

## Introduction

Somebody once asked a mountaineer why it was the Mont Blanc that he had to climb at all costs. 'Because it's there'. It's a good answer. It is also succinct enough to begin a short introduction to the photography of Teun Voeten. There is the man Teun Voeten, I've met him. And there are his photographs, I've seen them. The rest, all the words which you can think of about the meaning of photographic imagery, is a matter of minor consideration.

It is not of course unimportant that we continue to think about the relationship between image and consciousness, prints and politics, about the history of photojournalism with its ups and downs, and about the possible and desirable future of the profession. On the contrary: it is very important. However, the opposite does happen; the debate does continue unabated. Nonetheless, the debate lies mostly dormant, because photographers are unconsciously influenced by their own and somebody else's life and work and because gradually other requirements are being demanded by customers, or because there are once again small technological improvements for sale.

Sometimes, when a taboo is broken in this area, the 'photographic discussion' flares up so much that it becomes a public debate: time and time again, contentually the images are produced, which have the power to shock us. To cite another example, thanks to digitalisation, the possibility of manipulation has been increased to such an extent, that suddenly when reading the paper, a folder, watching the television or a video, we don't know what we are actually seeing anymore.

Why is the debate about the meaning of images sometimes so stupefyingly vague? Possibly the meaning of an image is in reversed proportion to the clarity of the image itself. We don't have that problem with speaking or reading, or at least the problem is much less. Some public speakers and writers - priests, politicians, novelists - have radically influenced public opinion, sometimes for centuries. The spoken and the written word are easier to deal with and also easier to contradict. However, a tangible, visual image such as a photograph is essentially, literally a taboo.

It is often the same kind of story with the other arts, such as music and painting. We try to describe what they do to us, however, most of the time it results in a lot of stammering and stuttering. And then, driven to desperation, we quickly ask the photographer, or the painter, why he or she has made the object in question, what sort of paper, paint, aperture they have used, and what the purpose is of it all. Some artists are quite good at coming up with some sort of answer. Mondriaan was one of those people. He knew he could sell his art much better

with a **good** story and with good presentation. Others could not or would not. So Armando **knew** when asked why, at the opening of his museum in Amersfoort in 1998, to limit his answers to the words 'trauma' and 'emotions' and then referred to his paintings.

It's the same with photographers. There are those with stories, and there are those without. Mostly it's the latter. This is often shown through public discussions with photographers about the purpose and the meaning of their work. These discussions get bogged down most of the time due to unsatisfactory exchanges of questions, woolly statements and reproaches. The most difficult moment for many press photographers who win the World Press Photo or the Zilveren Camera seems to be the 'deciding moment' when something has to be said about the winning photograph on camera. Certainly in the last few years, most photographers cannot come up with anything better than uttering the words 'terrible', 'the forgotten war' or 'consciousness-raising'.

This feeling of impotence has not only to do with the growing, but idiotic habit of making demands on the artist to describe the emotion which manifested itself in works of art, with the same kind of force, in ordinary language. Certainly not with all, but with many expressions of art this demand is a rejection of the uniqueness of the piece of art.

This feeling of impotence has also to do with a growing feeling of insecurity of photojournalists themselves about their own profession. They also ask themselves, after moments of mortal danger, after months of futile effort or after counterproductive reactions from the public: why on earth am I doing this? And then a few pros and cons come drifting up to the surface: ethical objections versus consciousness-raising, artistic urges versus the snap-and-ready approach of commercialisation, and the question of who is using whom and so on. I have heard many answers from the press photographers I know and the extent of rationalisation and self-justification varies. Nevertheless, when I ask why they want to capture moments of reality, I have seldom heard the answer which the mountaineer had uttered: 'because it's there'. I have also not heard it from Teun Voeten.

Why Voeten wants to trek all over the world with his camera is not all that clear to us. The question of 'why' in his text, *Neo-Vulturnism in Contemporary Documentary Photography* published in 1996, is not all that comprehensible. His description of the practices of some of his colleagues is critical and is of little comfort, and at the same time he explains his own motivation with an irritating and disparaging remark à la Karel Appel: 'Photographers simply mess around, and sometimes it looks good'. Nevertheless, looking at his work, it becomes a lot clearer where to place him in the gallery of the history of photography: in the tradition of anthropology which acquires its motivation through curiosity as well as in the tradition of the committed journalist who wants in particular to change some aspect. Sometimes it falls

in between these traditions.

