DAVID BERGÉ
DE WANDELAAR

Hij is een fotograaf zonder camera. David Bergé neemt mensen op sleeptouw om ze een stad te tonen, van scène naar scène. Maak kennis met zijn AalstWalk.

door Christophe Van Gerrewey

David Bergé (1983) wil aan fotografie doen zonder de verledelige en klassieke eigenschappen van het medium te aanvaarden. Zo heeft de Belg meer dan een jaar geleden zijn studio achtergelaten en zijn bazijtvingen gerestaureerd tot een koffie om ‘professioneel toerist’ te worden. Elk project is een aanleiding om naar een andere plek te trekken. In het kader van een residency in Netwerk organiseerde hij deze leentje, in samenwerking met de Oostenrijkse kunstenaar Jack Hauser, wandelingen door Aalst – iets waar hij al jaren na zijn afstuderen ook elders in Europa deel aan.

Een AalstWalk, zoals deze kruising van genres en activiteiten heet, begint als volgt. De deelnemers (in groepjes van hoogstens tien) worden opgewacht op het perron van het station. Hun gids (David Bergé of Jack Hauser) zegt: ‘Welcome to this AalstWalk, I will be your guide for the next 90 minutes. I would like to ask you to switch off your mobile phone and remain silent for the entire duration of the walk. Any questions before we leave?’ Als dat niet het geval is, gaat de wandeling van start.

De wandelaar verandert het komende anderhalf uur herhaaldelijk van been – en het is die verschuiving in manieren van kijken die dit project tot een zeldzame ervaring maakt. De eerste blijkt artiestiek: omdat de AalstWalk wordt georganiseerd door een centrum voor hedendaagse kunst, verwacht de wandelaar kunstmatigheid, spanning, fictie. De straten van Aalst worden onderworpen aan de zevende paranoïa die elk tentoonstellings- of museumbezoek kenmerkt. We moeten opletten, aandachtig zijn, op zoek gaan naar betekenis, esthetiek, aanwijzingen en intenties. Deze wandeling is immers een kunstwerk, en er wordt verwacht dat wij iets verwachten. De eerste halte in deze AalstWalk komt gedeeltelijk tegemoet aan dat verlangen. David Bergé leidt het groepje naar binnen in het Station Hotel: een beetje verouderd, ‘charmant’ instauration waarin de duinen van alle hotelkamers openstaan. Zijn er geen gasten? Een kamer is op slot – de gids heeft de sleutel en toont de bewijzen van tijdelijke bewoning: een onopgemaakt bed, kledingstukken, een koffie, een paar boeken. Is dit de kamer van Bergé zelf? Of is dit de eerste scène van een misdaadverhaal of een roman?

Het spoor wordt niet voortgezet. AalstWalk blijkt geen haalbaar te vertellen, maar het opent mogelijkheden om menselijke foto's van de stad en van de wereld te maken. Naarmate de wandeling vor- dert, en eigenlijk saai (of vermoeiden- de) wordt, verandert de artiesteke blok in een toeristische: we kijken nu naar Aalst omdat het bijna ‘toch licht’ is, en omdat we hier dingen kunnen zien uit de werkelijkheid die we als beeld moe -naar huis kunnen nemen. Bergé houdt bijvoorbeeld halt in een parkeergarage – een betonnen uitkijkplatform, een dak van een levens, dat uitzichten biedt over de stad. Maar even later stokt de wandeling, een kwartier later, in een woonwijk die – Louise Paul Boon natuurlijk niet ver weg – als een verga- ten straat doodloopt op een massief industrieterrein, met rokende schuiven uit een bruin hemel gekrast. Eten vrouw hinkt ons met een wandelstok naar toe, zonder te begrijpen wat wij hier komen doen. En begrijpen wij het zelf? Misschien vervult de toeris- tische blik nogmaals, en wordt ze fotografisch iets bestaat ten slotte pas als ze gefotografeerd wordt. En toch haalt niemand een foto of een iPhone tevoorschijn...

Uiteindelijk worden de artiestieke, de toeristische of de fotografische blikken geassocieerd door een overkoepelende, niet enige kust – die van de wandelaar. De wandeling is in de wereldliteratuur een terugkerend thema: W.G. Saabals is klassiek, en recent schreef de Amerikaan Telu Cola de wandernomad Open City En al in 1917 publiceerde Robert Walser het verhaal Der Spaziergang, dat heel goed bij de wandelingen van David Bergé gezien kan worden. Hij schreef: ‘Er vergezelt de wandelaar altijd iets onpekeloek, iets om over na te denken, iets fantas- tisch, en hij zou dom zijn als hij deze spirituele kant niet zou merken of zelfs zou verwaarlozen: intuïtief, hij verwielt komt alle markwaardige en uitzonder- lijken fenomenen, wordt zijn vriend en zijn broer, omdat ze hem plaatsen; hij maakt er welgevormde en substantiële luchten van, geeft hem structuur en ziet het zoals zij op hun beurt hem leer- den en inspireren.'

