

Understanding the relationship with my father through photography

The photograph, which concentrates on the relationship with my father, came from a process of understanding him and my personal relationship with him.

My father, Toon Hageman (11 March 1943), is mildly autistic and often doesn't behave socially that (Dutch) society is used to. When the project started in the summer of 2013, it derived from an interest to make a documentary about my father in the way I personally see him and to give him credit.

He is a very generous man and good at heart. People tend to make use of his goodness for their own benefit, when he helps they often don't respect and value him. The idea of documenting him arose from an urge to protect him from this. Initially my aim was to make a portrait about a person who has different views and behavior. I wanted to produce a universal documentary which would allow people to broaden their perspective.

I have the feeling he often helps others to create a value for himself. This is a very beautiful and interesting aspect; it also has a beautiful ambiguity to it. In documenting I tried to put emphasis on this. Next to that he has a peculiar way of looking at how social relationships work and has paranoid ideas about institutions.

In the process I discovered a lot about his life. The documentary started off being quite abstract and distant. Along the way, my interest changed into personally understanding him better. I realized that actually it wasn't about creating a documentary at all but about my personal relationship with him.

Documenting

The process of documenting him started off with filming and observing how he acts and how others react to him in different social contexts. From thereon I started gathering more. I documented his surroundings, I photographed his house and belongings, took pictures of his body, I recovered undeveloped films. I put all of this together and just saw where it would take me.

Photographing derives from a hunch; an intuition of what could be interesting. In gathering I sometimes accidentally came across topics that are interesting. Once he gave me a couple of undeveloped film roles. When I developed them it turned out that that some hadn't been developed for up to 20 years.

Different parts of the documentation give insight in different aspects and opinions of my father. In some of the photographs you can see the dirt in his house, you can see he doesn't think cleaning is important. Parts give insight in my own perspective. For example; when I realized that it was also about my fear of his deterioration and vulnerability I became interested in his physical state, so I photographed his body.

Through documenting and discovering I analyzed and re-contextualized my view on his life.

Mystification

During the process I noticed that ideas I had of him didn't coincide with reality. It started off with ideas of his knowledge about physics and science and later it seemed that there were more fields in which my idea of him was different from reality.

Since I was a little girl I glorified my father. I thought he was very intelligent and that he was knowledgeable in, photography, physics, electronics, technology etc. all fields that he is interested in. In the process I noticed that, although he is knowledgeable in certain fields, in some he bases his facts on just a whim. I had mystified and mythologized him. The documentation became a de-mystification. I became annoyed by his shortsightedness, his concluding.

The mystification of him and his life, the childish glorification of a father, and the de-mystification of that is a very interesting aspect of the documentation process to me.

For example; I always had the feeling he was afraid to become a professional photographer. It turned out that it was due to the fact that you have to work hard to become a professional and get credit for photographs. His main interest lies in the technical aspect of photographing and in that sense it is better to keep photography as a hobby.

At a certain point I didn't glorify his behavior and knowledge anymore in stead there came annoyance. Wondering why didn't he make more of his life using his capacities?

Deterioration

Since I was a teenager there has been a fear of him dying because he is older than most fathers are. Documenting him is confronting myself with a deterioration process, the fact that he is growing older, getting weaker.

I was confronted with the fact his energy level is not the same as it used to be, he cannot lift so much weight anymore and while playing with his grandson he doesn't have the same energy as he had with his own children.

My father doesn't take care of himself. There was a lump on his belly which turned out to be a rapture. The lump were the intestines hanging on the outside of his stomach wall. He didn't have the lump investigated for a couple of months. He waits

too long to go to the doctor because he often thinks it is unnecessary. There were strange patches on his skin which he didn't investigate for a long time. When he did get that investigated there was a scare of skin cancer. If a person is not taking care of himself, does not go to a doctor, the threat of dying becomes more apparent when there might actually be something wrong. It is as though I am capturing him before he dies.

The photograph

For me the image does not stop at the edges of the frame. The image continues in the relationship I have with my father. When I realized that the photographs were about my relationship, I wanted to place myself in the photograph.

We altered his living room so that it was sanitized from all the clutter but still his room. To make a pure feeling, let the room speak, to create a frame, made of his house, for our bodies. It became a setting in which, the real is transformed into representation. In here we almost act.

In the photograph I focus on the childish longing and the friction there has become with the de-mystification. Positioning our bodies was finding out where the behavioural boundary was. But also about finding out what the right body narrative is for acting out the focus. In the end the photograph became a mystified realm which is slightly uncanny but similar to my own reality.