

Reviews
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Review.

Introduction As long as photography has been around it has been compared to painting, mostly in favour of painting and photographers where mugged by calling them lazy painters. However photography in the end has been victorious and won itself a place in the world of arts. It has even come that far that museums now are exhibiting photographs taken by painters that were never made to be showed as pieces of art as highly artistic photography. For example the exhibition George Hendrik Breitner 1857-1923 Pioneer of street photography in the Kunsthal Rotterdam.

As mentioned Breitner was a painter and not a photographer, the photographs he made (about 3000) were found after his death in 1923 and are now being exhibited in a large number in the Kunsthal Rotterdam.

The exhibition contains a large number of photographs, a few paintings and some drawings. Roughly half of the photographs on exhibit are old vintage prints made by Breitner himself the other photographs are contemporary prints made from the original negatives. The whole exhibition is divided in different themes such as: the old city, people, etc. which all have their own little introduction text.

One section shows the only photographs that can be linked directly to a particular painting; the three photographs show workers loading dirt from a ship in a wheelbarrow and the painting shows the same image as the photographs. But Breitner made also sketches in a notebook also exhibited alongside the photographs and the painting.

The new prints made from the old negatives have a much higher contrast than the old prints made by Breitner. The new prints have rich dark blacks and are glued to aluminium and hang from the walls without a frame. These in contrast to the old photographs which are all framed

behind glass and have sometimes so little contrast that the scene is just visible. It's very obvious that, through these new printed contemporary framed photographs, the curator of the exhibition wants to emphasize that the photographs are works of art and not merely documents made by a painter to help him paint. The title of the exhibition is quite straightforward about this: Pioneer of Street Photography. The new prints help in seeing it that way; they make the pictures look like contemporary photographs made with old techniques, something that is not so uncommon these days. But the question remains if it is interesting to see these photographs as street photography *avant la lettre*?

To me the new prints are not that interesting they don't bear the same softness and depth as the old prints made by Breitner. But more important these pictures were probably never made as being works of art but moreover as documentation and study material. In the exhibition two large paintings are being shown of the vivid street life in Amsterdam, what struck me about these paintings was the way some of the people tent to at the viewer (as looking at a photographer) like they are photographed. Also the poses of the people in the streets overlap with the poses of the people photographed by Breitner. I think that Breitner used these photographs as study material for painting, cutting out single characters to compose a new painting instead of just copying one photograph and one photo truly supports my idea because it has a grid drawn over it (which makes it easier to copy a photograph to a drawing or painting). The old photographs might have been in a better shape when they were just made but their low contrast and the slightly soft focus give them so much more atmosphere than their getting quite close to the paintings. The atmosphere in both the paintings and in the old photographs makes them into works of art, the new printed photographs are just photographic documents made to look like contemporary street photography.

My work Recently I had an exhibition of my own work in a gallery in Amsterdam for which I used a similar way of presenting my pictures. For this series of photographs, all depicting façades of buildings in a

rather abstract way, I chose to show them without frames or white boarders. Quite the same way as the new prints in the Breitner exhibition with exception that my photographs were printed on a matt paper with matt ink which end in the result of a picture without any glossiness to it. Therefore it's not so surprising that some people reject to them with: 'Wow it looks almost like a painting'. Hearing this a few times I thought to myself: 'should I see this as a compliment or not?' What is the status of my work? Is it important that they are photographs or just works of art?

The fact that I didn't frame my photographs had nothing to do with the fact that maybe looked more contemporary that way, more like photographs. I wanted to present the photos not as loose singles but as a series and frames would create barriers between them and the gallery space in which they were exhibit.

My decision to print on matt paper didn't start of with the idea to make my photographs look like paintings, but after trying different kinds of glossy and matt papers I ended up choosing for a matt fine art paper with a little structure in it. Trough this paper I got the same softness back that the original wall that I photographed had when I photographed them. The photographs get a high tactility and immense richness in shades of colours. It's almost like the image lies on top of the paper, although technical that's actually the case, the directness of the image is not disturbed by any kind of reflection.

