

## Photography in Public Space

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#### 1. Photography in the arts

How can photography be a profession in today's world when everybody instantly shoots whatever they see? Joachim Schmidt makes a statement with his series "Other people's Photographs"<sup>1</sup> (*Durden p440*) about other people sharing online their photographs of the most trivial subjects. By being all copies of each other, they lack creativity. The installation of "24 hours in photos"<sup>2</sup> (*Durden p448*) of Eric Kessels makes the pile of images on the Internet tangible. Smartphones and apps, like Instagram or Snapchat, encourage all of us to contribute to this visual explosion. This quantity and high speed are in strong contrast with the difficulty of using with an analogue camera some decades ago. Shooting a snapshot on film was expensive and you could only admire your result after hours or even days, after this film was developed in the lab.

This technological turn transforms the role of the photographer without us being aware of it. Most photographers are only watching these changes passing by. A few are trying different techniques to spend more time on the process of making. Because it takes little effort to push the small button, or the screen, and send your photo into the World Wide Web. This convenience evokes an important question. What is the meaning and value of a picture, and even a photographer, now everybody can publish his pictures today?



The snapshot also lost its value as an expression of art. It does require some extra effort to be different. In this article I try to give an insight on the role that a photographer can take in the margin of the multimedia landscape. Some artists try to express their emotions instead of reproducing what they see. It demands an alternative usage of their art form, by experimenting and questioning the principles of this medium.

1 - Durden, M. (2014). *Photography Today*. London, UK: Phaidon Press Ltd.

2 - Durden, M. (2014). *Photography Today*. London, UK: Phaidon Press Ltd.



The rayograms of Man Ray<sup>3</sup> (*Hacking p199*) were innovative in 1922-1928 but turned into a traditional example of the avantgarde in photography. Instead of using his camera, he placed an object directly on photosensitive paper, which created odd pictures. Also the abstract images of Liesbet Gruppings achieve the same estranged feeling however by using more modern techniques. Gruppings explains her own work.

*“Trough (unconventional) use of photographic material, such as the implantation of a photo-slide in a flowerpot, a stroll with a pinhole camera, or the opening of a JPG-file in Microsoft Word, I generate images that question the codes of today’s photography.”<sup>4</sup>*

However abstract pictures can be found easily outside the art world today. Instagram and other creative apps, like Diana

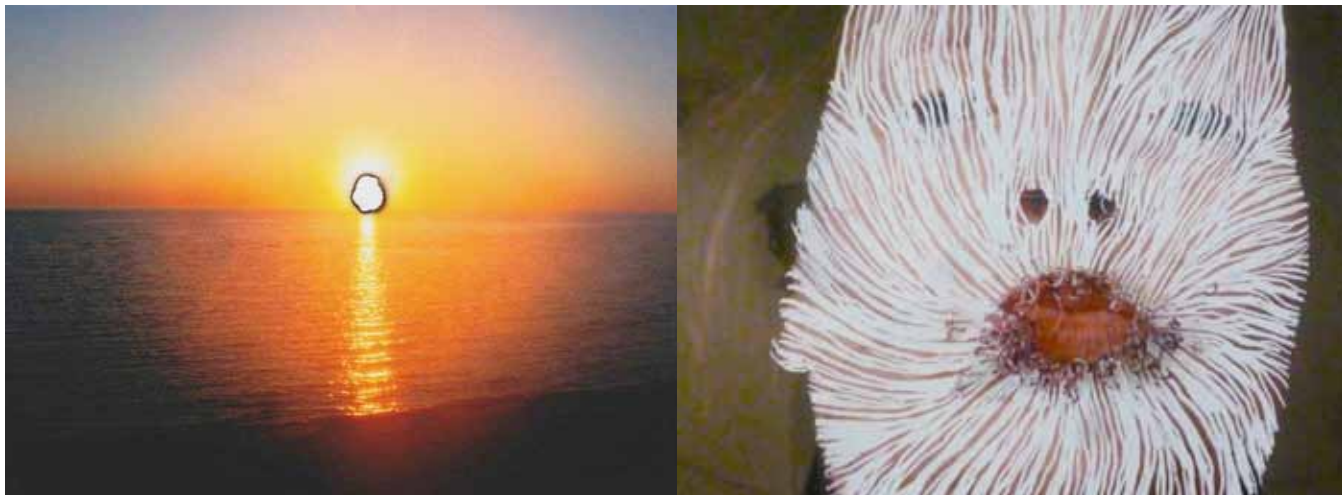
3 - Hacking, J. (2013). *Fotografie in het juiste perspectief*. Kerkdriel, Nederland: Librero bv. // Hacking, J. (2015). *Photography: The Whole Story*. London, UK: Thames & Hudson.

