

Between Silence, Time and Light

Cuny Janssen

Half my dreams are set in the house I grew up in. My parents left that house five years ago to move to the village where my mother was born. For my brother it felt like betrayal, but it didn't matter to me. I felt nothing for the place I spent 18 years of my life. Or that's what I thought. But over the last few years that house has been the site of the most strange events and bizarre situations, which take place inside my head in the dead of night. Every room, corner and passage of my old home features in these scenarios; at times cloaked in sombre, threatening colours, at others in an atmosphere of safety. And every time I'm amazed how something that seems so far away, over, could possibly remain so alive in my mind.

Perhaps it has to do with the fact that a few years ago I met the man with whom, for the first time in my adult life, I feel truly at home and with whom I have had a baby. I once wrote to him: 'I've suddenly realised that my life with you feels as if it has always been this way... as if there were no life before we met or after we met. Instead, past and present have become interwoven. I can't – and don't want to – imagine anything without you and Kaja.'

The past is my childhood, in my parents' house, where everything felt safe and logical. The present is my adult life, in which nothing seems safe and logical, but in which the challenge of life itself gives me great freedom and happiness.

I used to think I knew what life was and how I wanted to organise it. But as I got older and, especially, the more I experienced – increasingly doing precisely the opposite of what I had decided just moments earlier – I began to realise it wasn't as simple as I had imagined. I don't believe you can decide to live your life in a certain way, you can only decide whether you will respond to what life presents to you at that moment. In this way you remain constantly in motion and life becomes one big dialogue. In other words, the less clear things become, the more I begin to understand and the better it gets.

All the same

The notion of 'dialogue' formed the basis of the conclusion to the thesis I wrote in 2000 in response to the question, 'What is reality?' 'A constant dialogue exists due to the existence of different interpretations of reality. This dialogue is at the heart of all questions and answers, all thought and learning. This dialogue is a constant source of new interpretations and approaches.'

Relieved, because I no longer felt I had to go looking for the great, all-encompassing truth, I began the first long-distance journey of my life. I went to India for an unspecified amount of time to begin to implement my plan to photograph children all over the world. If I survive India, I thought, I can survive the rest of the world. Six months later I was back with a mountain of photographs and a suitcase full of life experience. From the still portraits of children from different backgrounds – from communities of beggars, to rich Brahman families – I made my first book. In it I wrote about the universal similarity of people; each individual is moved by their own vulnerability and ambivalence. Their emotions and desires fascinate me. I am convinced that all people are essentially the same, whether rich or poor, intelligent or simple. The amazing paradox, however, is that each person is also unique. Every person is formed by different life experiences and each creates his or her own mix of human generalities. Ultimately, it is phenomenal to discover the individual in each person – valuable, dignified and authentic.

From the moment I realised this, I wanted to go further. I became extremely interested in other countries, situations and cultures. As I had hoped, the world lay open for me and I desperately wanted to explore it and come to understand it.

In 2003 I found myself in Macedonia for three months. I wanted to photograph children who had been through the war. I wondered if I would only be able to see trauma. I might have guessed before I went that this would not be the case, but the question remained as to what I would see. I was fascinated by Macedonia's vast ethnic diversity and the centuries-long discussion of where the country's borders begin and end. I made portraits of the children and listened to the stories of Albanian Macedonians, Roma and Macedonian Macedonians. Simply put, these three are the ethnic groups who were at war with each other in 2001. I soon discovered that they were all right. As soon as I imagined myself in their positions and their worlds, their stories seemed right. It suddenly occurred to me that they were all, each in their own way, simply trying to survive. The most beautiful thing about this was that it brought them together and from that point on it made more sense for me to concentrate solely on the beauty and strength of this survival, rather than trying to grasp the complex problems that exist between people; problems which have been there for centuries and to which no end was in sight. I wanted to go on.

In Macedonia I studied the book *Why people photograph* by Robert Adams. This American photographer has spent decades portraying the ideals and failures of human civilisation in nature in meticulously compiled books of stunning photographs. Besides children, I had also been photographing nature for years, but, until I read this book, I hadn't really known why and what the attraction was for me. It turned out to be universal elements such as silence, time and light. With these three elements I suddenly had a structure for my photographs, both landscapes and portraits. However, the most important thing for me was that, through reading Adams' book I became aware of the questions: 'What is it I am showing? What is the meaning of my work? What makes it significant and necessary?'

