

**The Mass Ornament – Revisited:
Reading From Hans Eijkelboom’s *Photo Notes***

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Repeatability is the very essence of a sign
—Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*

Dieter Roelstraete looks at Hans Eijkelboom’s momentous photographic project of classification and documentation, *Photo Notes*, to argue for a humanism that staves off the fear of the same.

0. Preliminary One

By the time this issue of *Afterall* hits the newsstands, the Shanghai World Expo 2010, titled ‘Better City, Better Life’, will have been committed to memory, restoring the balance of power among China’s leading cities after the 2008 Olympic extravaganza thrust Beijing onto the world stage as a so-called ‘alpha world city’. This will (almost certainly) not signal the end, however, of the steady stream of publications with titles such as *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia* (Columbia University Press, 2009); *China Rising: Will the West Be Able to Cope?* (World Scientific Publishing Company, 2009); *China’s Rise: Challenges and Opportunities* (Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2009); *China Road: A Journey Into the Future of a Rising Power* (Random House, 2007); *China, Inc.: How the Rise of the Next Superpower Challenges America and the World* (Scribner, 2005); *The Chinese Century: The Rising Chinese Economy and Its Impact on the Global Economy, the Balance of Power, and Your Job* (Wharton School Publishing, 2006); *The Rise of China: How Economic Reform is Creating a New Superpower* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1994); *The Rise of China: Essays on the Future Competition* (Encounter Books, 2009); *The Rise of China and the Demise of the Capitalist World Economy* (Monthly Review Press, 2009); *China Shakes the World: A Titan’s Rise and Troubled Future* (Mariner Books, 2007); and *Dragon Rising: An Inside Look at China Today* (National Geographic, 2007). The first thing to observe here is the obvious lack of imagination among Western authors in capturing the global phenomenon of ‘China rising’. More important, however, is the distinct sense of fear, if not outright panic, that informs these various analyses of ‘China rising’ and what it means for your (really ‘our’) job. Posing as sincere scholarly interest in the Chinese economy, a relatively unrefined brand of sinophobia is easily unmasked in this writings – the real subtext of the thousand-year old history of the West’s ever-hesitant, ambivalent relationship with the ‘Empire of the Middle’.¹

Many different fears come together in the aforementioned complex history, but for now (i.e. with an eye on what will follow shortly) I want to single out one source of anxiety in this cauldron of orientalist fantasies in particular, namely the spectral terror of oriental *sameness* – of repetition on a mass (i.e. industrialised) scale – which led even so sensitive and empathic a thinker as Emmanuel

¹ I am indebted to Monika Szweczyk for pointing out many of the titles listed above. The topic of the West’s enduring fascination with China’s phoenix-like rise to global prominence is one subject that is dealt with rather extensively in her essay ‘Negation Notes (while working on an exhibition with Allan Sekula featuring *This Ain’t China: A Photonovel*)’, published in *e-flux journal* #13, February 2010, also available at www.e-flux.com/journal/view/110 (last accessed on 26 October 2010).

Levinas, normally so attuned to the mysteries of alterity, to regress to the xenophobic atavism of fear of the ‘yellow peril’² *fear of numbers*.

0. Preliminary Two

On a closely related note, anyone one who has flown into the gargantuan Chinese manufacturing centres of Shenzhen, Shanghai, Guangzhou and the Beijing, will have noticed – exhaust fumes permitting – the dense patchwork of gleaming blue roofs that cover hundreds of square miles of built-up land on these urban archipelagos’ fractured outskirts. Indeed, the view from above this monochrome mosaic of factory buildings, many of which clog together in actual factory towns, and which may in turn form dense clusters of factory metropolises, certainly helps to remove any remaining doubt that the world as we know it is indeed ‘made in China’ – from the laptop I’m using to write this (and what is its emphatic claim of having been designed in California other than a desperate attempt to cover up its indebtedness to Chinese *Vernunft?*) and the digital camera I used to immortalize the view which sparked this insight, to the thermos I’m pouring my coffee from, to whatever else I’m about to go out shopping for. And of course this endless list of things ‘made in China’ also includes the equipment used by Hans Eijkelboom to produce the work we are about to discuss – a significant portion of which also has China as its *subject*. So many things, in fact, are now made in China that a US journalist named Sara Bongiorno wrote a best-seller chronicling her family’s resolution to live one whole year without buying or consuming a single thing ‘made in China’ (this was in 2007; one cannot help but wonder what has happened to the family since)³ – yet more self-conscious civic awareness, in other words, that is easily unmasked as crude consumerist sinophobia.

