

Paris – New York – Shanghai

Marcel Feil: curator FOAM-fotografiemuseum

Hans Eijkelboom

Fifteen years ago the Dutch artist Hans Eijkelboom started on the biggest project of his career. He decided to keep a photographic diary, starting on 8 November 1992, for which he would take between one and eighty photos at least five days a week. His aim was not to create an account of his own life through this diary, which he named Photo Notes; instead, he saw the diary as a means of visualising the development of his view of the world. This development is shaped by experiences and observations which are repeated every day; it is a steady and continuous process. As he himself puts it, it is like the stalagmites and stalactites in a cave, which have gained their shapes through the ceaseless repetition of falling drops of water. In this sense every photo in Photo Notes is a falling drop of water.

The diary is based on a strict, methodical way of working. When Eijkelboom goes into a city he starts by observing without any particular goal, waiting for some dominant subject or theme to manifest itself in the streets. This may be women in red coats, women with a particular kind of shopping bag, taxi drivers with their windows down, men in dark suits or people wearing sunglasses. Then he takes as many photographs as possible of these people within a maximum of two hours. The results are presented in austere grids in which each individual image is given a place. In this way Eijkelboom is building up a steadily growing collection of typologies – a classification of people into groups with common characteristics. These typologies prompt us to compare the individual images with each other.

The viewer is prompted to do this because of the particular way Eijkelboom photographs and depicts his subjects. In doing so he remains as neutral and detached as possible. Unlike many other contemporary photographers, Eijkelboom does not see photography as a means of arriving at a subjective depiction of reality. Quite the opposite – he uses the camera primarily as a technical instrument which is able to

register and record images. Eijkelboom then goes on to select, classify and arrange the images to create a presentation which is strikingly clear and objective: all the subjects are in the middle, all are more or less the same size and placed in the picture surface in a similar way. Like pinned butterflies, like exotic specimens, they are ready and waiting for us, the viewers, to take a closer look at them.

Eijkelboom's work is firmly anchored in the history of conceptual art. Ever since he took part in the groundbreaking exhibition Sonsbeek 71 in 1971, he has been using photography to record the execution of a previously determined concept in a serial structure. The material quality of the actual photos and the technical quality of the shots is less important than the role of photography as a means of pure registration. Like for example Ed Ruscha and Hans-Peter Feldmann (contemporaries and kindred spirits), Eijkelboom prefers to present his work in small, inexpensive books which he usually publishes privately in small editions. To date Eijkelboom has made about twenty independently produced artist's books.

One common feature of all the photo projects Eijkelboom has embarked on since the early 1970s is a profound interest in questions concerning our identity. How do we see ourselves and how do others see us? Is there a connection between what we wear and what we are? How does each individual manifest his or her idea of identity? And – more fundamentally – what is the relationship between the expression of our identity and our (self-)awareness?

In Photo Notes Eijkelboom depicts the individual and unique in terms of the vast numbers of individuals who populate our cities. Because the photographs for Photo Notes were taken over such a long period and because of the constant repetitions and comparisons and the sheer quantity of visual material, the personal observations in this diary gradually acquire a universal validity. By looking at others, we also observe ourselves; subject and object become one, and the tension between the individual and the mass is highlighted.

The extensive project Paris-New York-Shanghai that concludes Eijkelboom's fifteen-year Photo Notes endeavour is the crowning glory of the work. The differences are

even more sharply accentuated; three different cities, three different continents and cultures and three cities which are typical of modern metropolises in a certain era: this was true of Paris in the nineteenth century, New York in the twentieth and may well be of Shanghai in the twenty-first. In spite of the differences which can still be felt and seen everywhere, the similarities are growing rapidly. 'Identity seems to be a malleable concept', says Eijkelboom himself. 'This is becoming even clearer due to globalisation. For instance, in every metropolis there suddenly appears to be a crying need for Louis Vuitton handbags. And the young couples featured in this series come from different countries and although they perceive themselves as being very independent, they actually look very much alike'. It seems that every individual belongs to a group, a market segment, for which products are specially devised and made; and in a consumer society defined by the media, this is leading to more and more outward similarities.

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