

## Intimacy Without Borders

### The Photographs of Bertien van Manen

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

Can you call it magic? A photograph by Bertien van Manen pulls viewers into an unknown environment from where it doesn't immediately release them. The borderline between seeing and experiencing more or less dissolves in her photos. They don't really show a definite subject, but rather an atmosphere, an impression. Showing is already saying too much, for the voice of the photographer is so intimate. She takes us by surprise. In a quiet, unemphatic way, she tells a story that has many dimensions, all elusively fanning out.

Bertien van Manen takes her photographs during stays in faraway countries. There she settles within the hospitality of families who have become her friends. In this way she connects the foreign with the familiar and this is perhaps why as a viewer one feels so welcome and included and free to look behind the everyday facade without feeling like a voyeur.

These photographs often lack a dominant focus and the casual composition is supported by colourful accents that are too subtle to be immediately obvious. They require patient viewing. No wonder then that it took some time before the photographs of this photographer reached the art museum public. It had to get accustomed to the power of intimacy and to a genre that may be called documentary but revolves more around something like the portrayal of humanity. These days Van Manen's photographs are regularly exhibited in art museums all over the world. It is hard to think of a relevant institute that has not shown her work. The Museum of Modern Art in New York, for example, exhibited her work in 2005 and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam has shown it on more than one occasion. While her work has been shown regularly since the 1990s, before then she photographed just as devotedly, though her subjects presented themselves primarily within the national borders and often within the theme of women's lib. From this engaged angle she made several supplements for the weekly *Vrij Nederland*, among which, as early as 1982, a supplement about *Women in Poland*. Also in 1982, commissioned by the Rijksmuseum, she shot a documentary series about the women's movement together with Catrien Ariëns. See *Zelfportret. Vrouwenbeweging in de jaren tachtig* (Self-Portrait. The Women's Movement in the 1980s; published by Feministische Uitgeverij Sara, Amsterdam).



Belgrade Boy,  
*Give Me Your Image*, 2006

### **An eye that never sleeps**

In recent years her free and poetic photographs have been collected in several books. A noticeable example of Van Manen's intensely human working method is the book *Give Me Your Image* which appeared in 2006. It is, as so often, a collection of photographs taken within families, average families, living in various countries. The theme this time is the portrait and the place it has been given in the living room. Sometimes such a photo has been framed and hung in a nice spot, other times it has been stuck in the corner of a painting or ended up between two vases. It presumably depicts a family member, who went away or died in war. They are often lauded people who, in a standard photograph by a professional photographer, have been raised above the rest of the family. The soldier in uniform, the beau garçon with his blond hair, destined perhaps to become an actor, the glamorous photo of the beautiful daughter, the successful images of a seaside holiday, the old photo of a captain wearing swastika insignia. We see several generations, several forms of material well-being, but we see especially the feelings that have been preserved through the photographs. We suspect a tie with a lover or a child, possibly cut off by distance or time; we feel the pride, the loss, the promise, the expectation, the deep sorrow. They are so recognisable, those photos that have accreted in the interior. That we

are allowed to see all this is through the mediation of the photographer. The reason we don't feel uncomfortable at these harrowing sentiments that the re-photographing has exposed, are her optics: we see the photos in a domestic context. The objects and furniture around it get as much attention as the portrait itself. Besides, in many cases the image dissolves into visual complexity. Your gaze goes to and fro: from the photographed portrait to where it is located in the room. It requires you look well and attentively, and repeatedly. The photo-in-the-photo creates confusion regarding the rules of perspective. We seem to be dealing with cubist shifts. At what distance has the re-photographed photo been placed in the whole? Only when we have figured this out does the cubist illusion melt away and do we see the reality of the double photograph fully.

The photographer took her photos for *Give Me Your Image* in cities like Madrid, Chisinau, Rome, Budapest, Sofia, Munich, Vilnius, Stockholm, Novokuznetsk, Vienna, Belgrade, Toulouse, Paris, Prague, Athens, a geographic diversity that shows it is an understatement to say that this Amsterdam-based photographer travels. She is an unstoppable traveller; her whole oeuvre is rooted in her travelling which she does at a pleasantly slow pace. Only when she stays somewhere for an extended period can she be sure of a bond of confidence with her host family. Then the photographic distance disappears and the pressing of the button becomes part of a shared domesticity. Not a single photograph gives the impression that it has come about after lengthy preparations. The work has the freshness of snapshots, they are direct and to the point. She herself talks about coincidence, which is a modest explanation for an eye that never sleeps.

Sofia Red Lady,  
*Give Me Your Image*, 2006





Yang and Yu,  
*East Wind, West Wind*, 2001

### Balance and respect

Bertien van Manen was born in 1942 and started travelling when her children were grown. Her unquenchable thirst for the foreign she had up till then been able to satisfy with photos of women who had come to Amsterdam from a different culture, like the wives of guest labourers. They appeared in so-called women's magazines and were collected in her book *Vrouwen te gast* (Women Who Are Guests, 1979). Photography had come naturally to her. She was bitten by the bug when, as a young woman, she was a photographers' model herself and became fascinated by the other side of the camera. She always uses easy-to-handle, analogue cameras – she likes to be ready to shoot without her equipment visibly interfering. At first, she told in an interview, she didn't know *what* she had actually come to photograph, in that distant country. One doesn't have to hit the mark every time, of course, but she went to Istanbul three times, for example, without ever figuring out what she wanted to tell. She didn't go a fourth time. By contrast, her visits to China have yielded an endless stream of images. She started going there regularly, long before the mass invasion of western visitors to the country. The book *East Wind West Wind* (2001) shows her ability to look behind the doors of average Chinese people, letting unadorned lives and human sincerity speak for itself with a fruitful lack of embarrassment. Whether her eye falls on a grimy cupboard or a bed on which a couple in love has eagerly thrown itself, nothing is passed off as more beautiful than it is, while the photographs are at the same time models of balance and respect. It's as if the composition is only an afterthought and spontaneity is the rule. Only later does one notice that many of the interiors are dilapidated and not very aesthetic. Had it actually been all that pleasant to be a guest there for that long? Or is lack of comfort what drives a real encounter in a foreign place?



