

# Complicating the 'We'

*'Staying with the complexities does not mean not acting, not doing research, not engaging in some, indeed many, unequal instrumental relationships; it does mean learning to live and think in practical opening of shared pain and mortality and learning what that living and thinking teach' - Donna Haraway'*

The air is quiet and expectant as I enter the small, impromptu studio, darkened by black curtains, and occupied only by a chair, some simple studio lights and a camera on a tripod. Toos Nijssen follows me in, and seeing my awkwardness, directs me to the chair. I am not told how to sit, where to face, what to do with my hands. I just sit. Out of habit, I direct my gaze into the camera lens. Nijssen presses record. The red light on the camera begins to flash. I am left to myself, the rhythm of my breathing and the thoughts that inevitably begin to flow when having just to be by oneself for ten minutes.

"I try to create a space of clearness, of openness, so that somebody can feel it too", Nijssen says of her recording studio that she has assembled and dismantled in a variety of locations, from museums to old boiler rooms to private homes.<sup>2</sup> "I don't want to abuse people, I admit I use people, but I never have the feeling that I do something with them which they don't want to do. I just give them the possibility to open up and show what they are in reality."

This unique complexity is pivotal to Nijssen's portraiture approach: creating a discomfort, a disorientation, but also a realm of possibility as she befuddles the traditional relationship between sitter and artist, documentarian and subject. Since 1995, Nijssen has been negotiating the emotional tangibility of self-presentation through video portraiture – collating an archive of over 1000 portraits ranging from five to sixty minutes long, and resulting from over fifteen projects. The breadth and depth of this archive includes Nijssen's work with refugees living in camps in the Netherlands (SHELTER = to hide/hiding place/to take shelter/to be hidden, 2008) and joint projects juxtaposing portraits of people on a busy shopping street in Istanbul and in the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (*.. biz ..biz kimiz*, 2005 and *be my guest*, 2006). The personal moments she records with film are not captured or frozen. They are framed, ongoing moments within a landscape of human experience.<sup>3</sup>

The "group portraits" emerging from Nijssen's studio are always displayed in such distinctive ways, as projections onto windows in a public square or on monitors, using

a circular logic in a more formal exhibition space. Recently, Nijssen has added to her installations static landscape shots of tranquil yet arresting scenes from around the Dutch countryside that correlate in a more psycho-geographical way with the video portraits. Each presentation of portraits befits the context within which Nijssen worked, all with a view to reflecting upon the particular realities of the people involved and Nijssen's own intuitions.

It was in 1991 that Nijssen first began making portraits, but of herself. She had previously worked in a women's house called *Blijf van Mijn Lijf* where the need to express one's sense of self and belonging became imperative. The idea of "coming home [was the] starting point of the process in my work ... the feeling that I still exist!" From here, Nijssen delved into a milieu of networks where she was invited and where she invited herself to revisit the notion of "being a human being in a group of people who were not connected to each other, but through my work I could connect ..."

It is the sameness of the individuals who sit in front of Nijssen's camera to herself that motivates her ongoing recording. The facial twitch, the incessant blinking, the awareness of being watched by someone somewhere, all enable Nijssen as well as the viewers of these archives (be they participants or completely different audiences) to identify themselves in the humanness on screen.

These moments of familiarity are ruthless. The video portraits play on and on in Nijssen's installations, often in unavoidable, life-size scale. Sometimes words are spoken, as in the recent project in Almere-haven (in collaboration with Ron Eijkman) where residents spoke to the camera about their ideas of Home (2009). However, most portraits are conducted in silence and it is these that Nijssen feels are the most powerful sites of confrontation, in a media environment of overwhelming vocalisation. And indeed the experience of sitting or standing in silence, while being filmed or while watching a video portrait, culminates in an exposure which people often "run away from", says Nijssen. But it is only when challenging our fears of surveillance or our postmodern hang-ups about regarding the Other, that Nijssen feels "we are getting somewhere". After all, as another of her projects asks, *.. en wij .. wie zijn wij?* (2005).

Yes, the relationships within Nijssen's nexus of sitters and viewers may be unequal or demised as instrumental, yet it is the unfinishedness or ongoing nature of this recording

of a quiet community of faces which teaches new ways of thinking about ‘pain and mortality and learning’ as expressed in my opening citation of Donna Haraway.

“Sometimes,” Nijssen says, “I am working in my studio and I screen a part of a project, just to look at them and to have them around. This sounds strange, I admit, but sometimes ... I see somebody and I think it’s the person which I have in my archive, made a portrait of, but it’s not this person, yet they look so similar, not from the outside but more from other sides”. The final facet of Nijssen’s work, which I have left ’til last, is her drawing. These modest offerings, usually darkened yet familiar shapes in watercolour or water pencil transmit the artist’s own monologue and “bring into balance” the video portraits

screened around them. “In a way my drawings are like a diary, they are the most honest about me and what I feel or think.”

Nijssen’s installations of fidgeting, sighing, or staid individuals on screen, her drawings and landscapes, as well as the introduction of a carpet or some other piece of more domestic significance, give her a “sort of freedom” to reveal an interior world based on exteriors and the projected identities of those she comes into contact with. It is the strength of her own vulnerability within this “ideal world” she facilitates, that invites us to stay and look, to see and understand what our human condition is and where we, whoever that is, belong.

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<sup>1</sup> *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> All direct quotes taken from the writer’s correspondence with the artist, July 2009.

<sup>3</sup> This phrase, ‘ongoing moments’, I must attribute to photography writer, Geoff Dyer who, in his key text *The Ongoing Moment*, Pantheon Books, 2005, isolated various detailed tropes such as walking sticks, benches, signage – stating that it is these moments which are the most interesting connectors between works made by recorders of realities throughout the development of art photography in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.