4 - Gruppings, L. (2015). Preface. Retrieved from <http://www.liesbetgruppings.be/tekst/1.pdf>

Photo<sup>5</sup>, allow everybody to place a filter easily on top of their instant picture to turn it into an outlandish frame. So what could be the added value of using photography in the arts? Therefore the medium needs to go beyond abstract expressions.

Let us forget about recording reality with the camera, like millions of other people do on social media. Thankfully a photo exists of several elements that can be further investigated. The recent trend ‘material turn’ opens up new ways to obtain freedom. The material of the print can be explored to discover a new reality. This extension of the creative process can be as simple as emphasizing a sunset with a cigarette like Emma Wieslander does (*Mijn Vlakke Land – Over fotografie en landschap, FoMu, 2015*). It can also be more violent like Anne Van de Pals who scrapes the surface to deform a portrait (*Museum De Pont, 2016*).

5 - Diana Photo. The fastest double exposure app in the world. Retrieved from <http://dianaphotoapp.com>



Michèle Matyn<sup>6</sup> made a more challenging move in the exposition “In Situ/Ademgaten” (*Breathing Holes*, 2016) in M HKA by transforming her picture into a sculpture. Hanna 6 - M HKA (2018). Michèle Matyn – Ademgaten. Retrieved from <https://www.muhka.be/nl/programme/detail/421-in-situ-mich-le-matyn>

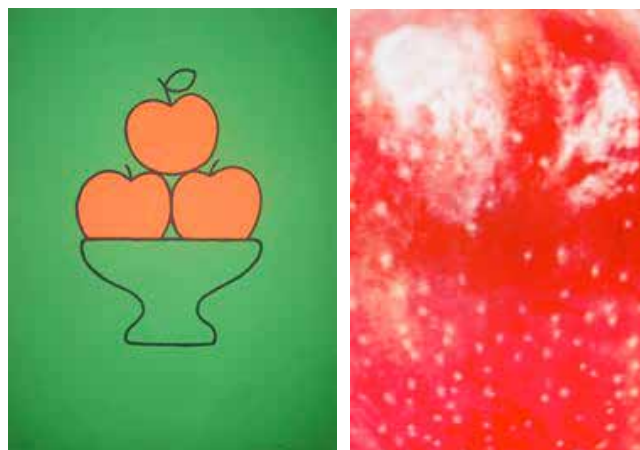
Whitacker embraces the mistakes of the camera. Therefore she merges the technique in combination with the use of an analogue camera. The strength of her works results of the influence of the medium textile. Whitacker applies the same structure and repetition in her work.





When focussing on the physical material of photography, a lot of possibilities are possible to approach the medium in a different way. The camera evokes a distance between the picture and the artist that always manifests in the work. Yet the technique of material turn gives the possibility to the artist to be physical present in the artefact. This way of working closes the gap between the camera, the subject and the photo. In my own work this resulted in the series “Wunderkammer/Nooit Gezien”. The inspiration resulted from the vision of people with dementia. Their reality is a reshaped version of our world. As it is not possible to register what they see, it requires the manipulation of the prints and abuse of the camera to give shape to their perception. It started with small actions like misusing the camera while photographing. After a while I managed to deconstruct a print of 3 meters high to reconstruct it to a new reality.

“Our brain constructs reality. While looking you our doing many things, you translate everything. You bring structure in the work that you see.” This quote of Immanuel Kant in “Critique of Pure Reason”<sup>7</sup> (Boon & Steenhuis p13) directs to the principles of Gestalt. At a high speed our brains translates different elements into one whole. And as a human being we want to give meaning to this object.



In our childhood the deducted images of Dick Bruna taught many of us that something red and round is an apple. We are repeating this behaviour during our whole life. When we see a picture we consider at the object as a reality. We see the apple. We never think “this is a picture of an apple” even when this is in fact what we see. The viewer is forced to look in a new way at the image when a picture manages to break free from this habit. For example by placing the photo in a new setting. For this reason René Magritte wrote “Ceci n’est pas une pomme” in his painting. Because you are looking at the image, not the apple.

