinrich Theodor Grütter (eds.), *Orte der Erinnerung: Denkmal, Gedenkstätte, Museum* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1999), 1.

Jan van Heemst, 'One Way Ticket: Over het ervaarbaar maken van identiteit' (Amsterdam/Leiden: Universiteit Leiden, 2002), publication accompanying Fendry Ekel's lecture 'One Way Ticket' in the series 'Art from the Diaspora', led by Kitty Zijlmans at the Department of Art History, World Art Studies, 4 March 2002.

**Astrid Honold**, Writer was born in Germany and studied Architecture (Dipl.-Ing) in Stuttgart, Art (BA) and Art History (MA). Today she is a PhD candidate at Freie Universität Berlin, Germany. She has lived and worked in Stuttgart, San Francisco, Amsterdam, New York, and Berlin, where she is based today. Honold gathered her work experience in organizing large scale exhibitions for international design label droog worldwide. Among the exhibition venues were Haus der Kunst (Munich), Museo Oscar Niemeyer (Curitiba, Brazil), Museum of Art and Design (New York), Gemeentemuseum (Den Haag) and Grand-Hornu Images (Belgium) as well as other prestigious venues in Germany, China, New Zealand, Australia, Senegal, Indonesia and Switzerland. From 1998-2007 Honold was also responsible for the organization of droog's annual presentation during the Salone del Mobile (Milan, Italy).

As an art historian Honold is focusing on artistic practice and the application of photography in painting. Her MA thesis 'Blur in Motion' inquires into the blur as a mediating movement in the work of German painter Gerhard Richter. For her PhD dissertation 'White to Play' she investigates the structural influence of chess theory and practice on the organization of Marcel Duchamp's oeuvre. In 2015 two research articles on the topic will be published in France and the UK. Honold curates exhibitions for galleries and museums internationally.

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Fendry Ekel (b. Jakarta) studied fine art at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy and the esteemed Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam.

As an outcome of his solo exhibition at the

Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art (HVCCA) in New York in 2010, he was invited to participate in the International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP), New York in 2011.

Ekel has been dubbed a *pictor doctus*, who critically investigates the power of art, figuration and representation by appropriating iconic images from our collective memory.

His multilayered monumental paintings after existing photographs explore the relations between man and memory. Fendry Ekel has exhibited his work internationally and had recurring solo shows in Amsterdam, Jakarta, Milan, Valencia, Mexico City and New York. Ekel lives and works in Yogyakarta, Indonesia and Berlin, Germany.