1. Artist

Who is Hans Eijkelboom? The short answer is: a Dutch photo-artist, born in 1949, who lives and works in Amsterdam and in a dozen other places around the world where his faux-anthropological photo expeditions may happen to take him at any given time. Only slightly younger than his compatriots Bas Jan Ader, Jan Dibbets, Ger van Elk and Wim T. Schippers, Eijkelboom was an active local member of the burgeoning Conceptual art movement that made Holland, and Amsterdam in particular, such a crucial avant-garde art destination in the late 1960s and early 70s – at age 22, he was the youngest participant, among such luminaries as Joseph Beuys, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris and Robert Smithson, in the landmark exhibition ‘Sonsbeek 71: Sonsbeek buiten de perken’ (1971), organised in his

² The yellow peril! It is not racial, it is spiritual. It does not involve inferior values; it involves a radical strangeness, a stranger to the weight of its past, from where there does not filter any familiar voice or inflection, a lunar or Martian past.’ This passage is taken from what Slavoj Žižek calls ‘arguably [Levinas’s] weirdest text, “The Russo-Chinese Debate and the Dialectic” (1960)’. Quoted in: Slavoj Žižek, ‘Mao Tse-Tung, the Marxist Lord of Misrule’, in Mao Tse-Tung, *On Practice and Contradiction*, London and New York: Verso, 2007, p.3.

³ See Sara Bongiorno, *A Year Without ‘Made in China’: One Family’s True Life Adventure in the Global Economy*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2007.

hometown Arnhem. Inspired by Concept art's groundbreaking experiments with machine-like image (re-)production and a radically deskilled ('anti') photography – Douglas Huebler's practice, along with that of Ed Ruscha, is perhaps the dominant model here – Eijkelboom already in the early 1970s settled on the serial imaging procedure that would become the hallmark of his practice, with the singular characteristic that almost all of his early work (roughly made in the period between 1971 and 1980) amounted to an extensive exercise in self-portraiture. In 1973, Eijkelboom succeeded in appearing in one newspaper photograph each day for ten consecutive days (mostly grainy pictures of regional non-events, relegated to the back pages); in 1976 he made a series of portraits documenting his encounters with the leading politicians and artists of the day; in eight pictures made in 1978 he appears as a model appraising such consumer items as Cockburn's Port, Heineken beer and Van Nelle tobacco. Equally early on, another pivotal pictorial precept emerged in the sartorial motif that, along with the serial procedure (and its formal expression, in exhibition formats, through the figure of the grid), continues to define his work to this day: in a photo series from 1973, he photographed different people wearing his clothes; in *De Drie Communisten* (*The Three Communists*, 1975), the artist poses next to a portrait of Marx, Lenin and Mao, each time in matching 'Marxist', 'Leninist' and 'Maoist' outfits (the different hats give the story away faster than anything else); in the extensive series *Identiteit* (*Identity*, 1976), Eijkelboom again photographed himself, dressed up in such a way as to correspond to the image some of his childhood acquaintances had formed of the artist, as recounted to an assistant, ten years after last seeing him; in *De Ideale Man* (*The Ideal Man*, 1978), one hundred women were sent questionnaires in which they were asked to describe their 'ideal man', and the ten best answers were used for yet more shape-shifting sartorial experimentation from Eijkelboom. And in 1979 came the final defining element of the diaristic, – the humdrum record of a man's daily doings – and with it the decisive turn towards the Other, in greater or lesser numbers, most easily and furtively encountered in the street.

