



ARJAN DE NOOY

Walden Affairs, The Hague

Barbara Wright, in her 1981 introduction to Raymond Queneau's experimental novel *Exercises in Style* (1947), sums up the tone of the book in describing 'the simple, mocking, amused linguistic lesson that Queneau here conceals beneath his characteristic humor'. This statement could also be applied to 'Great Men', the Dutch chemist-turned-artist Arjan de Nooy's glibly titled solo exhibition at Walden Affairs.

Having left his work in chemistry for photography in 2004, De Nooy has developed an *oeuvre* based upon the subjective construction and re-telling of photographic history, creating narratives for the minor figures he 'discovers' in his growing collection of photographs. Over the three floors of the project space, which is run by artist Joost Nieuwenburg and curator Mischa Poppe, De Nooy's exhibition was presented in chapters, each an homage to the work of a 'great man': the French writer Queneau (1903–76), the Dutch painter Théophile de Bock (1851–1904) and the Belgian botanist Rembert Dodoens (1517–85).

Queneau is first: inspired by *Exercises in Style*, which retells the story of a scuffle between two young men on a city bus 99 ways, De Nooy presented a series of 33 images derived from a single photograph, each executed in a different style ('Exercises in Style', 2013). The starting point is an average photograph De Nooy took himself of an unknown man on a city street. There are small references to Queneau's story: a parked bus, two boys walking along the left-hand side of the image. De Nooy titles each subsequent image according to art history and to the photographic processes used, as well as his idiosyncratic system of categorization: 'Style Avedon', 'Style Polaroid', 'Style Hockney'. The premise is exciting, but the images themselves fall flat. Displayed roughly in an already stark room, they felt unconsidered. Still, Queneau's book and the effect of linguistic stylings on interpretation created a generative framework for the exhibition.

On the next floor, De Nooy resurrected the work of a little-known Dutch landscape painter, Théophile de Bock, whose paintings are in the collections of the Tate and the National Gallery in London. Today, one can buy his paintings cheaply online, which De Nooy did. Here he presented De Bock's first retrospective in a century, with roughly 20 works on view (each *Untitled*, from *The De Nooy Collection*). Walden Affairs occupies an old canal house and its hominess shone: De Bock's bourgeois paintings lined the walls, comfortable amidst the fireplaces and hardwood.

De Nooy supplemented the paintings with a small room of photographs, attesting that the discovery of De Bock's 'tree photographs' reveals groundbreaking evidence that he painted in a studio rather than *en plein air*. The truth of these assertions soon unravels. In fact, De Nooy created the photographs himself, manipulating them with Photoshop to create a patina of age. Why De Bock? No apparent reason, besides the photographic quality of his paintings and their ready availability. Why not De Bock? Few people today could disprove the accuracy of De Nooy's claims, thus rendering De Bock the inheritor of a new history.

The steep climb to the gallery's attic space revealed a tidy collection of collages and photograms De Nooy produced in collaboration with the photographer Anne Geene ('Dodonaei', 2013). They depict the Dodoens, a plant no longer found in Europe, which is named after Rembert Dodoens. De Nooy ordered seeds, grew the *Dodonea* (viewable in bell jars), then created a series of images based on the leaves' form. Dodoens was, apparently, the first to classify plants according to their physiological characteristics rather than alphabetically, and De Nooy and Geene followed suit. This body of work was made originally for an exhibition in Mechelen (Dodoens's hometown); more scientific than photographic, it felt like an outlier, but then De Nooy's practice on the whole shirks easy classification.

Writing about the artist's work requires a lot of 'according to De Nooy ...'. One craves facts, references, the depth one expects from a historian. But De Nooy presents himself mythically, befitting an artist whose work hinges on the unstable border of fact and fiction. The exhibition texts detailed the biographies of the men De Nooy called upon, but revealed nothing about the artist. His book, *De Facto* (2009), sitting on the windowsill, was presented as a *catalogue raisonné* of the De Nooy collection: answers, finally. But this too was fiction, and its strange blend of art history with many superlatives only served to create further uncertainty.

The fictionalized writing of history is well-trodden territory, but De Nooy's project is absurd enough to surprise and engage. In a moment when the accurate sourcing of images seems increasingly moot, 'Great Men' raised still-relevant questions of the photograph's relationship to truth, authorship, authenticity and the historical record. According to De Nooy, most people believe what he presents. Returning to Queneau: the method of delivery bears heavily on its interpretation; it seems that the voice of the connoisseur, no matter the inconsistencies, is one that we'll still readily accept.

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