

An Unspoken Tale

In the short film *Jan Kieपुरa* (2005), a woman looks into the camera, laughing shyly. She turns her head to the side, tidies her hair, blinks her eyes, but she keeps looking. 'Why do you do that?' she asks in French, and pushes away the equipment in a mock-threatening way. The rest of her words are spoken in an incomprehensible Polish. They seem to be spoken more to themselves than to the man behind the camera. Beyond that, nothing else happens. At the mercy of photographer and filmmaker Maarten Tromp, you see her every furtive movement. The woman's apparently casual gestures are threaded into an anecdote, or better said, a chance meeting on a night train becomes a short story on film.

The stubborn persistence and questioning manner demonstrated in *Jan Kieपुरa* are characteristic of Maarten Tromp. The woman could be anyone. Why has he chosen her in particular? As a viewer, you are surprised at the camera's power to intrigue. In this contact, what the person filming and the person being filmed share is a love for the medium. Apparently for both of them, there is a story in this encounter. The woman keeps looking, talking. She seems to want to say something. The cameraman does not stop his camera, despite her motion to ward it off. He registers her behaviour and reads her story. He is reader and author in one.

In a comparable manner, over the last two and a half years, Maarten Tromp has recorded East Amsterdam's district 'Indische Buurt', this time with still cameras. Unforeseen coincidences, grand and compelling or as small as birds taking flight, capture his attention. They stir his involvement in the neighbourhood where he has been living for some time now. His images also slowly began questioning negative newspaper reports that label this neighbourhood as bad or wrong. In *De buurman, z'n ex en de eigenaar van de wasserette. Beelden uit de Indische Buurt, Amsterdam* (The Neighbour, His Ex and the Owner of the Laundrette. Images from the Indische Buurt, Amsterdam) Tromp restores, almost indignantly, the human face of 'his' neighbourhood. He heals, as it were, the intimacy disrupted by the negative press. As in *Jan Kieपुरa*, he does so by renewing personal contact with the neighbourhood residents.

Maarten Tromp's working methods are reminiscent of earlier filmmaker-photographers, such as Ed van der Elsken. In the film, *A Photographer Films Amsterdam* (1982), Van der Elsken himself gave an almost naïve, in any case sentimental commentary on what he saw, or engaged in verbal dialogue with what he was filming, but the work of Maarten Tromp also brings a project like *Me and My Brother* (1964), by Robert Frank, to mind. In it, Frank reflects in writing about the one-to-one relationship that is created via the camera and film, yet is in fact undermined at the same time. In printed letters, he scribbles on sheets of contact prints. '...wouldn't it be fantastic ... if the eye were its own projector instead of its own camera? I am a camera.' Wishful thinking. The words undermine the myth of the camera as a purveyor of truth. In the work of Van der Elsken and Frank, the camera strikes a lyrical tone and promptly becomes a poet.

Although Maarten Tromp's sometimes extremely subjective approach brings him close to Van der Elsken and Frank, Tromp also permits himself other freedoms. He puts individuals alongside one another, thus suggesting a link or relationship between the two, who are often unknown to each other. An older man becomes a prisoner by the hand of a policeman, who is in fact a civil guardsman, resting on his shoulder. There is a conspicuous likeness here to *The Arrest* (1989), by Jeff Wall. There too, a man is held fast, but by two policemen. The person being arrested looks fearful and the officers' authoritarian ascendancy gives the picture a threatening

atmosphere. We know the image has been staged, but that seems of little relevance, because it is with our own unconscious thinking in terms of types and preconceived categories that both Wall and Maarten Tromp confront us. The combination of elements in the image causes our expectations to waver; the combination of images in Tromp's book does the same. Behaviours seem to speak for themselves, but according to the photographer, the language is sometimes hardly understood. Tromp expresses the secret doubts of the reader, the unheard stories of those he portrays. This book of photographs is an unspoken narrative. Or it is Tromp's version of the tale.

