

Interview: Hans Aarsman

No Photo is Larger than Life

Original Dutch text on p. 117

Hans Aarsman made his breakthrough at the end of the eighties as a landscape photographer with the publications *Hollandse taferelen* (Dutch tableaux) and *Aarsman's Amsterdam*. In 1995, he resolutely ended his career as a photographer because, as he sees it, "life is too large for a photo." At the moment, he has gained quite a reputation with his weekly column *The Aarsman Collection* in the daily *De Volkskrant*, while regularly writing texts for the theatre and being a staunch advocate for "learning how to really look."

In Aarsman's most recent play *Niemand kan het* (*Nobody Can Do It*), actress Carly Wijs incarnates Hans Aarsman and gives his view on life through a "lecture". The images she uses are also on display at the eponymous exhibition at De Brakke Grond in Amsterdam.

EXTRA: As a Dutchman, how did you end up in the Flemish Cultural Centre De Brakke Grond?

HANS AARSMAN: The theatre is what brought me here. A while ago, Belgian actors and playwrights Josse De Pauw and Dirk Roofthoof, together with Dutch actor Tom Jansen collaborated in the production group *Laagland* (Lowland). One day, it so happened that Josse, Tom and I were guests in the same radio programme, and that's where they saw my photo book on Amsterdam with the journal entries. They thought I wrote in that typical monologue style, and they offered to turn it into a performance text. I wrote my first text for Dirk Roofthoof: *De Wijze van Zaal Zeven* (The Sage of Hall Seven). A little later I wrote a piece for Josse on Garry Winogrand, *Ruis* (Rustle), and with Tom I made *Zeg het maar* (Do Tell), about a Palestinian boy who blows himself up on a small square in Jerusalem. Strangely enough, plays like these always do better in Belgium than in the Netherlands.

In the blurb of the De Brakke Grond we can read that this new monologue was your first time doing something autobiographical. In what way then does it differ from the work on Winogrand or The Sage of Hall Seven?

The latter is not really autobiographical except for the fact that my father was a museum guard. But my work on Winogrand is, however. He's always been a kind of

father figure to me. I did not have to project so much of my way of thinking onto his, because we're so close already – so it was a piece of cake really.

But it's true that *Nobody Can Do It* is more explicitly autobiographical. It's partly about my father, but also about my thoughts on photography, which I have already formulated and written down here and there. I'm giving a lot of lectures and then it occurred to me: why not translate this into a theatrical form, with a climax, dramatic action and an end?

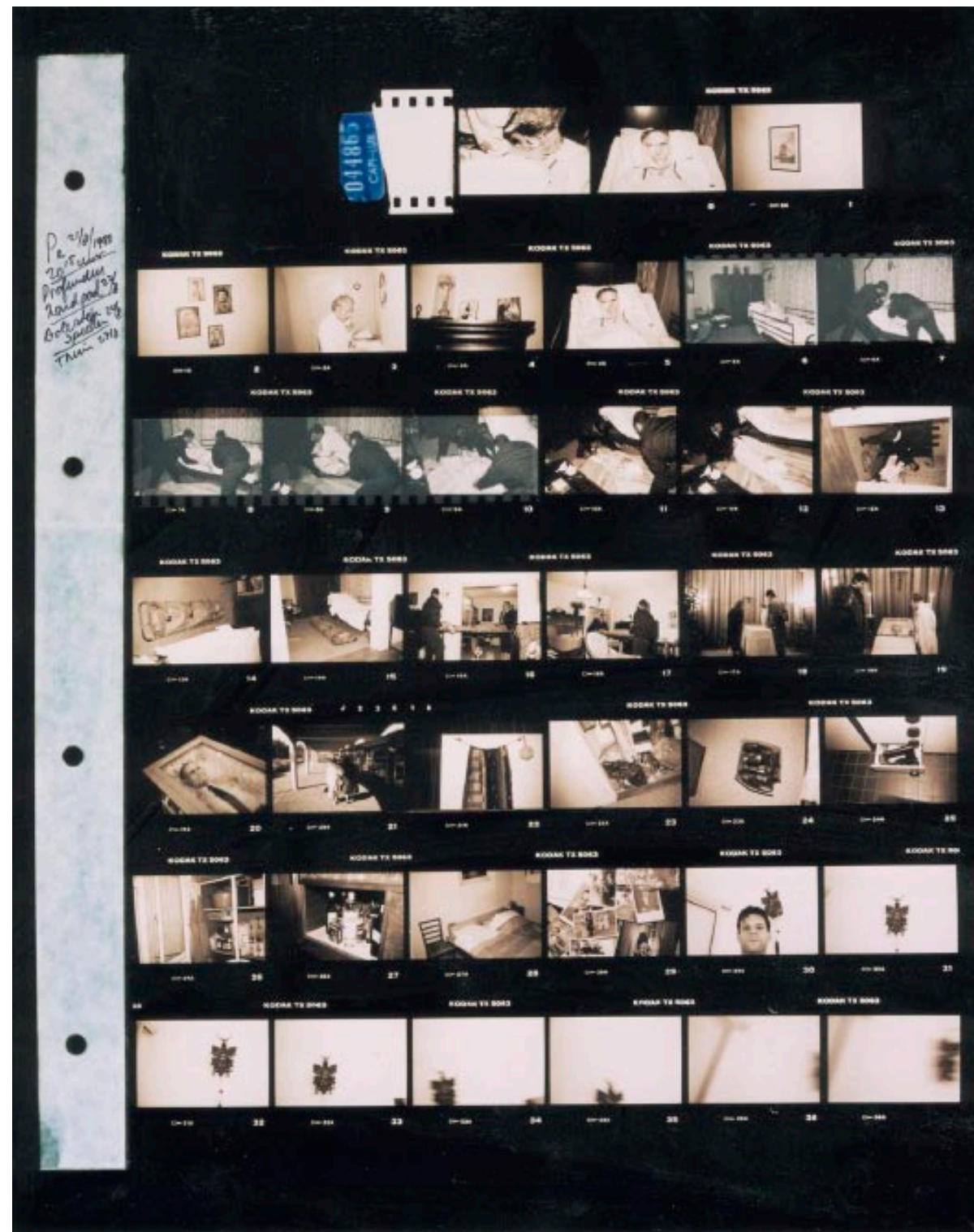
So you see it as an anthology of all those ideas?

