

MEMORY STUDIES ASSOCIATION (MSA)

**Memory & Trauma WG  
WG Witnessing  
Virtual Book Presentation,  
Spring 2026**

Join us at

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**Trauma  
and Affect**



(Mis)Understanding Pain  
in Art and Culture  
Ernst van Alphen

vis-à-vis  
Valiz

**Virtual Book Presentation Session, Spring 2026  
May 26, 2026 at 09:00 am EST**

**Presenter: Ernst van Alphen on his book: *Trauma and Affect: (Mis)Understanding Pain in Art and Culture***

**Abstract:** Since the 1990s, the concepts "trauma" and "affect" have become increasingly important in the critique of art, literature and culture, acquiring currency across disparate disciplines such as gender studies, literature, postcolonial studies, sociology and even economics. Productive and intriguing in many ways, this turn has also resulted in major confusion, as the concepts' meanings have grown obscured from overuse.

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In *Trauma and Affect*, literary scholar Ernst van Alphen examines the concepts through the lens of visual artworks and literature, drawing from many sources and domains. In the first half of the book, Alphen reexamines the origins of trauma theory in order to restore its critical power. In the second half, he discusses artists who develop strategies that process affect into critical making and thinking. Artists and writers discussed include Francis Bacon, Yevgenia Ginzburg, Félix González-Torres, Roni Horn, Steve McQueen and Andrew Wyeth, among many others.

**Bio: Ernst van Alphen** is Professor Emeritus of Literary Studies at Leiden University. Before Leiden, he worked at Utrecht University and the University of Nijmegen. He also worked as a Professor of Dutch Studies and Professor of Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley. His publications include *Francis Bacon and The Loss of Self* (Harvard University Press, 1995), *Caught By History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (Stanford University Press, 1997), *Armando: Shaping Memory* (NAi Publishers, 2000), *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media* (Reaktion Books, 2014), and *Failed Images: Photography and Its Counter-Practices* (Valiz, 2018), *Shame! and Masculinity* (Valiz, 2020), *Productive Archiving. Artistic Strategies, Future Memories and Fluid Identities* (Valiz, 2023). *Seven Logics of Sculpture. Encountering Objects Through the Senses* (Valiz, 2024). His book *Trauma and Affect: (Mis)Understanding Pain in Art and Culture* that he presents in our session has been published by Valiz in 2025. In press is another book: *Contemporary Photography and Surrealism*, which will be out coming July.