Robert Adams later responded to my book of photographs of Macedonia. 'There is always, I think, a question as to whether there is any mercy in landscape, in nature... whether beauty is itself a mercy (I think to a degree it is)... In any event, your book confronts that question powerfully...'

Thrilled by this statement and in agreement with the idea that beauty, to a certain degree, may be considered a mercy, I began to think more about this meaning in my work. There was a reason why I had chosen to concentrate on positive energy rather than stagnating, complex problems I was on no position to solve. There was a reason why I photographed children, who carry promise within them and who look forward to life, who are resilient and unbelievably adaptable. There was a reason why I always looked for the dignity in each individual I photographed. Even a mother living in a slum is proud of her child, and that pride should be shown. My work apparently also reveals my concern for the question of whether 'beauty deepens our critical engagement or distracts us, anaesthetising us to pain', *Beautiful Suffering, Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, (ed. Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, Erina Duganne, The University of Chicago Press 2006). I gladly went along with Simon Schama's statement in an interview that: 'The acceptance of monstrosity and cruelty does not obliterate the acknowledgement of the strength of beauty and of acts of creativity and the fertility of the natural world. The miraculous fertility.'

2005, Prince Albert, South Africa

In the first instance, I was interested in apartheid and South Africa's colonial history. I spent six weeks in the village of Prince Albert, staying with different families in both the black and white parts of the village. The people of Prince Albert were incredibly friendly and helpful, to me and to each other, but no one talked about what had happened in the past, even though the traces and consequences of apartheid were highly visible. This made it rather gruesome. The title of the book I made after this trip was therefore called *There is something in the air, in Prince Albert, South Africa*. This is the only aspect of the book that could be taken to refer to South Africa's complex problems, the consequences of which continue to be incalculable.

Based on a short text, the rest of the book refers to the prehistory of the Karoo, the semi-desert region around Prince Albert. Never before had I been to a place where there was so much tangible and visible prehistory. As I wandered through the landscape I could almost see the dinosaurs and there was something in the air. Even though neither man nor beast was visible for miles around, I was not alone. This is a region where the earliest humans lived two hundred thousand years ago. From here, in the thousands of years that followed, they moved out across the world. Here, in the Karoo, in South Africa, it dawned on me that the entire population of the world shares the same ancestors, the hunter-gatherers who were neither black nor white, but somewhere in between, who owned no land, but followed nature. That phenomenal ancientness, the desert and the people who lived in it were given the most prominence in my book. Being surrounded by those infinite planes must have had an influence on their identities in one way or another, forming them as people and how they experience the world. What, after all, are four centuries compared with a hundred million years?!

After this I was invited to Japan to take photographs. It couldn't have been more amazing. In 2007 I travelled to a sub-tropical island in the far south of Japan and an utterly different experience. There, in Amama Oshima, I discovered water. I suddenly found myself among people who are surrounded by nothing but water. There was water in the ocean, in the sea, in the air and in the juicy leaves on plants and trees. It was unbelievable how water lent the colours such depth. The world around me appeared constantly shiny and fresh. As always, I tried to live as much as possible among the local people. I stayed in their homes, sat at their kitchen tables in the morning and shared the water of their Japanese baths in the evening. Just as in South Africa, I explored the influence elements of their natural environment had on people's lives and, in this instance, how the Amami people lived on their island. Japanese traditions were carefully respected, but with a pragmatic, open and relaxed attitude. How easy it seemed to step outside to pick a few leaves from a tree for a salad or tempura, or to collect some seaweed or catch a fish for breakfast. By respecting the gods of nature, by enjoying the food nature provides and by forgetting time, the Amami way of life seemed entirely natural.

I cannot judge how necessary or significant my work is. Only time will tell. Look at the consistency of Robert Adams or David Goldblatt, who has spent decades photographing the mythical beauty and social impossibilities of South Africa. His oeuvre has become a document. The history of humanity made visible, telling us about ourselves, and we can learn from it.

Two thousand years ago Cicero said that history provides us with a counterpoint to, protection against, the danger of limiting ourselves to the present. That history teaches us, obliges us, to provide explanations for experiences of the past. Trying to understand

the experiences of others in other cultures, other times and other places breeds a certain understanding of who we are as people and the kind of world we live in.

Through my photography I want to continue to explore and to try to understand the world I live in. I hope the results will contribute to the documentation of the world and, above all, to quote Schama again, to be 'a validation of the complexity and pleasure and beauty of the world.'