2. Artwork

Eijkelboom's early experiments with 'street' photography, that honourable genre that includes such distinguished practitioners as Eugène Atget, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Doisneau and Gary Winogrand – the trusted purveyors of the exact type of 'fine arts' photography that early Conceptual art did so much to discredit –, still bear the marks of his debt to Douglas Huebler et al.: for *Mooi – Lelijk* (*Beautiful – Ugly*, 1980), for example, he asked random passersby in the city centre of Tilburg to point out someone in the crowd whom they found beautiful, and someone whom they found ugly; in each resulting series of photographs, a portrait of the 'participant' was shown in the middle, flanked by the objects of his or her aesthetic judgment to the left and right. This, then, is also where the *crowd* –

classes, groups, masses, multitudes – begins to come into focus as the artist's true subject (around the same time he stopped taking pictures of himself); it is no coincidence that in 1981, Eijkelboom embarked on his appropriately titled *Hommage aan August Sander (Homage to August Sander)*, a project for which he asked a number of people encountered in the street 'When you look at the world and acknowledge that not all people are the same, what is the first division into groups or sorts that comes to mind?', upon which they were invited, after having been photographed, to take a walk through Arnhem with Eijkelboom and point out people in the crowd who corresponded to this division. The humorous, outlandish crudeness of some of the resulting typologies – 'authoritarian types', 'housewives', 'junkies', 'office people', 'scum', 'the super-rich' – already points the way towards the parodic typo-logic that would become the driving force behind Eijkelboom's magnum opus, the so-called *Photo Notes* he made on a daily basis from 8 November 1992 until 8 November 2007.

Encompassing *thousands* of photographs of what are, without a doubt, individuals – there are some exceptions to this rule in the form of pairs or couples, mothers and daughters and the like, but these, too, are very much portraits, pictures of highly individual 'faces in the crowd'⁴ – Eijkelboom's *Photo Notes* effectively constitutes an amateur (visual) anthropology of the global village at a turning point in its history, precisely at a moment in time (the 1990s and 2000s) when globalisation as such took effect. Here, again, the importance of scrupulous photographic attention to sartorial detail cannot be overstated, although Eijkelboom is of course not a 'fashion' photographer. His interest in clothing concerns the levelling qualities of the *uniform* much more than the fashionista's illusory logic of individuation, the provision of which the garment industry must by its very definition found itself upon. Is it repetition (or sameness) rather than difference, then, that matters, in spite of how laborious or sincere the effort on the part of the wearer is to 'differ' or otherwise stand out from the crowd by clothing alone. By far the most amusing pages from Eijkelboom's kaleidoscopic 'diary' are those in which he has brought together all the photographs made on the Dam in Amsterdam, one August afternoon in 2003, of young black men wearing *Scarface* T-shirts, or those depicting young women in unnecessarily tight white tank tops licking ice creams; or fully-grown men, clearly civilians, dressed from top to toe in camouflage gear (26 November 1997, from 1pm till 1.30 pm, on the corner of Broadway and 14th Street in New York City). For this is *Photo Notes's* single governing principle, that which both invites immediate comparisons

⁴ This is a reference to the following famous haiku by Ezra Pound: 'The apparition of these faces in the crowd; petals on a wet, black bough' – the informal motto of an exhibition organized by Iwona Blazwick and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London and Castello di Rivoli in Turin in 2004 and 2005. Pound's celebrated poem 'powerfully evokes the situation of the individual in the metropolis: personalities suspended in a moment within the life of the city'. The exhibition was intended 'as an exploration of this condition of modernity seen in realist art, especially art of the human face and form. [... It] traces a history of avant-garde figuration from a new perspective.' Clearly, it should have included the work of Hans Eijkelboom. See <http://www.rizzoliusa.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9788876240690> (last accessed on 6 September 2010)

