

## The National DNA

### Boardroom Portraits by Taco Anema

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[ T I N E K E R E I J N D E R S ]

Sitting on an administrative board means coming to the table, taking seats face to face. Furniture features prominently in Taco Anema's boardroom portraits. In some cases seats contribute to the aesthetics of the composition, a pair of red armchairs providing a pleasant balance, but often they make it messier. That tells us that Anema is an honest photographer. He does not make things prettier than they are; he composes a document. The empty chairs in the foreground are the consequence of a decision to photograph all members of the board head on. At the photographer's request those in the foreground, whom viewers would see from behind on entering, have moved to stand behind those they normally face. All members gaze with deadly seriousness into the lens. The photo moment confirms their communal task.

### Everything must be equal

The Netherlands seems to have more administrative boards than any other country. An urgent decision, a course of action to be mapped out, the survival of a charity: it is always the board which gets stuck into the task. The board talks, each member takes a turn, until a decision is reached. For a country largely under sea level, agreement on keeping polders dry and maintaining dykes has been a matter of survival for centuries. The Netherlands was already strewn with dyke boards in the Middle Ages. Even after recent mergers there remain twice as many district water control boards as provinces. Like the nobility, the water control boards possess a distinguished coat of arms and tend to meet in old buildings with antique furniture. Of course, the members originally hailed from the better circles, where it was customary to underline one's status with a portrait. The gentlemen therefore had the high-ranking company depicted by a good painter. It became all the rage in the seventeenth century. All kinds of professional groups and associations posed before the easel. Frans Hals painted various militia group portraits full of cheerful shows of testosterone, and Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* is the major attraction of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam nowadays. Female board members, generally responsible for managing orphanages and caring for the poor, also had themselves immor-



The Rembrandt Association

talised in times gone by. Their expressions exhibit style and discipline. The subtle *Regentesses of St Elisabeth's Hospital* with its beautiful lighting, painted by Johannes Verspronck in 1641, was recently donated by the current members of the same board (no doubt after earnest deliberation) to the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, where it had already long been displayed.

The custom among Dutch boards of having themselves immortalised has become part of the genetics of the culture. I still remember a professional photographer being invited to my secondary school annually to protect the composition of the school club board from obscurity. In Leiden in the nineteenth century the photographer Israel David Kiek built up a flourishing business photographing student debates and boards. He positioned them imaginatively, for example up a high stepladder, making his relaxed group portraits popular far beyond the university city, and winning him great fame and a place in Dutch photographic history. A 'kiek' or rather the diminutive 'kiekje' came to mean an informal snapshot, although the term is now dated, as is bringing in a professional photographer to grant a board visual perpetuity. Nowadays, after all, one does that oneself, and not just once but regularly. One does not only take photos of people, either, but also of eye-catching biscuits or tasty sandwiches; and no longer with tripod and camera, but with telephone and sometimes a selfie stick.

Consequently it is now a sign of originality when a true photographer devotes himself to a boardroom portrait of his own volition, and all the more so when he does this in the form of a conceptually driven documentary project: a good cross-section of a diverse range of boards, photographed on the basis of a limited set of rules. The photographer made the visits between 2009 and 2014. Leo Anema selected 85 boards from all classes and demographic groups in the Netherlands. He captured them in colour in their regular meeting rooms. With the exception of the members in the foreground, who have stood up, the photographer pictures the groups in their ordinary meeting positions, including coffee pots and refreshments. People have set aside their papers for the

photo moment, put down their coffee cups and fixed their gazes on the lens. The sharp precision with which Taco Anema then portrays the board members underlines the seriousness of their task. The ideal tool for the surprising candour of the photograph is the technical camera, a digital equivalent of the classic 4x5 inch device. 'All objects and people you find within the square of the frame have equal value,' Anema believes. He puts that down to Dutch cultural identity, which insists that everything is equal. His work does not place a chair-person at the head of the table; everyone receives the same attention. 'If the essence of the polder model is consultation among equals with the ultimate aim of reaching a compromise, then that equality must also be expressed in the photo. So who you are and where you sit really does not come into it,' the photographer explains.

That point of departure is the only factor which determines the composition, a composition which appears natural, but which, in all honesty, is occasionally preceded by some shuffling, for instance where someone of substantial stature in the corner would unbalance the composition. In that case someone of a more delicate frame is asked to take the corner position. One might thus conclude that physical weight corresponds to specific gravity.

## Overleg Nederland

Taco Anema was born in 1950 and boasts a successful career in the Netherlands. He has won various prizes and been commissioned for good jobs, his work exhibited in museum collections. Usefully for this project, he has also sat on various boards himself. It is funny to think that he started at the other end of the social spectrum, as an activist observer of the Amsterdam squatter riots in 1980. That was the heyday of anarchy, a model designed by squatters occupying large properties. Just two years previously he had followed a course in photography at the student cultural organisation of the University of Amsterdam, CREA, and his photos of the squatter protests were almost immediately placed in the weekly newspapers. His preference for the social documentary side of photography is undoubtedly connected with his background as a sociologist. Anema graduated with a dissertation about the Netherlands Institute for Social Research, the prominent research institute which advises the Dutch government departments. The topic reveals his interest in the underlying mechanisms of society and his project *Overleg Nederland* is an ambitious result of that.