When you see another work of Wunderkammer/Nooit Gezien you become aware that you are watching ‘a picture’ of an apple. You can observe the pixels on the surface of the apple, which keeps the viewer reminding of beholding a photo (see *image at the right*). Or the spectator can notice that the sculpture made of a picture (see *image page 3*). Because you are not used to see a picture in this shape, you are obliged to give a new meaning to what your eyes perceive. Giving meaning to objects and images became an automatism since birth. When witnessing the work “Wunderkammer/

<sup>7</sup> - Boon, M & Steenhuis, P.H.. (2009). *Filosofie van het kijken*. Rotterdam, NL: Lemniscaat b.v.



Nooit Gezien” you lose this habit. This experience is exactly how the visual perception of people with dementia erodes. They have to rebuild all the different elements into a new composition. And create a new reality. For this reason they experience our world in a completely different way.

## 2. Relationships

Without doubt there are other ways to explore photography than abstraction or material turn. We forgot that the camera creates relationships from the start. It connects the person behind the camera with the world around him. The personal way of looking at the world is translated into the style of the photographer. We discover the world through the eyes of Stefan Vanfleteren or Martin Parr when we look at their pictures. As their personality is much stronger than the object, it takes over the diversity of reality. Whatever appears in front of their camera, it will be transformed into their subject.

An interesting gap is the creation of relationships. Photography is hardly used to evoke multidimensional

interactions. The pictures of the photographers mentioned above are based on a one-way relationship, due to the photographer his personal registration of the world.

What would happen if you redefine “relationship” according to the manifest of Kandinsky<sup>8</sup>? (*Kandinsky p45*) In this writing the artist challenges painters to approach their medium in a new way. Instead of painting all the details of an apple to recreate reality, the focus should be on the different elements of painting. Like Matisse investigated “colour” and Picasso was obsessed by “shape”. This analysis brought these artists to the essence of their medium. The investigation of the components pushed the development of painting. What could happen when you investigate the element “relationship” in photography? Which possibilities would arise? For centuries we used photography to express the love affair between us and the world, conquering exotic civilisations like National Geographic. What would take place if photography is used to connect people?

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8 - Kandinsky, W. (1912). *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*. München, D: R. Piper & Co.





The Allegory of the Cave of Plato distinguishes the elements that can play a role in this relationship. The camera unites two worlds, the one of the photographer and another person who might live in another world. The photographer Tim Dirven takes you on his personal journey in the exhibition "Karkas". As a viewer you can only observe this world. This places you as spectator in a passive role according to the Cave of Plato. The photographer (2) records the reality (1) around him and translates only a fraction of this in his picture (3).

This process of selecting a part of the subject is named 'framing' in visual terms. As a result the viewer (4) perceives the picture (3) as real, without being aware of the complete setting. So the picture becomes his reality. The whole process takes place in a linear hierarchy from reality (1) to the interpretation of the spectator (4). From the position of the observer it is hard to be aware that two steps are in between the photograph (3) and reality (4). This also happens by the media who offer the public a specific view on the world that is often in conflict with reality. Already a lot of research exists on this procedure of image-forming, especially by the mass media.

In a museum or gallery a guide or catalogue is usually provided to enlighten the visitor about the difference of reality (1) and the artwork (3). It is still rare to have a direct contact between the photographer (2) and the public (4). Artist talks are one way to offer the perspective of the creator, which explains the success of De Donkere Kamer<sup>9</sup>. Because the public gets to know the personal story of the photographer. Nevertheless the communication takes place in one way, leaving the spectators in a passive state.

9- De Donkere Kamer. Retrieved from <https://ddk-live.com>

This one way interpretation of the world takes place in all the visual arts. It is important to keep in mind that the viewer will easily perceive a picture as his own reality. A photo behaves like a window on the world. Especially when the result looks like a neutral depiction. The spectator takes this image for real because the operator is considered to be a camera that registers the world. This perception of photography is the result of history. In contrast with a painting or a sculpture where the manipulation of the operator is more easily visible in the strokes and material. Also the photographer manipulates the reality with the camera, which many spectators forget.

