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Eten, drinken, slapen I, 1994; Gooi, 1996; Eten, drinken, slapen III, 1996; Marco, 1996 (spread); Bar van de Ponteneur, 1994; Plaza Catalunya, 1996 (detail)

Reproductions of Affection. Photographic Works by Albert van Westing

Dominic van den Boogerd

Albert van Westing (1960, Wassenaar / NL) makes large, photographic reproductions in what he calls the 'handwriting of the machine'. His monumental images of sleeping adolescents in the grass and travelers waiting at a bus stop bear witness to a suggestive intimacy. How Marco on his motorbike became a young god.

Albert van Westing photographs friends, acquaintances and strangers. His intention is the same as someone who keeps a passport photo of his loved-one in his wallet. Or in his own words: 'I make photographs through affection.'

It sounds disarmingly simple and so it is. Affection is satisfied with a sixtieth of a second.

The dogma's of the professional photography are not Van Westing's cup of tea. He doesn't have to wait for hours for that 'certain' moment; he has no need for exhaustive photo sessions. He works without a tripod, uses no lighting and seldom makes more than one photograph of the same subject. And when on occasion he does make an exception, he always chooses the first exposure.

The essence as it happens is not the photo, but in what the artist does with it. For Van Westing the photo is not a true description of reality, but an image as a reality in itself, that he as an artist can work with. To that end he makes use of photo-printers, photo-copiers, litho-films, screens and other graphic aids.

No matter how perfect these reproduction techniques may be, they always bring about a change in pictorial quality. Generally this is seen as a shortcoming, as in the world of graphics the truest possible reproduction of the original is still held sacred. Van Westing thinks differently: 'My idea is that every change in picture-quality can be usable. I don't work with machines because they come so close to reproducing the reality of a photo but precisely because they deviate from it.'

The artist, who is allergic to photographic chemicals but nonetheless determined to carry out all work procedures himself, has made a virtue of necessity. He writes 'with a machines' handwriting' as he puts it. It is the subtle manipulation of reproduction machines that to a large degree determine the nature of his work.

Take Marco (1996) for example, an image of a young man on a motorbike. The basis of this work is a simple photo taken at a campsite in Spain. The black and white negative has been printed with a color-photo-printer. From this color-photo, a screen-print was made. This print was enlarged to monumental proportions, and printed with black toner on strips of thin, half-transparent polyester. Due to all the procedures undergone, the detail in the dark background has clotted while the white patch in the centre remains clear. In this way it looks as if the young man is being illuminated by a warm ray of sunshine, while his surroundings are clouded in darkness. The sparkling light has chosen him alone and changes him into a young god on a very contemporary throne.

No matter how mechanical or manufactured it may seem, Van Westing's technique is in fact quite traditional. The method of working is very precise and cannot be left purely to technicians. Therefore the artist adjusts the machines himself and decides, by examining the proofs, on further processing of the picture. There are numerous machines and seemingly endless numbers of treatments, each with their own possibilities, and even when the tuning of a printer remains unaltered, it is still possible that it will produce prints of greatly varying quality. It is precisely in this that Van Westing distinguishes himself from the practice of digital photoshopping. Where computerized reproduction inevitably results in the glossy

perfection of the pixel, the black ink in these photo works seems to lie in a layer of powder on the surface – soft as velvet, shiny as wet sand.

‘Everything I say about my work is observation after the fact,’ says the artist in his studio in East Amsterdam. ‘I don’t work according to a concept, but in a process wherein I choose specific materials and techniques for every image.’ Van Westing wants his work to originate within the material. He experiments with different inks and ammonia, he prints on colored paper and synthetic material. He may fix one work to the wall with pushpins, for another he will manufacture a special frame. In each work he strives for a precise relation between the image and the material of which the artwork is made.

This preoccupation is normally more easily discernible in painting than in photography. Van Westing says that he has never felt the need to paint but he stresses the importance of painting for his work: ‘My work originates in my interest in painting. At the age of twelve I was already cycling to the Haags Gemeente Museum, just to look, look and look some more. It didn’t understand it, but it had something magical. At home we had a subscription to Time / Life magazine in which art books were advertised. I ordered these on approval, read them, and sent them back because I had no money to buy them. The portraits by Van Gogh and Giacometti that I saw in the books made a great impression on me. I’ve never forgotten them.’

Perhaps the emotional intensity of these portraits has had an affect on Van Westing’s photo works, but that does not alter the fact that his work is unmistakably photographic, with the emphasis on the ‘graphic’. They have probably had a greater influence on the themes in his work, the historical genres, the well balanced, classic compositions and frozen scenes that are sometimes reminiscent of painting. Eten, drinken, slapen I, (Eating, Drinking, Sleeping I), 1994, a photo of a group of adolescents lounging in the grass, reminds one of the motionless Sunday afternoon of Seurat’s La Grande Jatte. And the way in which the two passing boys are pictured in Gooi (Throw), 1996, can be compared with Degas’ depiction of dancing ballerinas: from a high vantage point and framed in a way that heightens the suggestion of movement. Just like the impressionists, Van Westing registers contemporary city life preferably during leisure time, when people are spending their free hours in café’s and parks.