Christophe Van Gerrewey is auteur en FWO-ambtenaar aan de Universiteit Gent
up, so to speak. It was a poetic expression of his concern about the way my mother and brother were living their lives at the time and about the nuclear family disbanding. Each member of the family got a plot as a Christmas present. What I tried to do by transferring the plot to M.A.M.A. was to create a monument out of their actual grave plot. The museum would own the piece of land, ensuring no one was buried there, so that in effect it would become a negative monument: the gap between the other plots that spoke to the element that precipitated the gift in the first place. And a way of denying my grandfather writing the end of my plot.

Let’s turn to your mother’s gifts to you. Her will, for one, contains a list of very personal items, such as lingerie — ones which she felt in particular would benefit from and appreciate.

‘But they would always be things she also wanted for herself. The quality of what the gift was always felt to me, in some way. It wasn’t a true gift.’

Deranged?

‘Maybe not deranged but there was a kind of self-interest in giving certain things that were actually meant for her; they weren’t there to connect us. I saw these objects as tools of her that spoke to her taste. It was about expressing difference and it’s through the object that she was able to express that.’

What kind of objects are we talking about? You see her wearing fur in your photographs.

‘Fur, designer dresses, jewellery.’

Is it about glamour?

‘Yes but there’s a literary quality to it, too. It’s a little bit Emma Bovary-ish. Flaubert is also someone Per Bli- gren and I thought about when we were constructing the show at Reception in Berlin. Who’s dictating taste? Who’s providing taste?’

Do you think of your work as always being tasteful?

‘No.’

Is it deliberately not so?

‘In some ways. There’s a tension between the presentation, the structural aspects that inform the work and what might be found there that is difficult to handle and confront.’

I wanted to read you a quote by Nan Goldin: ‘When I started photographing my boyfriend of years ago, Brian, I realized I had no right to photograph other people having sex if I wasn’t prepared to take them of myself too.’ You talk about your mother’s highly sexualized persona but the same is true of you. In the case of personal commissions, for example.

‘Sure. These images are a flipping of the mechanism of the camera. By giving these women I met through the advertisements the camera to photograph me, the object generated is a reversal or inversion of the male gaze. It’s similar in a way to having my mother photograph me. What is female desire and how does it look? It’s interesting to me as well because the male nude has so long been owned by homosexual desire. And so it’s something that’s not…

…explored sufficiently perhaps. Did you feel vulnerable under their gaze?’

‘Yes, and vulnerable in the situation because I had no idea whose places these were that I was walking into. So each time I would go, I would call somebody beforehand and say, This is where I’ll be, if you don’t hear from me in an hour and a half or two hours, then take it from there.’

And did you ever find yourself in a position where you genuinely felt uncomfortable or surprised by the requests?

‘Some of the women were aggressive. The main thing is that it was a conversation. There was this extremely open, vulnerable thing on both sides. But then there is also the image of me or they’ve taken that says that the other has directed it, what their desires might be, what they believe my expec- tations might be. What their apartments look like, their style choices, and then there is the original self-description in the form of the personal ad which provides a limiting framework.’

One question I wanted to ask as a way of wrapping things up is that of humour in your work. You describe Double Blind, in which you confront photographers you took of your ex- wife, Meghan Ledare-Feddelry, with those taken by her current husband, who also happens to be a photographer, as having a bitter humour or playfulness. What is the role of humour in your work more generally?

‘Humour allows one to speak about things that are otherwise very difficult to speak about or that it might seem daunting to speak about. It’s a kind of cut-off, a release valve. It’s also about a sense of absurdity in things. Double Blind is premised on a failure.’

There’s something quite humble about your responses to put your- self that position.

‘The whole structure of the piece has a sense of play to it as well: in a way I’m casting her current husband in a role that I occupied ten years previ- ously and my role may be potentially a forecast of his. There are all of these temporal relationships that are happen- ing too that have a misleading- ness about them but that have the purpose of asking something that I think is really important: And which is?

‘The question of how we deal with loss.’

Agnieszka Grafa is a writer and critic based in New York.

Leigh Ledare: Leigh Ledare, et al.

Venues: Bruxelles.