Yes, it's really a period I can only now leave behind me. I won't be showing those ashtrays any longer, that's done. I have to say that this play has given me back a lot. It is just like writing a book on a subject you've already been mulling over, and then, suddenly, all those loose ideas come together and take on a definite shape. It is also important that I'm not the one doing the acting, so that the whole can exist outside of yourself, at a certain distance, as a character.

I have always been struck by your role of court jester when watching the Hans Aarsman as portrayed by the media. You are the clown who laughingly tells us the truth. That's why I think it's so bold that the images of the death of your father are up there as well, which makes it quite ambiguous.

I just love having a laugh and relativizing, that's what I'm always after. Describing the death of my father, with Carly Wijs uttering the words, is quite relativizing. In fact, art for me means being able to present what is usually considered as "heavy stuff" in a light and playful way, while being able to present the small things in life as exceptional. It all originates from that same love – my task is to present life as bearable.

I want to oppose people's materialism, the lack of imagination of the rich. You know the type – with their two ugly lions on that concrete wall on their driveway. What kind of culture is this where we don't even know what to do with all that money? It's my view that the task of art is to make people conscious of the things that are worth living for. Maybe it sounds a little pathetic, but that's why I keep doing it. I love poking fun at what people consider being of grave importance,





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while I am equally concerned with people brushing off things as unimportant, because that means they did not take the trouble to have a closer look. And I guess that makes me assume the role of the clown.

I have heard several people say: "I am so glad I'm seeing this, because this suddenly reveals a very serious side of you." The only thing I can say in reply is: "well, actually, if you've really read my pieces you'd see that they are all about death." *The Aarsman Collection* is all about how to live your life meaningfully, about what is worthwhile and what is not. I think that newspapers badger too much and that they overinflate things you should handle with calm and clarity. I am trying to counteract this with my photography analyses. What are we truly seeing? Are they really enriching uranium in Iran, or is something else going on? You can often tell by merely looking closely at the images.

A page of your dad's contact sheets is now displayed at the exhibition, but because of the way you present it you simultaneously shield it off...

What I find inspiring is presenting things as they develop along with your own process of discovery, instead of climbing up the mountain and then going back down afterwards just to tell everyone what you've seen. The real challenge consists in shouting down while you're climbing up; that way you make room for contingency. If you allow that, then I believe that everything will turn out alright in the end.

I've got the impression that your image sometimes obfuscates the message, what truly matters. There is always that focus on that guy who offers his prints for free on the internet, who has stopped photographing, who is saying that nobody can do anything anymore. Did it ever cross your mind to ease off a little?

Sure, but I cannot help it. I have tried you know, but it just won't work. It's just simply what makes me tick. Maybe I need to hire a spin-doctor (laughs).

Your series Photography Against Consumerism was exhibited at the Photographers' Gallery in London. Were they aware of your reputation?

They did not really know who I was. But then I was published in *FOAM Magazine* with the story *Photography as an Antidote to Consumerism*, and they thought the language was beautiful. I am going to give a lecture there soon, and a stage play of mine will be produced in London.

Do you consider your contribution to FOAM Magazine as a new calling?

