

# The work of Hans Eijkelboom

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This is a strange and unusual book: I open it, and it seems luxurious, as if I were spreading out a travel brochure or looking at some complex medieval polyptych or predella panel, or scanning a seventeenth century panorama of a city or battle. But the figures we see are very ordinary; these are not supermodels basking in the Caribbean sun nor are they saints and martyrs processing to heaven. Nothing is being advertised, nor is there any divine narrative. No miracle happens here, there is no glimpse of heaven (spiritual or consumer's): rather, it is the very ordinariness, the everydayness, that matters. But there is no map or plan, only details.

For a book of art photographs there are an extraordinary array of images. Having opened it, I turn the page of each volume simultaneously: I can see sixty photographs of men in striped shirts; turn again, and I see an army of seventy-two men in suits marching to work; turn again, and a panorama of empty civic spaces. What are we being told? That this is a small world after all? Is this a Family of Man on a minimal grid?

But this is not forcefully optimistic, positive imagery as Edward Steichen or Walt Disney may have looked for. Eijkelboom can nowadays see some parallels with Steigen's project, though his intent is very different, but he does not pretend we are all lovable and well meaning. We can see similarities across the continents but we start to find differences between the three "world capitals", and the photographer never seems to be jollying life up. This seems a neutral eye, reporting what he sees, letting us make our own analysis.

What unifies the book is the project that underlies it: beginning on November 8, 1992, Eijkelboom started a photographic diary that he calls Photo Notes. Since that date, every day if possible, he has taken between one and eighty photographs, as he wrote in 1996, "of things and events that I encounter during the daily course of things

in my life. I don't use this diary to show what happens in my life but as a method of visualizing the development of my worldview. The development of this world view is a slow and continuing process: drop by drop, through daily repeated experiences and observations, it shapes itself like stalagmites and stalactites in a cave."

Normally, going out into the town, Eijkelboom chooses and seeks out one type of person or situation (people in red jackets, women in shorts, people asleep on trains, men with slicked back hair, young girls in Spice Girl T-shirts). Then he photographs as many of those people as he can find within a period of up to two hours. The project will cease on 8th November 2007 – so this book is made very near its end.

For a period of seven years beginning the Photo Notes series, Eijkelboom had stopped taking photographs of people: after fourteen years (1971-1985) of photographing people, he had become uncomfortable with the way he was intruding into other people's lives and spaces. Like other artists – Victor Burgin, for example – he stopped working on the street. His photography had come to seem like a political abuse of power. Like Burgin, he returned to the street because he realized these scruples represented a lost cause: we are being photographed all the time. (This writer lives in London, the city with the highest proportion of security cameras in the world: he is photographed every day as he leaves his house, is photographed on the bus to work, and is photographed again as he opens the door at the office.) Eijkelboom also realized that in this age of celebrity, most people actually want to be photographed.

Eijkelboom's project is not untypical of late conceptual art in being an extensive and complex. It can be compared in its complexity of a Rodney Graham project, or in its social orientation with the work of Lorna Simpson or Jeremy Deller. But it echoes, above all others, Douglas Huebler's 1971 series *Variable Piece #70* in which Huebler set out to document everyone alive, taking groups of photographs from which sets or singles were chosen to represent such types as people who "might feel pleased to have been made the subject of art" or who are "beautiful but dumb". As always Huebler pokes fun at his own structures: they claim to be authoritative but are clearly provisional, and as always, he more than any other conceptualist was aware that

working in real space also means working in social space.

Of all the earlier conceptualists, Eijkelboom most admires Huebler- though the two never met. Like Huebler, Eijkelboom avoids confrontation, wanting to work with people, to find the aesthetic in small, everyday observations and actions. As was Huebler's his persona as a photographer is seemingly anonymous: having set out each day's project, he works (if in theory alone) as much like a recording machine as is humanly possible. When and where his persona as an artist emerges, it is, like Huebler's, a mildly ironic, gently humanist one.

Eijkelboom is locked into the history of conceptual art by his 1971 participation as a young man in Sonsbeek 71 exhibition, a radical exhibition of site-specific and environmental work, where he showed with, inter alios, Dan Graham, Huebler and Robert Smithson. It has become a truism that conceptual art changed the way we make or view "art" photographs making us fully aware of the photograph's ambivalent status as document and artwork, but it is less knowledged that few of the artists who made those key works in the late 1960s and early '70s have maintained their original impetus. What makes Eijkelboom important is that he began with that first wave of artists using photography but has built on and extended that initiative.