6 September — 20 November

THE WANDERER

DAVID BERGÉ

He is a photographer without a cam- era. David Bergé takes people in town and shows them a city, from scene to scene. Make your acquaintance with his AistWith.

by Christophe Van Gerrewey

David Bergé (b. 1983) wants to par- ticipate in the art of photography without accepting the seductive and classic characteristics of the medium. As a result, a little over a year ago, the Belgian left his studio behind and reduced his possessions to the size of a suitcase in order to become a ‘professional tourist’. Each project is an incentive to depart for yet another place. In the framework of his residency at Network this spring, together with the Austrian artist Jack Hauser, he organized walks through Aist — something that he has also done elsewhere in Europe over the last few years.

An AistWith, as this crossing of gen- res and activities is called, begins as follows. The participants (in groups of ten or fewer) are collected on a plat- form at the train station. Their guide (David Bergé or Jack Hauser) says to them, ‘Welcome to this AistWith. I will be your guide for the next 90 minutes. I would like to ask you to switch off your mobile phones and remain silent for the entire duration of the walk. Any questions before we leave? If there are none, the walks begins.

The walkers’ frame of reference changes repeatedly over the course of the next hour and a half — and it is this shift that provides the surroundings that makes this project such a rare experience. Their first point of view is artistic: because the AistWith is organized by a con- temporary art centre, the walker is expecting art, artifice, excitement, fiction. The streets of Aist are sub- jected to the gentle paranoia that characterizes every exhibition or museum visit. We must be alert, attentive, searching for meaning, making connections, indictions and intentions. This walk is after all a work of art, and it is expected of us that we expect something.

The first stop in this AistWith lives up to that expectation, in part. David Bergé leads a small group into the Stadtbibliothek, a little library estab- lishment ‘with character’, in which all of the doors of the hotel rooms are open. Are there no guests? Only one room is locked The guide has the key and shows the evidence of temporary habitation: an unmade bed, articles of clothing, a suitcase and a few books. Is this Bergé’s own room? Or is this the first scene of a crime story or a romance?

That trail is not followed through. AistWith turns out not to being a story, instead, it opens possibilities for taking mental photographs of the city and of the world. As the walks pro- gresses, and in fact becomes duller (or more tiring), one’s artistic point of view changes into the attitude of a tourist, for we are now looking at Aist because it is apparently indeed ‘real’, and because here we can see things from reality, which we can take home with us images. Bergé stops, for example, at a parking garage — a concrete lookout platform, the roof of a factory building, offering views out over the city. Equally, a quarter of an hour later, the walk stops off in a residential neighbourhood that — Louis Paul Boon is off course not very far away — comes to a dead end, against a massive industrial park with smoking chimneys cut against a blue sky. An old woman with a cane limps slowly towards us, not under- standing what we are doing here. Do we understand it ourselves? Perhaps we have grown bored by the tourist perspective, and that now becomes a photographic one: after all, something ultimately exists only when it has been photographed. Yet no one takes out a camera or an iPhone…

In the end, the artistic, the touristic and the photographic approaches all become absorbed into another sin- gle, more embracing way of looking at things — the attitude of the wanderer.

In the literature of the world, the walk...
BEAUTIFUL GRUESOME DEATH

LUC DELAHAYE

Is it acceptable to just lean over someone who is in danger of losing their life and take their picture? After years of working as a war photographer, Luc Delahaye is investigating this issue in work within the context of art films. His efforts are generating the requisite lack of understanding.

by Christophe van Eecke

Having earned his reputation as a war photographer for Magnum and Newsweek, the Frenchman Luc Delahaye (b. 1962) is now focusing on the art world. His panoramic and imposing war zone photographs are often disquieting and unclear. On the one hand, they are clearly documentary. On the other, the artist is decisively composing images. Delahaye is testing the boundaries between art and reporting, between fiction and reality.

In 2003, in an interview with Arnett, Delahaye stated that his ambition, was ‘to be as neutral as possible, to record as much as possible, and to let the image revert back to the mystery of reality.' It was a plea for an objective form of photography, because ‘it forces me too much, if I look for a certain effect, I risk missing the photograph.' This kind of neutrality is problematic. A work of art cannot exist without the personal signature or some intervention in content on the part of the artist. Even the decision to take his photographs from a panoramic, frontal perspective is a stylistic choice.

With his ambition for neutrality, Delahaye is repeating the problem of the realism of the late 19th century, a quest to achieve a ‘styleless style' that would represent reality only as it truly is. Because of their large dimensions and keen sense of detail (strongly reinforced by the digital, wide-angle camera he uses), Delahaye's images have more than coincidental echoes of the way in which Gustave Courbet and other realists adopted the massive formats of historical painting in order to paint images of contemporary reality. Delahaye's famous photograph of a dead (or sleeping?) Telfillien fighter lying by a road in the sand demonstrates how the horizon and filling the image with earth colours and a few flaps of grace against which the fighter's clothing is sharply contrasted, unmistakably has the smell, and most of all the massive eeriness, of Courbet.

