



Ankie Geeneen (Collectie De Nooy)

FEMINIST ARTIFACT?

Carol Sawyer negotiates the
questions raised by **HAARSCHERP**

Arjan de Nooy's project *Haarscherp* presents us with a curious and complex artifact in the form of an obscure feminist photo magazine published in 1977.

The contents, a series of illustrated articles on an eclectic range of photographers and their work, present a variety of aesthetic sensibilities and motivations for taking pictures. Taken together, the drily humorous narratives in the magazine and De Nooy's frame story about his discovery of the publication, *The Case Sharp*, form a layered commentary that touches not only on feminist art-making strategies of the era, but also on larger debates about the nature of the medium of photography itself. Is the magazine real, or a product of De Nooy's imagination? Did he find the photographs or take them himself?

The uncertainty around the magazine's "authenticity" is part of the game the artist invites us to play.

The project is inhabited by a richly drawn cast of characters, not the least of whom is De Nooy himself, playing the role of connoisseur, ardent collector, and discoverer of obscure but deserving photographic work. Reading the frame story (which resembles a detective story or cold case file), we encounter, in turn, a drunken magazine vendor, a cynical printer, the editorial team, and some of the photographers whose work is featured in the magazine. Feminism is depicted as a messy coalition of conflicting agendas and lack of consensus. Negative stereotype? Never mind; we are swept up in vivid descriptions of these artists' diverging fates — the details are gossipy and intimate, and we are hooked.

In his role as discerning connoisseur of photography, De Nooy never articulates what criteria he draws on; he just knows when a photo is good. But how do we decide when a photograph is good? Since the invention of photography circa 1839, photographic images have proliferated and infiltrated almost every area of our lives: they are used to record, sell, prove, lie, seduce. Arguments have regularly erupted amongst artists, curators, and critics about what makes a photograph good, when is it art, when isn't it. There are always some who think it can never be art. It is just a matter of pushing a button, these critics say — anyone can do it. Photographs are so ubiquitous that we have become inured to them, but what exactly is a photograph, anyway?

De Nooy's project is a layered web of interwoven stories that raises more questions than it answers, and negotiating these narratives and questions is a source of considerable pleasure when engaging with this work.



Fien Huijbregts (Collectie De Nooy)

The various photographers featured in the magazine's articles raise all kind of issues for us. Photographs are open to interpretation, laments Sammy Hegontvug in her heartfelt break-up letter with the medium. Indeed, her rather banal snapshots of middle class people in a variety of retail settings fail to convey her alleged "critique of capitalist consumerist society." Hegontvug is cast as the idealistic jilted lover of photography, turning away in disillusionment from the inherently promiscuous camera that loves and says yes to everything, even when the photographer is asking it to say no. Is this fickle, slippery tool capable of conveying any fixed meaning, let alone a feminist agenda?

Julia Luudens insists that photographs themselves are meaningless, but she is interested in what stories and speculations the photographs provoke in the viewer. Like the women populating the early film-still work of Cindy Sherman, Luudens' women have a familiar "déjà-lu" quality. *Haarscherp*'s editors claim her

work draws on the conventions of advertising and film stills, but to my eyes they more closely resemble snapshots taken by some anonymous sex tourist visiting the red-light district of Amsterdam — and perhaps that is exactly what they are. They become far more ambiguous and intriguing seen through the filter of the story De Nooy weaves around them for us. I weave my own story around De Nooy's story: I picture him discovering the photographs at three different jumble sales, and imagine his pleasure at deciding to put them together and claim they are the work of a gorgeous, intelligent blond who is dismissive of French theorists and well-versed in 1970s' Yugoslavian feminist performance art.

In the introduction to *Haarscherp*, the editors complain that most contemporary photo magazines are designed to appeal to male consumers, resulting in publications slanted towards the male photo enthusiast that can hardly be distinguished from *Playboy*. It is surprising, then, to

find that more than 25 percent of the images in the magazine show naked or near-naked women in sexually charged situations. This points to a difficulty female photographers and visual artists grappled with in the 1970s; although underrepresented as authors in the male-dominated fields of photography and art, they were overrepresented in the visual field as the object of the desiring male gaze. How were women to reclaim images of their bodies as the signifiers of their own identity and sexual desires? Images of lesbian sex are easily co-opted as fuel for male fantasy, as the featured photographer Anja van Buuren discovers when her film gets "lost" at the photo lab. I feel like De Nooy is hoping to provoke a debate about the gendered gaze here, but the battleground seems abandoned. In our era of do-it-yourself Internet porn and music videos on prime-time TV that might make a 1970s sex worker blush, it is hard to re-enter this debate with any clear sense of what was at stake at the time. This is the only aspect of the publication that began to wear on me — okay, I admit, in much the same way that 1970s feminism could get annoying in its over-determination of sexuality as central to gender identity.