Weifang Travelling, *East Wind, West Wind*, 2001

### **'Let's sit down before we go'**

Selecting photographs is clearly done with a most critical eye. Van Manen is a perfectionist and lots of material stays out of sight when she is in doubt, as the public was made aware when it viewed the formerly unused photographs of *Let's Sit Down Before We Go*, an exhibition the Foam Photography Museum in Amsterdam programmed in 2011. The photographs in the exhibition and the book with the same title were chosen and put in order by the English photographer Stephen Gill. They comprised a fascinating series of images that Van Manen produced between 1991 and 2009 in countries like Russia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Tatarstan and Georgia. The title is a Russian saying when one sets out on a long journey. It turned out to be a brilliant idea by Gill to finally give these sidelined images the stage that they deserve. Is there just a bit more 'craziness' in this series than in Van Manen's usual selections? There would be nothing strange about that: you would want to treat your temporary friends, who are opening up their lives to you, with the utmost courtesy. But when you leaf back through her books you see that this isn't really so.

What surprises again at Foam is the format of the exhibited prints, which is very modest. Given the current museum practice of large prints, the subdued seize of these images places them beyond categorisation and while it does justice to the intimacy of the content, it doesn't make it easy for the viewer. For a first look is not enough and one has to be prepared to adjust one's antenna several times.

## A hundred summers, a hundred winters

Bertien Van Manen's signature style came into full flowering with the phenomenal project *A Hundred Summers, A Hundred Winters* which was concluded in 1994 with an extraordinary book. The photographs were taken in Russia and embrace a side of Russian society that wasn't known to us in the West. Intuition and love for the people are the guiding principle. Colourful, messy kitchens are alternated with a magisterial shot from above of a rural funeral with a little orchestra leading a loosely formed procession around an open casket being carried high, followed by the cover which is carried separately. And then there are the small groups, three or four young people, with their piercing look into the camera. Their interaction depends on a tension of which we have no knowledge but which we can feel: these young people are ready to vigorously devote themselves to the adventure called life.

The individual photos never come with a title (the project itself has a name) and are therefore not bound to a specific meaning and welcome every projection from the viewer, something which contributes to the mystical ability of this oeuvre. The success of a photo depends on a multitude of conditions, social intelligence, curiosity, persistent visits, unwavering attention, lucky coincidence, a working camera. But all of this would lead to little if it wasn't backed up by Van Manen's superior sensitivity for image. With this something mysterious happens to time. It can't be denied that there is a defining moment but 'moment' in this case should be seen as enduring time, not as time brought to a halt but as prolonged mobility, an unstoppable form of life.



Novokuznetsk Funeral, *A Hundred Summers, A Hundred Winters*, 1994



Bely Yar Communal Kitchen, *A Hundred Summers, A Hundred Winters*, 1994



Kishinev, *A Hundred Summers, A Hundred Winters*, 1994

### **Propelled by sorrow**

In more recent years the imagery has taken a different turn. The social aspect has become subservient to nature. When, in 2014, the long-running exhibition *Moonshine* was also concluded with a book – a project for which Van Manen had returned many times to the American Appalachians to stay among the male and female miners there, a project that shows kinship with *A Hundred Summers*,

*A Hundred Winters* – it was followed by the enchanting *Beyond Maps and Atlases* published in 2015. The title comes from a poem by Seamus Heaney (the poem 'Herbal', from the collection *Human Chain*) and the photographs came into being in Ireland, an 'elsewhere world' which Bertien van Manen was seeking during the years that she mourned the death of her husband. The churning white-blue sea, the soft-green grassland hidden in mist, a nearly deserted beach, the lonely house; all are metaphors for a soul adrift. They already existed in our collective memory, these photographs. But like a poet taking existing words and turning them into unique panoramas, Van Manen uses these images for an epic of the soul, her soul and those of others. This is what she wrote about it, in September 2015: 'At first, working in Ireland, I wasn't sure what I was looking for. My husband had died. I dispensed with the people and reflected on the atmosphere. I was guided by a feeling and a search, a longing for some kind of meaning in a place of myth and legends. There was mystery and endlessness at the edge of a land beyond which there is nothing but a vast expanse.'

You have to be a true artist, to be able to translate your personal grief into a universal language. Where earlier far-reaching empathy with others was a motif, the Irish project completely let go of that. Propelled by grief the photographer reached the unencumbered core, perhaps the highest achievable intertwinement of art and life. It is not an upbeat story; it unmistakably exudes a desperate and ominous atmosphere. It does indeed take the hand of a master to be able to derive from soft-coloured vistas something which in its elusiveness can be called magic. ■

[www.bertienvanmanen.nl](http://www.bertienvanmanen.nl)



*Moonshine, 2014*

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