At the start of the Eighties, Van Westing made temporary ‘video-and-sound’ installations for specific locations. The photo-documentation of this work was finally more interesting to him than the work itself. Gradually he orientated himself in the artistic possibilities of photography, such as they had been investigated in the art of the Sixties and Seventies: from the registrations of Ben d’Armagnac’s performances to the analytical studies of Jan Dibbets and Ger van Elk. For instance Balkonscène (Balcony scene) from 1990, with its serial, systematic structure and the emphasis on lines of sight and viewpoints is clearly influenced by these artists.

Is it coincidence that Van Westing has subsequently mastered reproduction techniques? One of his first processed photos is the portrait of a young man. Van Westing: ‘I was particularly anxious to photograph the boy because I knew I would never see him again. But as chance would have it, I had no camera with me. I therefore asked him to pose in a photo booth at the station.’ The passport photo was later photo-copied at the postoffice and the photocopy has been reproduced again in off-set. By this process, the cheap print from the automat has been promoted to an image that approximates the aura of an ex-voto. ‘The work is entitled Maarten speelt viool (Maarten plays the Violin) because the only thing I knew about him was that he played the violin.’

Some of Van Westing’s photos only appear in his work after some length of time. Others undergo a complete make-over years later in a new version. By that time, the moment the photo was made, has long become irrelevant. The nostalgia of a family photo-album is foreign to Van Westing. It isn’t the conservation memories that count, but rather the attitude towards the image.

That attitude is difficult to describe. There is involvement but with a certain reserve. One could speak of passion at a distance. The affection for the subject, that lies at the basis of the photo, is replaced during the work process at the printers by a deliberating, objective eye. Every aspect of the image - its focus, its detail, the relation between light and dark, etc. - is subjected to a critical investigation and if necessary it is adjusted to fit the hierarchy the artist has envisioned.

Van Westing's images are undeniably contemporary. The sportsmen with baseball cap and stripped torso (Gooi, 1996), the two young train passengers with a somewhat wild look in their eyes (American Tourists Going to Kabul, 1996), the café visitors at the bar (Bar van de Ponteneur, 1994), the love-struck boys in the square (Plaza Catalunya, 1996): they all represent a portrait in time that many commercial photographers seek in vain. An artist like Wolfgang Tillmans purposefully records the lifestyle of his own generation; in Van Westing's work the spirit of these times is unintentionally present, as if by itself.

Although impressive, the pictures do not shout for attention. They speak of affection and attraction but in veiled terms. The most endearing game between Venus and Amor that the artist presents, is enacted behind a veil of normality: these are the well-known scenes just as they are performed on a daily basis in a park, in a train, or in a café. But in contrast to a street photographer like Ed van der Elsken, who sometimes allowed himself to influence events before his lens by - for example - pulling faces, Van Westing remains at a discrete distance. The photographs seem to have been made at an unguarded moment, when there is nothing at risk and everything continues its natural course.

The inconspicuous gestures and exchange of glances seem to imply more than is revealed at first sight. But what exactly? What are we to think of the waiting travelers in Eten, drinken, slapen III who stand like a classical group of sculpted figures bunched together on the street? What is happening on Plaza Catalunya, what does this strange eight-act ballet signify? Who are the two boys in Gooi and what did the boy on the left throw up into the air? The pictures won't give us a decisive answer. They're large enough to step into in a manner of speaking, but we can only guess at the situation we'll subsequently find ourselves in. It's difficult even to determine exactly where the scene is taking place: a summary indication of 'the park' or 'the road' is all we are supplied with.

That which remains undefined or unarticulated is what gives these images their suggestive power. In contrast to the aggressive, in-your-face photo works in the category 'come and take a look at what I have just seen', Van Westing grants his audience a welcome breathing space.

'My images exist free of anecdote', the artist explains. 'The affection that fuels my work is something different than the portrayal of that affection. I don't feel the compulsion to communicate my own personal story. The picture may have a personal significance for me, for someone else the meaning must remain open. This calls for a certain aloofness towards the pictures I work with. That's why I pull them apart. I enlarge them to become screened reproductions. As a result some elements of the picture disappear; what remains is placed in a different context. This can make the picture more forceful, allowing it to exist independently.'

It is the combination of monumentality and vulnerability which is truly extraordinary in these photo works. The cinema-screen like dimensions and the graphic printing give the works a cool, distant character; the candour of the presentation enhances intimacy.

A trace of poetic romanticism hangs over Van Westing's impressions of city life. From the smallest dots of their make-up, these works attest to a scintillating lust for life. Fear, violence and alienation are conspicuously absent. The mood is set by a never ending fascination for the human feelings that make life so pleasant, but that lead a largely hidden existence and seldom reveal themselves openly. That's what these pictures have in common with the work of the English artist David Robilliard, who died at an early age; a pleasure in life from day to day, without forgetting, without wallowing in reminiscences.

Much of Van Westing's recent work has been printed on half-transparent polyester that reflects light but also allows its passage. It lends the photo works a tenuous, nearly weightless substance that matches the imponderabilia which form their subject: affection, sympathy, amiability - everything that makes life worth while and as it happens cannot be measured.