

Hans Eijkelboom

Martin Parr: introduction in the book Paris – New York - Shanghai

Anthropologists often make use of photography in their research, especially when gathering information about a society's strange and fascinating habits.

If I were an anthropologist, the first photographer I would call upon is Eijkelboom. Over a long career, he has photographed mainly in the street, observing people and places with the discipline, rigor, and engagement that are the hallmarks of anthropology. In fact, if I were a visitor from another planet looking for information on the nature of city life, I would also engage the services of Eijkelboom.

These are lofty claims to make about any photographer, so why is Eijkelboom so little known in the world of contemporary photographic practice? Here is my theory. First, he is Dutch. Dutch photography is consistently good; the country's approach to photography has conceptual roots, an approach now employed widely in contemporary photographic culture. And yet there has been little acknowledgement of these photographers' recent achievements, and their work has gone largely unrecognized. There are happily some exceptions to this lack of recognition; both Rienke Dijkstra and Hellen van Meene are celebrated within the fine art world. The marketplace within Holland, however, is very limited; the country does not have many high-powered art galleries that can help promote photographers work.

Second, Eijkelboom has been quietly working away for many years, and has produced numerous small and engaging catalogs. Despite the prolific nature of his publishing, however, the distribution has been limited. In total, he has published over twenty freestanding artist's books, released under the title Photo Notes; occasionally museums that have exhibited his work have published these, but most have been self-published. These Photo Notes editions have usually been limited to no more than 150, the majority being given away to friends and supporters. In one piquant example, in the 1970s Eijkelboom for ten consecutive days managed to get himself inserted into the background -and sometimes the foreground- of suitably dull photographs in his local

newspaper. The resulting book project entitled *In de krant* (1978) reproduces the pages of the newspaper where he appears. And although he has had many museums shows, especially in his native Holland, Eijkelboom has not hit the bigger world of photography or art.

The roots of Eijkelboom's work back can be traced back to the earlier work of Ed Ruscha and Hans-Peter Feldmann. It is difficult now to realize how long photographic culture took to register the wit and poignancy of these artists' observations; I remind readers that barely twelve years ago you could still buy the original Ruscha books at remaindered prices. The importance of the way photography enables us to compare and contrast-in other words, to create a typology- has only recently won full recognition. This, in essence, is what Eijkelboom has been a master of for many years. In this way, he might be seen as having been ahead of his times; while the larger world of photography was caught up in subjectivity and "stream-of-consciousness photography" in the intervening years, Eijkelboom has kept up his deft clinical observations.

Now everything comes together in this book, which is built around three contrasting cities. The old world is here represented by Paris, and the developing world by Shanghai. Somewhere between the two lies New York; with this sweep of the three cities, we get a good grasp of the modern metropolis. Within these parameters, set out in grids-in other words, typologies-we see images of real people, the quirky personal observations that Eijkelboom does so well: men with striped T-shirts, women with shopping bags, men in taxis. For the first time in Eijkelboom's career he has deliberately sought the same concepts or grids in all three cities, both uniting them, and also allowing the viewer to identify the small but significant differences among the cities.

All these grids are given the context of more sweeping urban views to complete the portrait of the city. It is the combination of these grids with the wider view that tell us so much about city life. We see the details, and how these all fit into the urban jigsaw. The timing of this project could not be better. Eijkelboom as a photographer has reached maturity.

This book is part of a much larger project entitled Photo Notes that Eijkelboom started on November 8, 1992, and which he will complete on November 8, 2007. The concept was that on at least five days a week he would go out into the city, town, or wherever he is, and record a grid or even a single image. The chosen subjects would not necessarily be predetermined. If Eijkelboom noticed that a certain coat was being worn, say, by middle-aged men, he would document these men for a period of up to two hours. Sometimes the theme of the day was so ubiquitous he could achieve the typology in twenty minutes. Originally these were shot on film, but in recent years he has used a digital camera. So fluent is his technique now, he no longer needs to look through the viewfinder, or even focus. It all unfolds and is recorded automatically.

It is difficult to imagine the vast number of images this obsessive artist has produced in pursuit of this project. However, in this remarkable book we are treated to Eijkelboom's condensed observations. As we leaf through, it all looks so beautifully simple, so clear in its intentions. Most of all, though, Paris – New York - Shanghai pushes the notion of documenting and interpreting city life into new and exciting territories.

Martin Parr, 2007