So this time the initiative came from the photographer himself, as he created a genre which had long existed but which was brand new to photography. In 2015 the project was exhibited at Amsterdam's Huis Marseille. Initially the large prints bring the visitor close, really close, to the individual board members, whose facial expressions in general are fairly neutral and reserved. Only afterwards does one notice the space around the company, a meeting room which is rarely obvious or suited to the aims of the board, sometimes appearing to be nothing more than a hired venue. The viewing order is reversed in the project book, *Taco Anema Overleg Nederland*. Unlike seeing the works in the museum, on the page one often looks from the table to the little figures behind; it even puts the viewer in mind of a bowling alley, an impression which

disappears, however, in the face of the many close-ups and cropped pictures with which the book's graphic designer Irma Boom – to put it nicely – seeks to ensure liveliness and incidentally honours the flawless photography. This is blatant cheating with respect to the rules of the project, though, as no individual is permitted extra attention. Boom, whose reputation is built on obstinacy, makes up for this with her lists of statistics and information-rich taxonomies at the back of the book, a wonderful passion of the Netherlands' best-known graphic artist.

## Suit and headscarf

The best thing about Anema's project is the connection between the formal group and the aim of the charity or association. Sometimes expectations are fulfilled. For example, one would never suspect that an image of four magnificently dressed black ladies represented the board of life insurance company 'De onderlinge van 1719 U.A.' (the Netherlands' oldest independent life insurance company). The captions could not possibly be switched; the board of the Nigerian Women Association is worlds apart from the seventeen gentlemen in their immaculate suits and classic silk ties, gathered under a chandelier, in front of an eighteenth-century cabinet adorned with a Delft blue garniture. Such gentlemen appear to come from a different era, and they are not the only ones in this parade of diversity. Equally refined ladies feature regularly too; the conspicuous blonde on the board of the Royal Industriele Groote Club is clearly particularly at ease with the camera, as are the former politicians, who evidently like to appear in cultural or other prestigious contexts. The board



'De onderlinge van 1719 U.A.', the Netherlands' oldest independent life insurance company

of the Anne Frank Foundation is an old boys' network of this kind. Since the composition of boards generally takes place on the basis of co-option, a certain uniformity is only natural, even if people express the intention of getting someone younger in next time, a woman or someone from a different background from the prevailing white. In fact the project includes plenty of specific ethnic boards. The Stichting Moskee Badr en Scholen, a foundation for a mosque and schools, is populated by bearded men in kaftans; the National Federation of Chinese Women's Associations is managed by fashionably dressed ladies, one of whom breaks Anema's rules by posing coquettishly. The gentlemen of football club VVU Ardahanspor sit importantly, with a gigantic gold cup in the background, and yet in obscurity, as the only club not to submit names. The board of the 'Nationaal Comité 4 en 5 mei', a war commemoration association in Amsterdam Zuidoost, is of mixed composition and the Landelijk Aktie Komitee Scholieren LAKS, an organisation for school pupils, features a suited young man beside a Muslim girl in a headscarf.

The board project contains all the ingredients to enable us to act as voyeurs, gazing freely at what goes on behind closed doors on administrative boards and at the people who devote themselves to their officially stated aims. The



'Nationaal Comité 4 en 5 mei', a war commemoration association in Amsterdam Zuidoost



Landelijk Aktie Komitee Scholieren LAKS, an organisation for school pupils

astounding focus allows viewers to lose themselves in every detail or face. Everyone certainly exudes ambition and to a greater or lesser extent an eagerness for membership of the advisory board to which they have been invited. Do I detect greater than average alacrity among the board members of the Rembrandt Association? It is certainly a dynamic and extraordinarily assertive association which has helped to enable museum purchases since as far back as 1883, with an impressive set of awards to its name. Much more modest and less worldly are the people behind the Johan Messchaert concert foundation. No business suits here; the foreground features the kind of gentleman who does not care all that much about good presentation, and in trying to avoid it stands out with his pink trousers and colourful jumper. There are boards which have effectively been dormant for years, decades even, when suddenly a single decision finds them dominating a Dutch news media flurry, as in the case of the Koninklijke Vereniging De Friesche Elfsteden, the organising committee of the beloved Elfstedentocht. The ice-skating marathon which visits eleven cities in Friesland can only go ahead when the ice on the canals and lakes is strong enough to support large numbers of people, which rarely happens now in times of climate change; the last competition took place on 4 January 1997.