This might explain that I did not start of to imitate paintings but the fact remains that people mention that they look like them and still I don't know what to think of it. But I might say that I like the ambivalence of it, the fact that is disturbing for people to look at and not really can tell what it is. In the end the works are photographs made with a new kind of printing process that gives them a different aesthetic than that we are used of photography.

A question that came to my head look at the exhibit of Breitner was:

would it be interesting to an audience to show my sketch material? Although they are made in the same medium as the final works they will have a different character, they are much more like documents. Not only by sheer fact that they are documents to me but also in the way they look and are made. For instance they contain more information because in most cases they are made with a wide-angle lens so that later I can crop them to the exact size I want. When I know what I want I go back to the place and re-photograph the scene with a large-format camera. I have to admit that this could be interesting to see for an audience, just as it is interesting to see the pictures made by Breitner and how he used them for his paintings but not as works of art because they were not produced with that purpose. By turning his pictures into street photography *avant la lettre* the curators are just trying to exploit an oeuvre by turning it into something that is popular these days. Everyone owns a camera these days and the easiest way of getting started with making nice pictures is to go out onto the streets to take pictures of people and buildings. That's the exact same way I started out when I got my first camera from my father. It sounds strange to me to claim that Breitner was a pioneer of street photography because his photographs were never shown in this context before and street photography is approximately 80 to 90 years old. In conformance to the definition of a pioneer the pioneer enters new territory that has not been discovered yet with the purpose that others can follow him. So Breitner may be called a street photographer in hindsight that doesn't make him a pioneer. The true pioneer of street photography is mister Oskar Barnack the maker of the first Leica camera not because he made pictures but because he made the tool that made it possible.

Although I am still not convinced that we should see Breitner's photographs as works of art it is interesting and maybe slightly disturbing to see that a painter nowadays can be promoted for his photographic work who was not made for that purpose. In this case it almost looks like photography has won the battle between painting and photography. Breitner's photographs are made more relevant and contemporary, through new context, than his paintings.

Second review

Exhibition Classroom Portrait by Julian Germain. In het Nederlands fotomuseum.

The exhibition contains a large number of photographs, a couple of TV-screens and some graphical statistics. The photographs all represent classrooms with a group of students within them and are taken all over the world. The TV-screens show the same pictures of class rooms but these are best described as filmed photographs; all the students are asked to sit still for a couple of minutes like a photograph. Some photos are accompanied by some graphical statistics which were gained by giving the students questionnaires.

School photographs are traditionally used as visual documents to keep track on time for example, but this only works if over a large time the same person is photographed multiple times. Germain chose not to photograph one school over a longer time, although he worked on the project from 2004-2012, but to photograph multiple classrooms all over the world. He wants to create a document of this particular time and not a specific place over time. This slightly implicates that the work might become more interesting over time because we are now still so close connected to our time.

Germain uses what we might call the 'typology' strategy to build his photo series; almost all photographs are taken in classrooms with the blackboard or other walls as architectural backdrop. The students in the frame face to the camera so we can see their faces. The photographs are taken with a large format camera, which gives a lot of detail to the image. All these choices made by Germain makes it easier for the viewer to compare all the different photographs to each other.

The fact that Germain adds info graphs to some of the pictures emphasizes the idea of the photographic document even more. But the

whole exhibition is set up like a traditional art exhibition with pictures in wooden frames and behind glass. The photographs hang from the walls in lines with quite some space between them and have different sizes. In the whole exhibition there's not really an emphasis upon the fact that these are photographic documents. Maybe for the show this is not really that much of a problem, it's an exhibition in a museum, but the catalogue only consists of the photographs of the classrooms. In my opinion this is a missed opportunity to create an interesting document of this time by also including all the info graphics and to make it into an encyclopaedia.