

Hans Eijkelboom

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Although Dutch artist Hans Eijkelboom cannot be considered an artist from the most recent generation —he has been making work since the early 1970s— he has been working in the margins of the international art and photography world on a very topical project “Photonotes” (begun 1992), a project that is only now coming to its final phase. “Photonotes” deals with the concept of individual identity in a world of mass consumption.

Five to six days a week, at a fixed time and for a maximum of two hours, Eijkelboom goes to one of his favourite locations in the streets of Amsterdam (or sometimes New York and other cities) to take photographs. His favourite spots are very crowded places in or near shopping malls. Thousands of people come here daily to shop, and here he seeks confrontation with city life; more specifically, confrontation as an individual with the masses which for Eijkelboom is a typical part of life in the big city. It both defines and challenges our identity as individuals.

Already in his early work, when he created installations and performances, Eijkelboom was fascinated by the concept of individual identity. He focused on how people dress at different occasions - exhibition openings for instance - in order to underline their individuality within a specific social group. In the course of time he focused more on the interchanges between his own identity and that of others, and photography became a crucial medium for him. He reflected in these early, more conceptual, works, on the effects of different clothing - as in his self-portraits made while dressed in the clothes of his friends. Later he became more interested in the relation between identity and worldview. Looking for a method to visualize his daily observations and experiences, Eijkelboom started to make his daily “Photonotes”.

Having arrived at his location for that day, Eijkelboom observes the crowd. Initially he has no idea of what he will photograph that day. After a while, however, particular details start to draw his attention; for example the way people are dressed or behave, or the objects that they are carrying, and he subsequently starts to focus on these

details: the color of raincoats, shopping bags that look alike or the fact that there are a lot of mothers and daughters walking together. He behaves like a spy, he dresses inconspicuously and he hides his camera against his chest (so that he does not look through the viewfinder when making a photograph).

In this way, he creates a series of photographs every day, which he mounts systematically on large sheets of paper. The title of each "Photo Note" is the date on which it was made.

Sometimes they are published in the form of small booklets which Eijkelboom sends to a limited number of friends and other interested people.

For more than ten years, Eijkelboom has created a fascinating, systematic archive of images that provides us with a unique overview of, for instance, fashion in the Netherlands; a sociological study as much as an anthropological one.

The space where he makes his photographs still has the connotations of a democratic space, in the sense that it is truly public. However, we know that it is not a "free" space, but in fact highly controlled; by security, by CCTV and also by commercial interests, tightly focused and designed for shopping and consuming. The many similarities between what people wear and what they do in these spaces pose serious questions about how free we are to choose our identities. There is ultimate freedom to buy what we want in order to shape that we want to be. But it appears that in the end there are only so many possibilities that people can actually (and consciously?) decide to choose from.

Frits Gierstberg 2006