

Sometimes a photograph says less than 1000 words

Pandora's box

text: Hans Rooseboom, 2012

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When the *Volkskrant Magazine* existed ten years in 2009, this fact was celebrated with the publication of the book *Andere ogen* (Other Eyes), which presented a selection from the more than 15,000 photographs which had appeared in 469 issues. It will come as no surprise that in the preface as well as in the introduction much praise was lavished on the photographs.

The selection was made by picture editor Theo Audenaard, who wrote that he confined himself to the *portraits* which had appeared in the magazine: "Not only did we publish a great number of them, we also appear to have been good at it; we even managed to gather a following." Speech maker Hans Aarsman said in the preface that the *Volkskrant Magazine* contained "possibly the most daring photography of the Netherlands." Thus it is no wonder that the book was given the subtitle *10 years of self-willed Dutch photography*.

Daring, self-willed, that might be true, but what mainly struck me when leafing through the book was that –and this is the other extreme– there is hardly any normal photo in it.

Almost all the photographs show something peculiar: Freek de Jonge standing up to his knees in water, Brigit Schuurman holding a red cat or tomcat between her spread legs, Hans Teeuwen standing next to a large teddy bear, Gerda Verburg running down a flight of stairs, etcetera, etcetera. And if it is not in the pose, the situation or the attribute, it is in the, emphatically present, style of photographing or printing: Stefan Vanfleteren, Anton Corbijn and Erwin Olaf just do have a very recognizable "hand". We have seen before in magazines that the photographs make a splash on the page. A magazine wanting to attract attention will also use remarkable photographs to get it.

A classical example is the famous American magazine *Life* which was founded in 1936 by Henry Luce. He knew how much the public loved to look at pictures in magazines and thus strived for making "the damnedest best non-pornographic look-through magazine in the United States."

In *Life*, which existed as a weekly until 1972, many photographs appeared that pictured spectacular subjects which were not shown anywhere else, or that caught the eye by their technical complexity and/or unusual camera angles. Luce certainly did not allow *Life* to be dull. In those same thirties when *Life* was founded, a revolution occurred which would change photography forever.

A young generation of photographers was looking for new ways to represent the world. They introduced extreme high or low camera angles, cut-outs and close-ups and breathed new life into the photomontage, the photo collage and the photogram.

Books like *Malerei Photographie Film* (Painting Photography Film) by Lászlò Moholy-Nagy (1925) and *Foto-Auge* (Photo Eye) by Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold (1929) offered a wide selection of these and other experimental imaging means.

This revolution brought many good things by rigorously breaking with the stale pictorialism that had outlived its usefulness. Several photographs that were made with the imaging means propagated in these books are undeniable apogees of the history of photography.

But there is a downside. Very soon – still in the thirties – the extreme camera angles and cut-outs and the alienating working methods became a “mannerism”. Any photographer wanting to be up to date followed the recipes of Moholy-Nagy *cum suis*. This not only ended in listless and half-hearted epigonism, but also in inflation. In the large and increasing number of newspapers and magazines in the thirties that were illustrated with photographs – drawings slowly but irrevocably lost ground – the angles, cut-outs and techniques which lately had been new and refreshing, became obvious and even commonplace.

It is understandable that in the books of Moholy-Nagy and others no ordinary photographs were found: in that period something new had to be introduced and something old challenged. It would seem, however, that the partiality for unusual photographs has come to stay.

There still is an ineradicable leaning towards doing something peculiar, unexpected, “different” from others. The volumes of *Life* and the survey of ten years of *Volkskrant Magazine* are only two cases in point.

There is hardly any portrait in *Andere ogen* where nothing distracts the attention from the face. There is always a grimace, a funny hat, or another incongruity. A “pure” portrait of only the face is obviously not enough.

With all the visual rhetoric that got into photography since the thirties, today it might be rather “daring” to make a subdued, tranquil portrait, without straining after effect, a portrait which does not need anything but the represented person himself.

Recently the Rijksmuseum acquired a donation of two portraits which are so simple, that one of the museum’s employees, who is used to (have to) verbalize the qualities of a photograph, was stunned into speechlessness for a moment. Why are these two portraits, *Mayumi I* and *Mayumi II* by Krystyna Ziach, so good?

Portraits with peculiar attributes, poses and the like obviously give rise to words such as “daring” and “self-willed”, but they are not applicable in this case (even leaving aside the fact that they are not seldom empty concepts).

In Ziach’s two portraits we see the same woman twice, photographed straight from the front. Only her face, the black hair, the naked shoulders and a blue background are visible. Her eyes are closed which only enhances the impression of tranquillity. The blue of the background is neutral, but at the same time warm enough to prevent the portraits from being as barren as Thomas Ruff’s blown-up passport photos.

If we leave photography for a moment and look at portraits made in other techniques, it becomes apparent how effective such an extreme simplicity can be. Take for example the portrait of a girl drawn by Leendert van der Cooghen in 1653. Only the face has been elaborated and accentuated with red chalk, whereas the bonnet, the throat and the shoulders are only broadly outlined, a classical "trick" to ensure that all the attention goes to the face.

We look straight into the seventeenth century. The more than three and a half century old portrait proves that, even after so many years, ultimate simplicity does lose nothing of its strength, on the contrary the emotion and strength are only enhanced by it.

Translation: Hanny Keulers