We see a man and a woman posing arm in arm in front of a store. Laughing, they look at us. His head is covered, according to Islamic tradition. She is wearing her blond curls hanging loose. Alongside a pearl necklace, a cross dangles from her neck. Christians and Muslims do not go through life in the affectionate arms of one another – or have we missed something? Are we mistaken? Has the unbridgeable gap suddenly been sealed?

Tromp takes his photographs with a 35mm or a mid-sized camera. This lets him work quickly and see his subjects from close by. There is very little difference between what he sees and the eye of the camera. The only thing that divides the photographer from those being photographed is the question of the photograph being made of them. The camera serves as a pretext, the implicit excuse to start the conversation. The photograph is the proof of consent, the often tender, vulnerable and sometimes moving result.

This leads to the fact that we want to give names to the people, the protagonists in this book. Names of their own make them characters. Names give them a fictional identity. They create the possibility of filling in the personalities. The name of Mme De Guermantes caused the narrator in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927) to imagine a mysterious lady from an 18th-century aristocratic milieu. She would live in seclusion, preferably in a monumental castle.ⁱ As Proust later reveals, actual encounters with the woman who bore the name deflated the poetic interpretation, time and time again.

Perhaps the desire to give names to the people portrayed by Tromp is an expression of the fact that these people seem close to us. You recognize them. You identify with them. Tromp's closeness has become yours. Imaginary or not, you can see yourself in their situation. The open structure in which the photographer has contained the portraits asks you for your own opinion, asks you to form a personal image of your own, just as he himself has done for you. A photograph takes part, unavoidably, in everyday life. At the same time, it establishes distance from everyday life, a space to begin to reflect. Or, as Roland Barthes once put it, 'I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think.'ⁱⁱ Herein lies the photographic strength.

Laughing and gesturing, but also surly or turned inwards, pictured full length or just the face, the image runs off the page. This is a fragment of a person, snatched or grabbed away from his or her life, a life that goes on, even after the button has been pushed. The succession of photographs and the manner in which they are arranged characterizes the passage of time in this book. Daytime moves slowly into twilight. In the shadow of the glass façades, the dark heads of passers-by sparkle, disappearing, then shine, highlighting shadows. It is becoming evening, night. Even in cosy villages and well-to-do neighbourhoods, this is the moment that calamity awaits. A thin woman paints her lips red, like her nails. Distrustfully, she looks off to the side. She doesn't walk in the dark, she streetwalks. Farther up the street, there is fighting, the white shirts of the police officers clearly visible. Your quietly confirmed suspicions that this district is an agitated, 'bad neighbourhood', are undermined by a subsequent

photograph: two corpulent, bald men, peaceably smoking in front of a coffeehouse or their favourite café. And maybe that thin woman we just saw was actually just the neighbour on her way out for the evening.

Black-and-white does not exist. You forget the gradations, the variegations, the shading. You forget the shadows and in-between zones. A strict division between opposites does not exist, says Maarten Tromp in his photographs. The quarter bears witness to this. Light is not the reverse of dark, nor good of bad, nor day of night. The subtlety is visible in his images, tangible, sometimes even audible, despite – or thanks to – the physical silence of the book.

Playing children, a woman smoking, a mother shopping, a man crossing the street. Streets, city squares, intersections: a busy place. Then a park. The sudden openness of the park is a breath of fresh air after the sometimes claustrophobic narrowness of urban streets. Birdsong that is not drowned out by traffic racing past, summer light filtered through green leaves, the emptiness of a Sunday morning, when Amsterdam is still asleep. Near the entrance to the park, a screaming man broke the serene silence. It is a reason to approach him. It is the contrast that creates the intriguing difference. At least you think so. And indeed, his facial expression is in stark contrast to the fine temperature, the pleasant weather. You are right. But don't the pastel tints of his shirt rhyme in some wonderful way with the barely perceptible colours of the building in front of which he stands? Apparent opposites come to meet, or they come to agreement.

Ilse van Rijn
April 2008

ⁱ Proust, M., *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. Paris, 1954. p261

ⁱⁱ Barthes, R., *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. London, 2000 [1980]. p21