with August Sander's monumental *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (*People of the 20th Century*, 1924–27), and decisively sets it apart from this legendary precedent: the artist takes to the street not only armed with his camera, but also with a set of rigorous, non-negotiable rules. Photographing only takes place in a precisely determined spot, for a precisely determined length of time (both facts are always included at the bottom of the resulting arrangement of photographs as crucial bits of information) and the 'subject' is correspondingly narrowly defined to ensure maximum sameness. Young girls with Spice Girl T-shirts, young men with Che Guevara T-shirts (most of them, though not all, Rage Against the Machine merchandise) or middle-aged men with Rolling Stones T-shirts; topless types on rollerblades; middle-aged mothers and teenage daughters schlepping shopping bags while talking to their mobile phones; people who are *not* emergency workers yet still wear yellow coats – as a document of changing fashions, *Photo Notes* certainly creates the impression that what was in reality only a decade-and-a-half ago is light years away in time.

In 2007, Eijkelboom published *Paris–New York–Shanghai*, a selection of a staggering 1218 photographs taken in the title's locations during the closing years of the *Photo Notes*'s decade-and-a-half – the project's epitaph so to speak, named after the capitals of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as the artist himself has remarked in a conversation with the author. (This is where we return, at long last, to our inaugural discussion of sinophilia and sinophobia. Luckily, the artist does not seem to suffer from either: Eijkelboom's China, that bewildering Empire of the Numbers, is as much a site of difference as it is a site of sameness, just like every other culture in the globalised capitalist world). In all three cities, the same precarious balance between difference and sameness, articulated by the way people dress and comport themselves in public, persists. In retrospect, one question in particular – a telling measure of the changes wrought upon the world in the couple of decades that the artist has been snapping away, changes that perhaps nowhere have made themselves felt more acutely than in both China and the China in our minds – cannot so easily be answered: would the Chinese chapter of this triptych have made any sense in the communist Shanghai of the early 1980s, of which our image is a rather drab and monochrome one? Would the monolithic spectacle of an army of similarly clad Chinese men and women on identikit bicycles have made for insufficiently heterogeneous photographic subject material? However it be, the ancient Western fear of oriental sameness, really a fear of numbers, here appears assuaged by the seemingly benign differentiating effects of global capitalism: seen through Eijkelboom's lens, the rise of China that is so often the source of all kinds of xenophobic anxieties becomes a rather more colourful, comical affair – a carnival of subtle, nearly imperceptible differences.

3. Reception, Interpretation

One thing that strikes me whenever I return to Eijkelboom's work,

whether in book form – he has authored an impressive catalogue of self-published artist’s books – or as an amalgamation of art objects (i.e. finely framed prints), is its persistent good humour, the lucidity of what is in essence its ‘humanist’ spirit. The photographs’ subject is the *comédie humaine*, this time rendered surveyable thanks to the artist’s commitment to a handful of tried-and-tested ‘minimalist’ or serialist rules – of a kind more commonly associated, paradoxically, with the anti-humanist gaze of a sociology of structures, patterns and numbers, reducing the ‘dignity of difference’ (to paraphrase Jonathan Sacks) to the mere spectacle of a human zoo or, worse still, cogs in a machine. Yet we never get the impression that the subject of Eijkelboom’s camera-eye is being ridiculed or literally looked down upon (even though the persistence of either class distinction or class consciousness – of the existence of social strata – certainly is one important element of the work), which raises a number of questions involving the apparently academic issue of detachment and distancing, and of the importance of the proximity of photographer to subject: where exactly does the artist stand when he makes these pictures, many of them detailed enough to register the intricate finery of his subjects’ facial expressions? Does the artist submerge himself in the crowd he is immortalising? Does this tell us something about the difference (or identity) of the people, the crowd, the multitude? Hans Eijkelboom is a tall man, making it easy for him to command a panoramic outlook, but this is not the merciless bird’s-eye view of a scientist noting the variety of exotic rituals in which his temporary hosts indulge. Subtly satirising the objectivist optic of the social sciences, his work is animated by the distinctly heart-warming glow of a humanist empathy *with* his subject – something which again leads us back, past apocalyptic, Foucauldian visions of the End of Man, via Douglas Huebler, to August Sander.⁵