Delahaye wants to raise several ethical issues in his work, most notably the question of whether it is 'acceptable to lean over someone who is dying and take their picture'. The problem with this is that the photographs themselves offer no answer at all. Carrying out the morally problematic action, however, solely for the purpose of asking that question, is certainly a dubious tactic. Both morally and artistically, introducing such reflections before setting out into a war zone means that the viewer's one-angle lens would be far more honest an approach.

This is where the weakness of Delahaye's photography is exposed. One cannot help but see himself in these photographs, but their meaning is in doubt. One has to question whether the artist or the viewer is the person who wants them. To because of their high aesthetic character, the moral issues connected with these photographs comes up doubly short: they seem hypocritical in light of their aesthetics. At the same time, the moral issue teaches us nothing about the photographs as aesthetic objects. It is in morality that Delahaye is concerned with, there is no intrinsic reason to produce either beautiful or panoramic photographs. Form and content wrench, but not in a productive way.

The debate that Delahaye has woven around his work consequently seems primarily intended to avoid broaching a number of difficult questions, such as whether photography and a saturated can or should be art, or the question of whether an aesthetic discourse around photography as art does not ultimately undermine the journalistic value of the photograph and lead to a cynical aestheticism in how we deal with gruesome reality, amongst other things because that gruesomeness is at the same time the reason for putting the aesthetic skills of the photographer on display. What is the morality of a photographer who sells himself an artist when he does it at the expense of suffering in the world.

Here lies a crucial difference from the historic realism of Courbet, for example, because the suffering figures in Courbet's paintings are a representation of a painful reality. In order to do its work, Luc Delahaye's photography requires real suffering, directly in front of the camera lens. The fact that Delahaye's work has made the step into the art gallery, that its morally problematic character is itself allowed to determine its artistic weight (it is art because it evokes moral questions, but it evokes those questions because it essentially does something immoral), primarily reveals how, in its postmodern relativism, the contemporary art world is no longer capable of keeping its own categories clear. Legitimizing Delahaye's work by angle lens would be far more honest an approach.

WHAT COULD HAVE SEEN

KATJA MATER

This is the art of absorbed time. By registering the stages of a drawing with a camera, Katja Mater presents us with more what photography and drawing nominally reveal of themselves.

by Maxine Kopsa

"Does it ever not work?" I was wondering while Katja Mater (b. 1973) told me about the instructions she had given herself for the parameters of one of her recent pieces. She makes a drawing on a wall in an exhibition space and at different moments during that process takes Polaroid photographs with a technical camera. Six to be exact. There's one shot that marks the moment halfway through, when everything is saturated with black, before flipping and going back the other way to white. When the Polaroids (as unique as the drawing is -- were) are shown in the same space, they're hung on top of the vanished drawing and then there are five; if they're shown separately, on a different occasion, in a different space, there are six; this series includes the shot of the end result, the white wall.

"That can happen, yes. Definitely ... things can not work out. And so what I often do is re-work makes. Again and again."

Why?

Well, because something indeed did not work out. But regardless, it's always a subsequently going, on one hand, a controlled process and, on the other, a chemical reaction. I can't predict three c-prints and a camera's reflection, a type of paper reacting to moisture, how it combines with paint ... they are ones I like because they're the ones that refer to the moment itself, when I was there, when it was 3-D instead of only 2-D; they refer to the material itself.

The ongoing series of numbered works called Density Drawings (started in 2010), are related to the Site Specific Density Drawings described above, but are created by a slightly different procedure: during the making of a drawing (or painting) multiple exposures are taken onto the same negative in such a way as to 'document' the process of the making of. This time though, the final drawing is completely saturated (a monochrome) and the resultant c-print has captured a work that points to what was, but has never really existed. It's as though the photograph learned the art of implying. 'The camera,' Mater explains, 'can let us see what is truly there, but what we cannot perceive with our eyes only.'

Those of us who studied art history in Holland in the 1990s most likely recall Frank Roijers' Appearance and Disappearance (1984). I distinctly remember our opening, a sit not far off here: the idea that something could be and not be at the same time. Roijers' disappearance and reappearance -- you would think -- depended on the viewer's perspective. But it was not about the art itself, about the things themselves willing their own disappearance. Like the print of an acrylic painting ceasing to exist in real time, only to continue their formal passage via the lens of a camera. This is a different, well mixture, namely. metaphorically photographed paper.

Parallel Plans (2011), like other works, plays with the recording or the witnessing of genuine 'events', in that a series of steps in a process are recorded onto film. However, due to multiple exposures and altering perspective, these so-called concrete elements are subsequently thrown into the realm of the intangible, and the result -- a series of two, sometimes three c-prints and an acrylic drawing -- manages to straddle the realms of information and interpretation.

Mater explains her fascination for the technical aspects of photography as...