

'Remoteness of the Real. Some Notes on Albert van Westing's Photo-works.'
Dominic van den Boogerd

Intimacy and publicness tolerate each other poorly. Out on the street, in the café, in the park, in the train, when another person arouses feelings of affection in us, we initially keep this to ourselves. That which is private must remain discreet. And so we have learned to code, to mask our most intimate desires in the company of others.

The artist Albert van Westing has a sixth sense for this social game of veiled intimacies. His camera registers the unguarded moment at which a slight gesture or a furtive glance renders a glimpse of a world that usually remains hidden, a world marked by tenderness, affection, amiability.

Neither the beloved, nor the act of courting is the subject of these photo-works. Van Westing photographs situations that seem to contain a promise which has yet to be fulfilled, scenes in which Venus and Amor could, in a manner of speaking show up at any moment. If his photo-works are moving, this may have to do with the fact that they record that very fraction of a second which makes a day worthwhile.

However, Van Westing is not like a hawk who waits for the decisive moment, as though he would be able to capture his subject by way of his camera. There is nothing to capture. To him, the world simply looks as it does. "No great artist ever sees things as they really are", wrote Oscar Wilde. "If he did, he would cease to be an artist." It therefore doesn't matter whether the artist photographs a man who happens to be walking by on the street (Flat Man, 1997) or reconstructs, in his studio, a newspaper photograph from a police investigation into seven separate images (KwaZulu Natal, 1998). There is always the same sensitivity, the same concentration, the same compassion.

Nor does the artist attempt to appropriate the fleeting reality of secret amiability. "One can't possess reality", writes Susan Sontag. "One can possess (and be possessed by) images." For a visual artist like Van Westing the image is not so much a reflection of reality, but a world into itself. His work consists of photographic images that have been repeatedly copied, enlarged, printed in halftone or altered in some other way. Different machines, different inks and synthetic materials have been used for this. The lengthy process of visual manipulation is his artistic method for extracting from the image everything that is biographical and anecdotal. It is precisely on the basis of his conviction that the image should be open to more than one interpretation that he keeps an appropriate distance from his cherished subject.

This mysterious relationship between involvement and detachment lies at the heart of his work. To quote Susan Sontag once more: "Photography implies instant access to the real. But the result of this practice of instant access is another way of creating distance. To possess the world in the form of images is, precisely, to re-experience the unreality and remoteness of the real."

The 'remoteness of the real' characterizes Van Westing's quiet city scenes of people who are relaxing: a group of four young people lying on the grass (Eating, Drinking, Sleeping I, 1994); a boy on the beach, his gaze fixed on something which remains out of view (At the Seaside II, 1998); two sportsmen in the park, one of whom is throwing something up into the air (Throw, 1996). The compactness, the obscureness, the weight of existence is obliterated in these images. It is as though all social repression, every self-imposed restriction has vanished instantly with the click of the shutter. For a brief moment the world appears with uncommon.

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