No, and that is just what's so enjoyable about it. They simply asked me: "We are preparing a special issue on photographers who made some weird changes in their careers, and we immediately thought of you. Are you still photographing?" "No, not really." "Not at all?" "Well, only of the things I am throwing away." And that's how the publication came about. It was never made with a clear intention in mind, and yet there's a concept to it. It's not intended for the world of photography, but simply for me.

You refuse to work form a pre-established concept or idea. But can you exclude that there won't be any more exhibitions in the future?

I could see something like *Nobody Can Do It* happening again, because it grew organically. It was just a case of stringing things together, and working from your gut with your ideas. It is quite a discovery though, that something like this can be made to work. It is only you who can attach importance to the things you do. Being conscious of this allows you to shift the importance of some actions, which in turn enables you to explore unforeseen paths. That's how I felt about this project. In a place like the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam for instance, I would probably have sensed a different atmosphere. Because De Brakke Grond is not strictly a place for photography you can feel more "mellow," and just reason: "Well, people are coming here for the play, they won't seriously go view the photographs, will they?" And that's exactly what happens: no one has reviewed the exhibition. So, De Brakke Grond is an ideal secret chamber.

Do you enjoy the fact that it's remaining in the margins? Or had you secretly hoped that the exhibition would attract more attention?

I think it's the most interesting exhibition I've ever done. But it's only so interesting because it has stayed on the fringes. So there's no reason for me to complain.

Do you feel any affinity for the theoretical discourse on photography?

Mostly I don't find it that "deep." What I hear is a lot of jargon. Theoreticians do not try to formulate their own experiences, what they do is chew over what others have already said. Theorists have this prejudice that if you are not writing like Roland Barthes or Jacques Rancière, it must mean that you've never read them. Well, let me tell you, I've read them and I know what they're trying to say. But I imagined that there had to be a different way to put your thoughts into words, a much more transparent way – simply the way in which life happens. Wisdom and pomposity are so often equated. I intend to write a book on photography where I'll just go into the things I've been contemplating. There's so much there that I'd like to study in depth, but things are simply too hectic at the moment.

To what extent do you think you have an educational role?

I have to admit that I'm somewhat of missionary. There's nothing that exasperates me more than shoddy photography.



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Do you still teach?

Yes, at the *Rijksacademie for Visual Art* in Amsterdam. But mostly it's visiting studios, so it's not really teaching. The resident artists share a similar affinity, a certain sensibility to things that make up existence, and this is what they try and reproduce. I'm good at describing their work. I can just glance at something and say exactly what I see, so that's what we end up discussing. The medium does not really matter, although I do think that the combination of painting and photography is a complete disaster. I am more surprised than anyone that I seem to be closest to painters. Mind you, you'll never catch me at home trying to put a photo on the wall – photographs are not made for walls. Picture postcards are fine, but a photograph framed in a passe-partout, that simply does not fit well with the medium. Photography is too ephemeral to be captured in a frame – it is more like a thought.

I read somewhere that you stopped photographing because writing offered much more perspectives than photography. Have you meanwhile had the feeling that sometimes you're banging your head against a brick wall with writing too?

No, not really. I'm astonished that you can keep writing on the basis of photographs, that something new always pops up. In fact, it's just an excuse for reporting something. In the beginning, *Koekerd (The Prowler)* was a true release, which is no longer the case, but it still enables me to discover new things.



op 20/11/2008 zag Simon Kool op Marktplein
 een exemplaar van de vrachtwagen waar mee
 hij zijn hele jeugd gespeeld had. Na twee
 uur zijn foto's gemaakt, foto van geroep

In spite of all the work that starts from your biography, it seems as if Hans Aarsman himself has retreated into the background, while you get the impression that with artists such as Wolfgang Tillmans or Sophie Calle you're really entering their private lives.

No, Sophie Calle actually constructs a character, a persona. That's what I find irritating about her work – it's just too contrived. It's so weird, but despite the fact that *Dutch tableaux* and *Amsterdam* are autobiographies *pur sang*, nobody seems to believe it. Just take those two books, together with my play: that gives you more than enough to get to the bottom of me. You'll know all there is to know: my love life, family, the things I like, things that disgust me, my favourite dishes... everything. I'm not sure what it is, but there seems to be some mystification at work here.

I truly do not have the feeling that I'm interacting with Tillmans through his work at all. What I like about him is that everything could be a photo of his. But his urge to bare his cock and lay it on the table every few pages, well, that's just a little silly. With Seiichi Furuya's work, which is also on display at the exhibition, I truly sense that I am entering his world. The same holds for Garry Winogrand, although he was such an enigmatic figure. Winogrand has been so misunderstood; they just keep distilling little paintings from his photos. The slightest resemblance

with Cartier Bresson's work is enough to make them happy. Put in a lovely little composition in a nice little frame and you have a photograph. Anyhow, Winogrand never tired of saying that he never developed his negatives after shooting, that he never wanted to view them immediately after. It would take him five years. So, after he died, they found a stash of three thousand undeveloped films. This provoked John Szarkowski into saying that Winogrand had gone mad, because he didn't bother to develop his films during the last five years of his life. But that was just his method; it made it possible for him to create a distance with his work. Winogrand did not look at his own work, although he did say: "I photograph to see what the world looks like in photographs."

