

A DAY WITH

Along my route to the gallery Boetzelaer|Nispen in Amsterdam, while limping on a sore ankle that I had twisted two days before leaving for Unseen Photo Fair and Festival in last September, I found myself thinking quite intensely on the relativity of the concept of distance. In theory, distance is a measurable and therefore absolute notion, which is valid in the same way for anyone. In fact, it largely depends on our perception, which is always changing and constantly influenced by the specificity of context and circumstances.

I stepped into the gallery whilst still immersed in these thoughts, feeling confused and a little guilty for not having devoted a single minute of mental readjustment in view of the meeting previously agreed with Anouk Kruithof. But soon after, launching a first gaze at the works on display in the bright white room, I realized I had unconsciously adopted the best attitude to observe and understand the new project by the Dutch artist.

As the title #EVIDENCE suggests, the project is inspired by the famous book by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel (1977), in which the authors withdrew photographs from the archives of various US institutions and then mixed and showed them in an original and autonomous sequence. Similarly, Kruithof collected images from the Instagram accounts of a range of US companies and government agencies, dissected and reincarnated them within visual bodies endowed with a new denotation.

Back in its day, the book was pioneering in demonstrating how the meaning of a photograph is conditioned by the context in which it is observed. To date, Kruithof adds to this relativistic view of photography, now assimilated, the importance of the working process as an integral part of photographic practice. Making thereby indefinable, in a genuine mixture with collage, design and sculpture, the distinction between various disciplines, as well as the very presence of the author.

Anouk Kruithof

Text by Paola Paleari

P.P. In a recent article posted on The Photographers' Gallery's blog, Daniel Rubinstein defined 21st Century photography as "a wave characterised as a continuous process of re-shaping visual forms out of data"¹. How do you relate to this definition? Can photography be used as a tool to clear out the visual pollution that at one time it contributes to create?

A.K. I would say that photos rather than photography contribute to the whole visual phenomenon, and with "photos" I mean all the images that are ceaselessly produced in the world. In my practice, I often start from a limited source of images and then I make order into the chaos which is proper of that particular subset, for example by clustering the images in groups and then by developing them into specific body of works. I think it's more a matter of working method. I'm also not so much a photographer anymore, I do take a new photo very rarely.

P.P. The focus has been moving from the image to the process, which is by nature intangible and transitory. Nowadays, an artist has to find a way of surfing the ocean of imagery out there, if s/he doesn't want to drown in it...

A.K. Exactly. Book making, just to say one, is used by artists to do that. Although we can't deny that photography in contemporary art still has this kind of standing on its own, borders have significantly been shifting. Most artists are post-medium specific: the fact that one makes photos and the other works with photos is not so relevant anymore. For sure there is still urgency for fine-art photographers and photo-based artists to depict our historical context and its developments. But, personally speaking, I think it's only good if this clear separation between art and photography blurs even more and we focus on what one's artwork is about, one's intentions and vision are – and, of course, on how the artwork looks and what it tells to the public.

P.P. Your approach to photography articulates in playful but at the same time complex solutions: in your installations the pictures are often twisted or concealed and they require some kind of action from the audience. Have you ever thought about it as a "natural selection" on the viewers that can properly access your work?

A.K. Oh, good point. If I look at all the things I've done, at first glance they are often colourful or formally pleasant (I hope), so one is easily driven to think they are also playful. But in fact, they are all project or concept based, in the sense that they start with an idea that is unfolded in many steps and

these create a multilayered structure, which is not always simple to read in its entirety. For me as an author, the whole process is important, but I don't necessarily ask you to retrace it from A to Z. If you don't, it's fine. I actually believe it's the artwork that has to trigger you to learn more about it: only in this case perhaps you will be willing to go back over the steps that led me transforming that particular set of pictures into the abstract sculpture you're looking at. It's great if it happens, but I also know I can't be so arrogant to expect that everybody wants to do it - especially at present time, when we already process so much visual information.

P.P. From what you say, rather than requiring an effort from the viewers, you ask for their time – which actually seems to be the most precious thing, today. Asking for time today is a strong statement.

A.K. Well, that's maybe because when I make art myself, nothing really matters to me more than time, not even money. I agree on the fact that if the artist is complex, and the work is complex too, you might demand the viewer to spend a while on it in order to get on a higher level on comprehension. But if doesn't work, it's never the viewer's fault. It might mean it isn't good art.