According to the vision of Kandinsky the elements of the medium should be used in a different way. Let us focus on creating a dialogue between all the elements, which makes space for interaction. For example the artist (2) and the spectators (4) work together to translate reality (1) into an artwork (3). The philosopher Jacques Rancière applies this on theatre in his book "The Emancipated Spectator"<sup>10</sup>. (Rancière p15-17) In 'good' theatre the spectator obtains an active role that eliminates the wall between the reality of the artist and the artwork. In his vision there is no fixed position, hierarchy or boundaries. Our society strives for equal opportunities and equality, but the artist world is still far behind. Most artists are locked up in their ivory tower, hiding for the public, for many different reasons. Some of them have no idea how to start this interaction. Others are fighting to keep their superior role in our society that was allocated to artists for centuries. However the community of artists should be emancipated like all other parts of our society. And the viewer should play an active role in the arts

10 - Rancière, J. (2008). *Le spectateur émancipé*. Paris, F: La Fabrique éditions.

because they are part of this society.

The keyword of this emancipation is vulnerability. The artist needs to admit to the public that he or she cannot gather all the knowledge necessary to create the artwork by himself/herself. Even more, the artist is in need of the public to understand the world. Of course the public does not possess all the knowledge too. Therefore this game of not knowing creates a dialogue between the reality, the artist, the artwork and the public. The sharing of knowledge and the experiments to gain this information leads to a common artwork.<sup>11</sup> (*Rancière p19*)

In the work *Wunderkammer/Nooit Gezien* this collaboration originated from a necessity. Literature and science could not provide the answers about the subject. Science did not wonder about the effects on daily life of the visual perception of people with dementia. It forced me to go back the origin of this subject, so to speak the people with (young)dementia. Conversations but also experiments resulted in works that reflected their invisible world.

From the start we, the people with (young)dementia and myself as an artist, had no idea how to explore this subject or which knowledge was needed for this investigation. I was also forced to question my medium photography because it was not able to produce their vision by the traditional way of taking pictures. This ignorance was our 'common ground', which became the source of our shared exploration.

How hard I still try, I cannot photograph something from my personal perspective. I gaze towards my camera without inspiration. My work always translates the perspective of someone else. For this reason time plays an important role, to get to know the person before the artwork even can manifest. It creates space and interaction that transcends their gaze into my work. So I mostly visualize hidden worlds. And I also need this collaboration to experience what they see.

The same process took place, but with less consciousness, in my earlier work. The series *Vocho Verde* required getting to know the Mexican people and the role of the green Beetle taxi in the society of Mexico City. I needed to understand

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11 - Rancière, J. (2008). *Le spectateur émancipé*. Paris, F: La Fabrique éditions.

the value of this object to picture their culture. I also often felt a social worker or a good friend of the inhabitants of the *Flemish Interiors*. I spend a lot of time getting to know these people before I even took one picture. Photographing their interior was only a part of this project. It was essential to observe and absorb their interior as well as their personality. The pictures were reproduced in life-sized format so the viewer could sense all the details. All these elements enabled to observer to construct the interior of his/her (grand) parents in his mind. The photograph performed as a catalyst to evoke this experience. Also in this project the reality, the artist, the picture and the public were considered as equal so new relationships could arise. (As visualised in image 3 of the *Allegory of the Cave of Plato*.) The spectators shared their memories with each other while watching the pictures and played an active role that is also pursued by Rancière.

### 3. Case study

Interaction was already achieved through intuition in my previous work. The main difference with my recent project *Streetwalk* was exploiting interaction in different ways. The M Museum of Leuven started this project based on their vision to take up a bigger role as an institution to stimulate art outside the venue of a museum. They started a collaboration with different partners to experiment with "community art"<sup>12</sup>. To achieve cooperation, a framework was set to ensure interaction between the four elements in the *Cave of Plato*. The public could experience the difference between the artwork (3) and reality (1). As well as the artist considered the public (4) as a part of reality (1). This attitude plays an important role. This makes the artist aware that his inspiration arises from his personal history and the surroundings he still lives in. The original interpretation of the *Cave of Plato* beholds an invisible wall between the public and reality. But an artist should see the public, the artwork and himself as part of reality.

The interaction between the four elements came into existence by different activities. This varies from a personal meeting between the public and the partners. And also by

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12 - "Community art is the creation of art as a human right, by professional and non-professional artists, cooperating as equals for purposes and to standards that they set together, and who processes, products and outcomes cannot be known in advance." François Matarasso



embracing a new expression of photography, which was also fresh for the artist. The final project was not a simple picture, as the elements time and space were used to cultivate participation. Starting from the first step of taking the picture of a certain location in Leuven, just as in the next step of sketching the composition. This finally resulted in a manipulated reproduction of the original image.