Didn't you just tell us that you consider him a father figure?

Indeed. My favourite quote of his is this one: "There is nothing as mysterious as a fact clearly described." Oscar Wilde also had a knack for formulating observations that have a certain infinity about them. And bam! – then suddenly everything seems possible.

Winogrand also said: "I actually try to stay away as far as possible from the subject to the extent that it only just is the subject." That's why you see that woman with her pram traverse the street two crossings further. Through a forest of car window

frames, streetlights and cars, you can just make out what the subject is, over there, in the distance.

So he did have a subject after all?

Sure he had a subject. Women, always women (laughs).

He is one of the few people who used the documentary method, and who had a different worldview than the stereotypical "I love poor people and they must be helped."

Have you ever been to Perpignan? I have. After a day I couldn't put up with it any longer: yet again, one of those small rooms with photos in an old forge, an antique brewery or a former prison filled with photographs in that same 30 x 40 cm format with passe-partout. Those things were everywhere, all over the city – so many of those same forms with a touch of chiaroscuro, with people with sad faces staring down a little.

A wall with flaking paint is of course more photogenic than a solid one. And of course, someone in tattered clothes has more aura than a guy in a sharp suit. That's why types like that are on the lookout for such subjects.

You could equally argue that people are just sensitive to such things and that those photographers merely tap into those emotions to facilitate empathy.

But that's just a way of legitimating your own taste. You see people in complete misery so you think: something has to be done about this. But you are there because you are unable to use that camera in an office with a system ceiling, which is indeed also problematic. It is not easy precisely because you approach photography with the eye of a painter. And what's funny is that you now see professionals shifting to mannerism because of the advance of digital photography – and this just for the sake of distinguishing themselves on the market, which is now overrun with cell phone pictures of collapsing tunnels and other things. They are all so eager to prove that they are the ones who truly understand photography. It feels like the last flare-up of a dying fire if you ask me.

Do you think it's a positive development?

The flood of digital photography? Yes, very positive.

As Joachim Schmidt states, "many of my colleagues think that the digital age is the end of photography, I think it's the beginning. We really start working with pictures now. So what people did with cameras for the past hundred and fifty years were the preliminaries, but now we can start."

Yes, this is how we can break free from the small

sphere of painting. Once, I was driving my car while I saw some guy taking a picture of himself with his cell phone as he was crossing the street. Ten years ago you would not have wasted any film on that. We are so busy with finding subjects. Those images of the Oolong bunny, the one balancing those biscuits on its head – if that isn't the essence of digital photography, then I don't know what is.

At the newspaper the photographers are so panicky about it. They're really convinced their livelihood is at stake. To me, it is a prelude to set out on a new course. If you just embrace the liberation while keeping an eye on where you're heading, then there's no reason why it shouldn't end up giving you more satisfaction.

One quick last question. What are your two favourite photo books?

Mémoires by Seiichi Furuya. The second one does not immediately come to mind... Let me tell you what – let's figure it out over a beer.

In the end, the second turned out to be *A Fine Day*, by another Japanese photographer, viz. Kishin Shinoyama.

WORKSHOP IN DE BRAKKE GROND

Following the theatre monologue and the eponymous exhibition *Niemand kan het (Nobody Can Do It)* by Hans Aarsman, the Flemish Cultural Centre in Amsterdam, De Brakke Grond, organized a workshop for MA photography students on 13 October 2008. Students of the AKV St Joost Breda and the KASK Antwerp viewed the monologue and were given a guided tour of the exhibition. Afterwards, Hans Aarsman gave a workshop on writing about photographs. Each student picked a photograph by another student and wrote a brief text about the image.

THE AARSMAN COLLECTION is a weekly column in the newspaper *De Volkskrant*, where, in his own unique style, Hans Aarsman scrutinizes a press photo. These contributions have also been collected in a book with the same title.

DE KOEKERD (THE PROWLER) is Hans Aarsman's internet column on photography. www.photoq.nl

USEFUL PHOTOGRAPHY is a journal edited by Hans Aarsman, Claudie De Cleen, Julian Germain, Erik Kessels and Hans van der Meer. The last issue (no. 8) was produced in collaboration with Adriaan van der Ploeg. It focuses on pornographic internet sites and "features the opening scenes and celebrates the talents of actors not usually noted for their acting."

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