P.P. You particularly love contaminations and collaborations: a fitting example is the book *The Bungalow*, the result of an exchange between you and Brad Feuerhelm based on his collection of vernacular photographs. But I'm referring also to *The Anamorphosis Prize*, which you established with the aim of stimulating the self-publishing system. Tell me something more about your tendency of sharing: what are the motivations behind it?

A.K. The Anamorphosis Prize is the right example. I set it up together with John A. Phelan, who is a collector, because we both figured out that many of the best books we've been seeing lately are self-published. Charlotte Cotton was then involved to give a curatorial eye on the thing. So far [just a few days before the submission deadline, editor's note] we have received more than 300 books - which means a lot of fun and also a lot of work, of course, to review them all. Why I'm doing it? Because I just turn mad, when I see that people are asked to pay 10.000 € to publish a photobook. Very young authors, often still students! The photobook world erupted as a volcano and all of a sudden making a publication became indispensable. But this doesn't justify the idea you have to pay to get exposure: this is simply unacceptable to me, because you already have to create your work and it costs a lot of money, time and effort. Isn't it logical? This approach, I mean?

P.P. To be honest, I find it quite unusual. It's not so common that an artist – a young one, who in first person struggles in her everyday life and practice – tries her best to make something happen for the benefit of her colleagues. Something that is related to her professional field, but it's not strictly her own business.

A.K. For sure it's a nice responsibility. It's like when I teach in a workshop or I give a talk at some university: I present what I've built up, I share the process of my practice, because when I started I was looking for it in first person. It's like a circle, from my point of view. The only difference with the Prize is that I don't earn any money from it! [she laughs]

P.P. You frequently operate in particular contexts that see the involvement of borderline subjects: a group of patients in a psychiatric unit, Wall Street's businessmen out of their offices - you even set up a street-poster-call to find and work with a person that had never made a photo in his life before. When you embark on such kind of adventures, aren't you afraid of losing control on the process?

A.K. I love it! If I set off a project that involves the direct participation of a particular kind of audience, I basically look for the lack of control. When I decided to collaborate with mentally ill people, for example, I was conscious I couldn't fix any appointment and plans changed all the time; in fact, with *Happy Birthday To You* I had no intention of making a publication out of it when I started, for me in the beginning it was more like a social project to celebrate birthdays rather than a book or anything else.

The same happened when I decided to deal with New York bankers in my project *Pixel Stress*: I don't understand their choices, their world, their way of thinking, so I had the curiosity to talk with them about something that is as much natural for me as it is abstract for them - which is, the meaning, the interpretation and the value of art and exchange. I knew it was a good intuition, but at the same time I was aware it could have turned out in a huge fiasco: well, c'est la vie! It's not about playing a game, it's about having an idea, believing in it, taking the risk and then experimenting. You should never be afraid that you could eventually fail.

P.P. Well, I guess that when it works out, it's a kind of magic! But it may mean that the hardest part is still around the corner, because these compound situations often need elaborated solutions to be presented. The risk is that the quest for the "weirdest"

A.K. displaying solution takes over the meaning of the project itself. It's funny, I've never considered what I do as "weird"! On the contrary, for me these solutions look very natural, in the sense that in my projects the artworks' final form always follows what I want to tell through them. To give an example: when I used the blurred ID cards you see in the series *Neutrals*, which I found and took from the TSA - Transportation Security Agency's Instagram page, it could have never come to my mind to print and hang them on the wall - not because it's not cool, but because to my eyes these pictures were longing for a new physical presence. I thus started to imagine new persons and new bodies and, voilà, I was already thinking three-dimensionally. Maybe I'm wrong, it would have worked way better on the walls and I did make those more complicated sculptures instead! I don't know.

What I'm sure about is that my aim is not to entertain the viewers, nor to shock them, but to unfold the visual-based process I follow in my mind in the most coherent way and to try to itch them into further thinking and feeling. So please, promise me that next time you'll hear people saying I do weird stuff, you'll ask them what they mean, and then you'll let me know. I need to understand the implications of this word!

[end]

¹ Rubinstein, Daniel, What is 21st Century Photography?, posted on July 3rd, 2015 on The Photographers' Gallery Blog. <http://thephotographersgalleryblog.org.uk/2015/07/03/what-is-21st-century-photography/>