If we look at Eijkelboom's earliest photo work – for example, A shower of rain (1971) – we can see him using serial imagery and using himself as a subject. The system is simple: as he gets wetter his shirt getters redder, and he progressively flinches. The mixture of humor and pathos may recall Bas Jan Adler or William Wegman's work of that period. The concern with serial structure can be seen elsewhere, famously in Jan Dibbets, but also traces back to Constructivism, a movement the Dutch adopted as through is were their own-Peter Struyken, Eijkelboom's teacher, was a leading light.

Eijkelboom's use of the book (and he has to date made forty-one books, some large, mainly small) comes out of that impetus in conceptual art for small inexpensive books as a mode of presentation. One thinks of Ed Ruscha, who made sixteen artist books between 1962 and 1972 - but only one since. Originally inexpensive, they were flat, everyday, or even, in the linguistic term for a "voiceless voicing" often used by

Smithson, “surd”, but they had a fascination, a strange beauty, hence our continuing interest. Like Dan Graham’s photos of the late 1960s, they were an evocation of Generica: a world where regional differences have collapsed. In Europe Hans-Peter Feldmann made small photo books from 1968 onwards of banal subjects: ambulances, toys, footballers. The point again was not that they were beautiful books, but how they could be used. Sometimes he would hang these books on a line stretched across the gallery or from nails in the wall. The books deteriorated as they were handled: a book of photos of women’s knees often proving the most popular.

In its use of manifold snapshots, Eijkelboom’s work also grows from that forgotten art medium of the conceptual moment, the slide presentation. Early works by Graham, Smithson and Lothar Baumgarten were originally shown as slides, an ironic reference to both the academic lecture and the amateur travel-snap slide show.

What Huebler or Feldmann do is make possible a different kind of photojournalism where the casualness of the snapshot seems to invite us to question exactly what and why they are. When likewise Boltanski put other people’s banal photo albums on the walls at *Dokumenta 5*, he did much the same: these everyday images were taken out of the context of family memorabilia and turned into readymades: objects that raised questions about their own status and nature.

Simple conceptual systems underpin Eijkelboom’s work from the 1970s: for *Identity* (1976), he asked ten people who had known him as a teenager but whom he hadn’t seen for ten years what they remembered about him and what they thought he could have become since then, then he published the answers with photos of himself as these imagined people: social worker, thug, electrician, political activist, gamekeeper, photographer, hippie, Provo, banker, pilot. In *96 alternatives* (1978) he asked ninety-six people to dress him from a wide selection of clothes. Contrariwise in *People wearing my clothes* (1973), he had other people wear his clothes and, perhaps, adopt his personality. What united all these projects was a concern with identity, how we present ourselves and how others perceive us. Implicit always was the question, Is there is

a concordance between what we wear and what we are? But even deeper lies the question of how the expression of “identity” relates to consciousness. A more recent project has a more social bent: every week in 2005 Eijkelboom bought a complete set of clothes for less than 10 euros and had himself photographed in them.

The democratic direction of Eijkelboom’s research is seen in the 1981 series *Homage to August Sander*, in which he asked individuals he came across in his hometown of Arnhem to name a type or group of people and then point examples of these people as they walked together through the town. Examples chosen were “men with flat caps,” Turks, punks, junkies, “cheerful,” “striking” people, civil servants. This was no recipe for a metastructure such as Sander sought—it seems haphazard in comparison—but this is how we get by on the streets on a daily basis, making endless quick, provisional assessments. The categories that determine each day’s work in *Photo Notes* are equally diverse – though notably at a sociological level they document new types emerging from the crowd. More explicitly than in *Homage to August Sander*, the question that underpins *Photo Notes* is, Do we express our identities tribally as types or via uniforms?

The vast majority of the *Photo Notes* series has been taken in the provincial, architecturally unexceptional town of Arnhem. Eijkelboom’s move from Arnhem to Amsterdam in 2003 was not just a move from one town to another but a change from being a local artist to being a global artist – Amsterdam has a multiracial population and, in Schiphol, one of the biggest of international airports. Eijkelboom’s favorite haunt became the Kalverstraat, a busy but unmemorable shopping precinct. Nowadays he talks of moving to Rotterdam where tourists are less present, the streets more generic.