Teun Voeten's book, *Tunnelmensen* (Tunnel people), published in 1996. which is about the underground existence of homeless people, seems to have a facile interpretation. At first glance, it seems to be almost a literal repetition of the work of Jacob Riis. a committed journalist who worked a century before in the New York slums. Voeten came into contact with the tunnels through a conversation with the American ethnographer Terry Williams who had changed his research on crack houses and cocaine gangs to the 'human wrecks' in the abandoned train and metro tunnels. He described them as "The new class of people rejected by society who have literally become invisible. I want to give these invisible people a human face." That was precisely the reason why the journalist Jacob Riis in the 1880's bought a camera: to give the poor wretches in the slums a face for the newspaper readers to be aware of. He had already written a whole series of revealing articles for his newspaper about the misery of the slums, but the political element was left out. When he heard that one could make indoor photographs with the help of burning magnesium powder, he immediately went with his camera and the powder to the cramped basements and cafes. Those were the photos which had the desired effect. The book *How the other half lives* shocked the nation. Future politician Theodore Roosevelt announced immediate action, and as chief commissioner of the New York Police Department he tackled crime, the housing shortage and other wrongs. Just like Riis, in New York's subterranean world, Teun Voeten is a journalist first and a photographer second. The relation word-image is three hundred pages text and only thirty-two photographs, as if the photos just serve as an illustration and proof for unbelievers. Nevertheless, in his purpose, Voeten differs from Riis. Riis was out to improve the situation of those people. Not Voeten. He does not involve himself in trying to influence policy change because he says, as he has written, that he knows too little about the homeless in Europe and that "as an European it would not be thought expedient to lecture the Americans. My only purpose is to gain a clear understanding of the soul of the tunnel people".

Voeten then does not fit entirely into the tradition of the 'crusaders with a camera.' This began with Riis and Lewis Hine, and with the Vietnam photographers such as Philip Jones Griffiths who has reached the height of his career and has since then continued in Africa.

In *Tunnelmensen*, Voeten is that which he has been trained to be: an anthropologist. Do we then have to view the photos which he made on his treks to the backwoods of the world and to which he has attached much less text as anthropological? Are these photos a visual addition to the impressions of misery, anarchy and war which American journalist Robert D. Kaplan wrote in 1996 in his book *The Ends of the Earth - A Journey at the Dawn of the Twenty First Century*? With regard to these devastated places, Voeten seems to have assumed a more committed attitude. He went to such places as Sierra Leone, because all his colleagues, like

the proverbial swarm of bees, have made for other places, places determined by CXX. It seems that indignation about the one-sided 'exposure' of reality was the cause of this studied rebelliousness. Precisely why he felt this way is not clear. And is it really all that important? Questioning the motivation of press photographers might be important, however this is just as true of the motivations of every human being. As regard to art, in this case photos shot in far away places, it is much more important to consider how others see them and what they do with them. Can we manifest the same, if need be, the desperate optimism as photographers/initiators have shown in the past, people from F.D. Roosevelt with his 'Depression Photography' and Edward Steichen with his *The Family of Man* to the jungle photographers with their phosphorus-photos from Vietnam? Unfortunately, we cannot; the political effects the images from Vietnam inspired have never been repeated to such an extent. Since then, we have gradually become sadder but wiser.

'The world has had enough of Africa'. This sentence was the title of an analysis which Els de Temmerman wrote in 1994 for the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant* about the situation in Rwanda. She had written a lot about Rwanda, nevertheless clearly without result. After the genocide she had the same feeling which Martha Gellhorn, THE war correspondent of the twentieth century had felt so often before. Looking back on her work, *The Face of War*. she described her views on journalism as, "The light which journalism spread was as weak as that of a firefly (...) The articles which we wrote might have done some good; in fact, they could have been written with invisible ink, printed on leaves, scattered by the wind."

The precise reasons why journalists such as Martha Gellhorn, Els de Temmerman and Teun Voeten continue to do their dangerous work is, again, not clear and not all that important. What IS important is that they have done it. A report means authenticity: 'I was there'. "Journalism at its best and most effective is educating people" is a typical Gellhorn observation on the purpose of her work. This observation could indeed be praiseworthy and right, if this is its effect, however, that is for others to decide, for the observers and for the public. When I look at Voeten's photographs, sometimes for a long time and often with a undefinable feeling full of compassion, respect and an inkling of insight into human existence. I feel, despite their sombre content, a certain satisfaction about these photos: 'because they're there'.