## Polderen

All these diverse boards exposed by Anema embody the search for consensus in their own different ways. Taking the trouble to agree on a single line of action, something which can sometimes turn out to be terribly awkward, is perhaps the major stamp of the Dutch temperament. Good meetings do not over-run and they end with a practical to-do list of decisions. The path to unanimity is known as *polderen* in Dutch, after the need to keep the polder dry. The word is unknown in other parts of Europe, not only for geological reasons, but also because in countries such as France strikers and other protest groups prefer to take to the streets rather than remain seated at the meeting table. Anema's boardroom portraits provide insight into the close-knit system of civil self-government which has characterised the Netherlands since time immemorial and which also appears to have an infectious influence on immigrant compatriots. The photographer came up with the idea for this study from questions arising after a previous project, *A Hundred Dutch Households*, in 2009 (also exhibited at Huis Marseille), where he photographed families in their living rooms. Then too he opted for a multicultural approach. Visitors were surprised to discover that a family of Indian origin also lived in an Ikea interior.

Photographers of a slightly younger generation often choose a more intimate viewpoint and shrink from group portraits. Dana Lixenberg, Rineke Dijkstra and Koos Breukel exhibit a preference for the individual portrait and limit themselves to groups of two or three people. Jacqueline Hassink has made the boardroom table of large international enterprises her specific subject, but excludes all traces of humanity from her work. The reductionist character gives her photos more artistic potential than the social engagement of *Overleg Nederland*. The heart of this project is not the composition, which is minimally staged, at most based on a certain symmetry in the set-up, sometimes involving a gently triangular structure with one person standing behind those sitting



(an effect which is lost in the book when the photo is spread over two pages and the standing figure is left hanging in the split of the binding). The heart here lies purely in rendering a social structure visible where it would otherwise 'rule' from behind closed doors. Bringing something into the light which normally remains hidden; is that not the core mission of a photographer?



The Delft Student  
Corps

### A world-famous provincial board table

To ask whether it is a shame that this project is limited to the Netherlands would be posing the wrong question. A sharply delineated project programme benefits from local and of course conceptual precision. In any case, no one would level an accusation of provincialism at what is undoubtedly the most renowned board table in the world, that of the Amsterdam committee which once judged the quality of textiles, *The Sampling Officials*. Rembrandt's painting is one of the jewels of the Rijksmuseum and is ever present behind the perception of Anema's photos. When museum director Taco Dibbits explains the liveliness of this group on television, he describes how someone has accidentally opened the door, causing the men to look up and one of them to half stand up to tell the intruder to leave. Rembrandt was a keen observer when he painted this picture in 1662 and good at snap-shot-style details. The portrait of Jan Six also derives its modern effect from the movement of the body. Jan Six is putting on his glove while stepping out of the door, giving the portrait of the Amsterdam mayor, with whom Rembrandt was sufficiently friendly to be permitted to experiment, an unparalleled casual quality.

The project book mentions that Taco Anema knows his art history, but he also seems keenly aware of the deep differences between painting and photography. Rembrandt plunges the viewer into splendid doubt now and again, as in the secretive psychology of the *Jewish Bride* and the movement of that one

rising sampling official, which leads one to wonder, is he standing up or sitting down? The photographer, by contrast, opts for extreme clarity, a clarity with which he lends reality – with its own hazy side – the utmost trustworthiness.

The fact that people and objects, as well as the space around them, are set down in such detail seduces the attentive viewer into secondary narratives which can sometimes be very funny. For instance, the Delft students have pulled their jackets straight, but left the candles higgledy-piggledy in the holders. Some interiors date back to the seventeenth century and fit with the board-room culture of the day, but others are so paradoxical that they make us laugh. The good men of the Johan Messchaert concert foundation mentioned above meet in an attic with attributes reminiscent of the 1970s and weed-smoking youths. The brightly coloured bedside lamp on one of the beams above the heads of those in the meeting looks equally out of place.

Taco Anema spent many years on the administrative board project, capturing a cross section of a specific Dutch phenomenon in a particular period. It is fascinating to consider how that cross section will look in twenty years' time. Will some issues have become redundant, and what kind of progress can we expect from organisations such as Assadaaka, a multicultural association in Amsterdam which works towards social cohesion? One wonders what new consultation will be needed and what new situations will require people to put their heads together. The accents might change, but the polders must be permanently guarded. The urgency only increases: as the water level rises, the dykes must be built higher. That is the best guarantee for the survival of *polderen*.

Finally, as for the *Sampling Officials*, was the painting the inspiration for *Overleg Nederland*? No, says Anema, it was not the point of departure, but 'If you strive to give everyone equal value, you soon arrive at the same composition.' Anema shows that equality in the Netherlands does not need to be imposed by revolution. On the contrary, for centuries equality has defined our national DNA. ■

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The Nigerian Women  
Association

Translated by Anna Asbury