It required each partner to move outside their comfort zone to succeed in this interaction. In doing so everybody had to help each other. This dependency, and also the fragility, of each participant (the public, the artist, the artwork and the society/reality) created a bond that shaped the artwork.

The word ‘public’ can be confusing because it has multiple meanings. It’s important to state that we can speak of two different publics in this case study. At first there are the people who are participating in the collaboration, in this case the children of the school Mater Dei. Secondly the indirect public who witnesses the work in the street, like residents and occasional passers-by. For now I refer in this chapter to

the children who were involved in the creation of the artwork.

Since kids are vulnerable and independent because of their nature, they require an adult to escort them to be part of our society. For most of them this narrows down their world to school or family. Thanks to the artwork they become visible as an individual in the public space. Together with the artist they move outside their safe place. In other words the artwork transforms thanks to their vulnerability.

Also the artist needs to expose his fragility by admitting that he/she doesn’t possess all the knowledge to create the artwork. Jacques Rancière stipulates this equality of intelligence in “The Emancipated Spectator”<sup>13</sup> (*Rancière p 15-17*). To achieve this interaction and evenness, the artist needs to obtain a mind-set of depending on the other person.

For the same reason also the artwork needs to be vulnerable. Therefore the “material turn” in photography manifests in

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13 - Rancière, J. (2008). *Le spectateur émancipé*. Paris, F: La Fabrique éditions.





this work. This method mainly focuses on textures to create a new reality of the image. By placing these pictures in public space they are exposed to external influences, which reveals their fragility. The prints are subjected to the surroundings and other users of the space as the prints are glued onto the sidewalks. The picture adapts to the structure of the surface. In another case the shadow play of the trees nearby add an extra layer to the image. These incidents establish a dialogue between the artwork (3) and reality (1).

Only the fourth element 'society' of the Cave of Plato has not yet being described. But also the community is being placed in a delicate state by showing tensions in the neighbourhood. The work at the playground of Groefplein looks very innocent however it visualises the stress between the habitants and the children. Since a lot of children play outside when the weather is sunny, the residences are often annoyed by noise pollution. For this reason the memory behind this image involves racist comments and even the presence of the police who intervened between both parties.

Besides the fragility of the four elements, also different interactions between them lead to the creation of the work of art. This causes impulses on the society that results in small changes. So the impact of the artist is much bigger than the work itself.

Let us have a look on the role of the indirect public, like the residents and passers-by. They recognize the locations, social issues and history that are layered in the images. These identifiable elements stimulate the neighbourhood. An extra effort was made to activate this public to obtain a relationship with the artwork and the direct public, namely the children of Mater Dei. For this reason each work was accompanied with a QR-code. Scanning this item showed a YouTube-video where the child explains his work and memory about this place. In this way they take up a part of the role of the artist. This non-linear communication offers new insights and changes in society, which results again into a source of inspiration for the artist.

#### 4. Future research questions

Thanks to the smartphone everybody can instantly register the world around him. This puts everybody in the role of 'photographer'. As a reaction on this, several photographers and artists identify their selves by approaching their medium in other ways like abstraction or 'material turn'. An alternative way to use photography can be found in analysing the Allegory of the Cave of Plato. By focusing on the creation of new relationships, the artist can bring democracy between himself and the spectator. In doing so the artist can elevate his work into an interactive dialogue between the reality, the artist, the artwork and the public.



At a first glance this vision appears disorderly. Because this approach of equality and interaction offers many possibilities. This means that the project Streetwalk with M Museum is a trial with involving children of one school. It might be an utopia to involve every person of a community in the creation of an artwork. Although Coming World Remember Me<sup>14</sup> of Koen Vanmechelen does come close with a collaboration involving 600 000 people. Each sculpture is made by hand by one person and represents one of the 600 000 victims of the First World War.



Further it remains a challenge to activate a public that is not involved directly in the artwork. Like passers-by who stumble upon the work without being aware of any context. How can I bring my work to the public so they can understand this, without the need for a guided tour? The cooperation with a selection of the society is not enough to communicate with the public. So it is an obligation of the artist to keep in mind

14 - Vanmechelen, K. Coming World Remember Me. Retrieved from <http://www.comingworldrememberme.be>

the translation that the ignorant spectator could make of your work. And also how can you stimulate the spectator to relate your artwork with others and our society? This might be a quest for life. At least this article is another step to establish a dialogue with the public.

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