Until recently Eijkelboom paid little attention to architecture, focusing on the people in the limbo of the street, but lately he has looked at the architectural context, choosing much less crowded moments. These are more considered photographs, acting like a stable bass line to the busyness of people. Such an interest in architecture is prefigured by his contribution to *Sonsbeek 71*, an environmental piece.

He has always been interested in Situationism, the *derivé* (that libertarian approach to the urban walk proposed by Guy Debord) and what Henri Lefebvre saw as the transformation of everyday life. Though any political purpose is always implicit rather than explicit, it is nonetheless embedded in his work. This can be seen in the difficulty we have in pigeonholing this work: Is it sociology? Sort of, but only as a sociology, or anthropology, of the image, or of the look. Indeed when we scan his work we often try to imagine what the subjects are looking at—the shop window, a companion, the camera. Is it fashion photography? Hardly. It is closer to anthropology of contemporary folk dress. Its true progenitors are those books of prints made in the late Renaissance by Jost Amman and Wenceslaus Hollar of women in representative dresses from around the world, but which are above all about an endless curiosity and delight in the life and zest of the street of the Renaissance city. □ The street then, as now, was the face of the city.

Is this, as in the poetry of Craig Raine, an attempt to see the world anew, as if one was a Martian reporting back on what he saw on Earth?

Rain is when the earth is television.  
It has the property of making colors darker.

No, for Eijkelboom is more like a fish in his native water, a participant in the flow of the street: the project works because he is attuned to the mood of the street. What stays key is his recognition that he is simultaneously a subject and an object of a society.

His most common choice of subject has a mother and daughter out shopping together: he normally selects it as a subject once a month. In 2003 he published a whole book of Photo Notes that was exclusively of mother-and-daughter pictures. It is that moment when a girl wants to look both the same and look different from her mother. And of course this underlies everything Eijkelboom photographs: parading out identities – in uniform, performing on the street; connecting, how people meet and differentiate and merge.

Flicking through this book can seem like speed dating, trying to make some emotional connection, some association. We go out in costumes that represent our identity but are in fact uniforms: clothes have no semiotic message unless they are typological—unless they look similar to something else.

In our imagination and desire for identification, it could even be like one of those children's sticker books, with a stage to place your figures in and clothes to stick onto them.

In the early years of Photo Notes Eijkelboom made monthly self-portraits. He wanted to show the world who he was and where he lived, as through to say, "Come to Arnhem and meet Hans Eijkelboom!" Self-portraiture had been central to his early work: in a 1979 project, he had himself photographed for one hundred successive days, standing each day in the same spot on a street in Arnhem. The crowd mills around him as though he were a rock or a readymade. This, like his other earlier self-portrait projects, shows a concern with identity and human interchange that echoes and develops much as in the work of Huebler and others, and can be seen developed elsewhere, for example in the similar 2005 six-screen video installation *A needle Woman* by Soo-Ja Kim. In this piece, she shows herself standing static in various streets of the world while people mill around her. Although Eijkelboom now rarely appears in his Photo Notes, there is a sense in which the whole project is a sort of self-portrait.

As we look through these pages the most invisible thing is Eijkelboom's own presence, yet as always, one wonders why and how he is there. This constant visual eavesdropping is not like Beate Streuli's voyeurism nor Sophie Calle's pseudo-detectivising. It seems more like the angels who, in the opening of Wim Wender's film *The Wings of Desire*, listen to people's thoughts and attempt to give solace, but cannot intervene. This concern with others, with a sense of communal memory, and a desire in some discreet way to intervene is seen both in his practice of making small books for his subscribers and in his attempt to exhibit every month not in galleries but in public spaces: libraries, hospitals, and so on. He wants the ordinary people he photographs to have the opportunity to see themselves in his work.

As with Eijkelboom's early works, this is all about something deeper than identity: consciousness. What truly underpins the books and our enjoyment of them is how they restage the experience of being alive, wandering the streets, looking, trying to get a purchase on a shifting world. It makes us more aware of our life in the street: many people testify that knowing his work has changed the way they see. As he himself says, he no longer does self-portraits as part of the Photo Notes, but in a far larger way the whole project is a self-portrait, a network map of a human consciousness living our lives through the street.

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