It is perhaps inevitable that we should conclude the present discussion of Eijkelboom’s forensic view of the ‘wisdom of crowds’ with a cursory glance back at Siegfried Kracauer’s landmark essay ‘The Mass Ornament’, published in 1927 (predating the publication of Sander’s *Antlitz der Zeit (Face of Our Time)* by two years). In this widely read text, without a doubt a key chapter in the long history of the occidental fear of numbers, Kracauer is highly critical both of the so-called mass ornament – his most famous example of such a novel aesthetic phenomenon being the synchronised legwork of the Tiller Girls, a manically eroticised echo of the modern factory’s pitiless Taylorist regime – as well as of the intellectuals’ misguided disdain for

⁵ Douglas Huebler’s status as ‘perhaps the most important overlooked figure in Conceptual art’ has long been closely linked to what curator Jenni Lomax called the ‘humane and humorous vein in Huebler’s work’ – to his *humanism*, so to speak. An emphatically unironic work such as *Variable Piece #34* (1970) for instance, for which Huebler photographed forty random passers-by in the street immediately after telling them ‘You have a beautiful face’, remains an anomaly in the dour canon of 1960s and 70s US Concept art: in a catalogue essay published on the occasion of Huebler’s first ever retrospective exhibition in the UK, organized at Camden Arts Centre in 2002, Mark Godfrey notes that of the four figureheads of the movement captured in a famous photograph from 1969 (the other artists are Robert Barry, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner), Huebler is the only one who is smiling. Would it be too much of a stretch to call Hans Eijkelboom the Douglas Huebler of the Dutch Concept art scene?

such revolutionary entertainments. Kracauer's ambivalence is emblematic here, and particularly insightful with regards to our current discussion of Eijkelboom's work in relation to the atavistic fear of dizzying, innumerable multitudes:

*Educated people – who are never entirely absent – have taken offense at the emergence of the Tiller Girls and the stadium images. They judge anything that entertains the crowd to be a distraction of that crowd. But despite what they think, the aesthetic pleasure gained from ornamental mass movements is legitimate. Such movements are in fact among the rare creations of the age that bestow form upon a given material.*⁶

And so 'the masses who so spontaneously adopted these patterns are superior to their detractors among the educated classes to the extent that they at least roughly acknowledge the undisguised facts'⁷ – the undisguised fact, that is, of mankind's enslavement to the daemonic machine of mass production, and of the production of sameness (this is where Kracauer emerges as a progenitor of 1970s apparatus theory): that which is both manned by and which produces the masses as such.

Sometime before that, Kracauer had noted the ornament's resemblance to 'aerial photographs of landscapes and cities in that it does not emerge out of the interior of the given conditions, but rather appears above them. Actors likewise never grasp the stage settings in its totality, yet they consciously take part in its construction.'⁸ This casual reference to the alienating particulars of the thespian profession leads us directly back to Hans Eijkelboom's *Photo Notes*, where it often appears as if all the world's a stage indeed. Many people who appear in Eijkelboom's pictures may perhaps not be aware that they are being photographed – and this certainly qualifies as one of the series' more potent mysteries – but quite a few of them clearly strut around in anxious, unspoken expectation of some camera crew appearing out of nowhere. If they are not actually *living* in a movie, at least when seen together their images make up a movie unfolding before our very eyes – that of the rise and fall and rise (etc.) of 'public man'.

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⁶ Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament', in *The Mass Ornament – Weimar Essays* (trans. Thomas Y. Levin), Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2005, p.79. Italics in the original.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.85. Of some members of the educated classes who choose to remain oblivious to these undisguised facts, Kracauer says that 'they fail to grasp capitalism's core defect: it rationalises not too much but rather *too little*'. See p.81.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.77.