The article likely to resonate most strongly with artists is the tragicomic saga of artist Ankie Geeneen. Her sad sequence of career misfortunes is simultaneously absurd and all-too-plausible. Her images show a modestly dressed young woman with her head concealed by part of her surroundings — a visual strategy that becomes funnier and more poignant through variety and repetition. Seen in the greater context of De Nooy's project, which purports to question if there is such a thing as a female gaze in photography, it is ironic that the most effective feminist strategy on offer is this withdrawal of the female gaze. Like Francesca Woodman's gesture of slipping behind a sheet of peeling wallpaper, Geeneen hides in plain sight. She shows herself yet makes herself unavailable; through breaking the rules of conventional media images of women, she invokes them. We are not used to the young women in photographs hiding from our gaze. We assume they will be on display like fashion models, pop stars, or pin-ups — there for our scopophilic pleasure. Geeneen gets the kindest fate in the frame story: happily continuing to make work, albeit disengaged from the art world.

The absurdities pile up in Haarscherp: one article attempts to scientifically quantify the different characteristics of photographs taken by men and women, while another provides a pointed and unflattering psychoanalysis of a male photographer of erotica. The full feminist toolkit is on display here, with pseudo-scientific statistical analysis and Freudian analysis-as-weapon deployed to hilarious effect. In other articles, the surrealist images of Fien Huijbregts are revealed to have been created using a "method" that consisted of drinking heavily, and a series of blurry portraits are presented as documentation of psychic Johanna Teven's levitations. De Nooy seems to be inviting us to consider if photographs are reliable as evidence of any kind.

Haunting these narratives are the conflicting claims of modern and post-modern photographic discourses. What makes one photograph better than another? When is a photograph art? Can the meanings of photographs be fixed, or are they continually shifting in response to context? Is a photograph the objective product of a machine or the subjective document of a person's experience? What is the relationship between photographs and "reality"? Since photography was invented, people have grappled with all of these questions. Photo historian Geoffrey Batchen characterizes this debate as lying between the desire to secure the medium's identity as an inherent and stable product of nature (chemistry, optics) or the highly contingent and unstable product of culture (human nature, art). He argues persuasively that the value of photography lies in the very impossibility of resolving this binary: it is both mechanical and subjective, which gives the medium a unique complexity and tension. How interesting and fitting, therefore, to use photography to interrogate that most puzzling and central cultural binary of male/female. Revisiting the questions raised above about photography, we could reframe many of them to ask how gender is perceived. Why is the work of one gender more valued? Why are people from one gender more likely to succeed as artists? Is gender difference, as we understand it, a product of our genetic make-up, or is it socially constructed? Can photographs be used as a means of social critique of sexism or other injustice, or is their meaning too dependent on social context? I am glad that De Nooy's project raises these questions, and gladder still that he doesn't try to provide us with easy answers.

Bibliography

Batchen, Geoffrey. *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1999.

Carol Sawyer is a visual artist, singer, and educator based in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. Her ongoing project *Some Documents from the Life of Natalie Brettschneider* uses photographs and musical recitals to "recreate" the work of a fictional performance artist whose career spans the better part of the 20th century. <http://republicgallery.com/sawyer1.html>

Female photographers in the show: Julia Luudens (1954), Sammy Hegontvug (1937), Ankie Geeneen (1950), Anja van Buuren (1946), Fien Huijbregts (1910-1977), Yvon de Korte (1947 - 1979), Johanna Vliegthart (1947) & Eline Portman (1879 - 1928). To offer some counter-balance to the 'female gaze', one of the display-cases shows work by the, at that time, controversial photographer Han de Beer (1942), a typical representative of the 'male gaze'.



Ankie Geeneen (Collectie De Nooy)