

The Shadow Artist On the work of Koen Broos

Harold Polis, 2015

Is there anything that we have not yet seen? Earthquakes, wars, births, deathbed scenes, goals, bloopers and funny pets: everything gets filmed and photographed, stored, shared. There is even no point in trying to make an estimate of the number of photographs which we have collectively taken since the beginning of photography. That estimation could only reach astronomical proportions. We produce the overwhelming majority of this mountain of pictures for our own usage. In the best case, these pictures make up the storage area of our deepest emotions. In the worst case, photographs are proof of what Susan Sontag called our 'chronic voyeuristic relationship' with the world around us. These are things that we can or will want to forget in time: drunk uncles at a wedding, technical shots of building sites, photos of our dentures, a castle whose name we forget or a sunset that once had meaning. Only a minimal part of the pictures that we record during our lifetime survives the ravages of time. An even more minimal part of that minimal part has lasting meaning that reaches beyond ourselves or our close relatives. We can see, record and share everything, but the value of those pictures is actually dropping by the minute. This evolution could be set down in a law which, why not, would carry the name of a Belgian photographer who avoids Photoshopped hyperrealism and staged emotion, the law of Broos: the more pictures we produce, the more worthless they become – and the more Koen Broos retreats into the twilight zone between light and darkness.

There was indeed a time, long ago, when I was somewhat confused by the law of Broos, when I asked myself why he was making blurry photographs, for crying out loud. The contours of his pictures faded away. The light hung in wisps over increasingly hazy forms. The colours resembled the surfaces that dance before your eyes just after you have banged your head against the cupboard. And yet Koen Broos appeared rather energetic and awake, and free of any bruises. But his free work seemed to me to be the result of sleepless nights and an obsessive tendency to stretch the shutter time. I expected symbolism, clarity, realism and a recognizable message, and I got the exact

opposite: abstraction, a confusing simplicity, a deceptive aesthetics. Stylistically, the current work of Koen Broos lies at first sight in the vicinity of the autochromes, the first colour photographs, and of the pictorialism of Alfred Stieglitz, that slave to soft focus and rough photographic paper – but then in a much more extreme form. Contrary to his illustrious predecessor, however, Koen Broos does not necessarily wish to imitate painting. He remains a passionate photographer.

So Koen Broos virtually lets go completely of the figurative narrative and uses his camera the wrong way around: instead of recording his photographs in focus, he makes them unclear. In doing so he considers the limitations of the genre and in fact ties in with the early days of photography. When the French inventor Nicéphore Niépce took the first known camera photo in about 1827 – a dark, coarse-grained picture of a rather banal roof – he could never suspect what would come after him. An avalanche of pictures, indeed, but also countless people who, moved by a longing for innovation, strove tirelessly after new forms and techniques through which to master reality. By reality I mean that which slips away from us time after time, although we make pathetic attempts to grab hold of it. Time, a smell, a touch, a conversation, a panoramic view. Characteristic is the tragic story of Joseph-Ernest Buschmann, the historic publisher of Belgian literature and of Hendrik Conscience, who, in mid nineteenth-century Antwerp, cherished another passion, besides publishing books, painting and illustrating: photography. His vague, brown, grimy early photographs are also known. In about 1850, for instance, he photographed the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp. At that moment Daguerre was already busy with his polished, mercury-prepared plates that yielded minutely detailed pictures. Buschmann's photo of the cathedral is full of flecks and markings. The photographer here is like someone who grabs hold of a formless fragment of reality, fashions it after his ideas and sticks the result in another, two-dimensional space. The photographer is a demiurge. Buschmann took that creative urge particularly seriously. He developed a genuine obsession

for photography, more particularly for technical progress, which wavered between paper, copper plates and glass plates. An obsession that was literally fatal to Buschmann. The poor man was hospitalized and died at the age of 38 in 1853 in an institution for well-to-do citizens in Ghent. The medical verdict was as follows: 'He neglected so to speak his affairs, taking an interest only in photography, which he studied passionately'. Broos is no Buschmann – fortunately for himself and for us – but there are nevertheless similarities between his context and the period about 1850.

There is absolutely no doubt that we are currently approaching a new industrial revolution that will profoundly change our way of working and living, and therefore also of thinking and watching. This is among others what the American economist and social theorist Jeremy Rifkin describes in *The Zero Marginal Cost Society*, published last year: the digitization and automation of our society are heading towards a new, intense and disruptive phase, which might result in paid labour being a privilege for a few, instead of a life fulfilment for many.

Already experimenting with photographic techniques, Buschmann undoubtedly also felt in his day that the world would be turned on its head, a short while later, during the great industrialization that jointly lay at the basis of our welfare, democratization and social rights. Buschmann's pictures are a representation of this: the miracle of technology helps to domesticate, freeze, stop reality. This technophilia is equally great in Broos. He likes to test the possibilities of his equipment and to sound out boundaries. This fetishism is indeed proper to photographers, addicted as they are to the mechanical prostheses of their senses, but for Koen Broos it has had a counterproductive effect. This is perhaps the second law of Broos: the more digital our behaviour, the more tangible the work of Koen Broos. The lighting is heavy, the photographic paper tremendously coarse-grained and vulnerable. The way in which he shows his work is becoming more monumental, more emphatic, more earthly. Some prints look like charcoal drawings rather. In this way Broos achieves surprising results, which he orders in nameless series, as though they were laboratory experiments. That artistic practice has gained in strength over the course of the years, not in the sense of an athlete building up his muscles, but of a craftsman seeking a form or a scientist ignoring what he will find, but making progress by feeling his way forward. Broos has reinvented himself during this journey, and has discarded the visible, recognizable and repeatable. No symbolic titles for him

or ironic gestures that must make mediocre pictures acceptable. No insipid commentary on the freshwater naturalism with which we so love to laugh at ourselves. No pseudo-sociological claptrap to sacrifice the poor ugliness of humanity on the altar of the great moral righteousness of the superior viewer. Broos is on the trail of something that is not quite there yet.

Talking about art, and especially about photography, is inevitably a bit like skating with a full cup of tea in your hands. It would be best to concentrate on the skating and to keep the tea for later. And the same holds for art, alas. You have to look at it, and keep looking at it, and carry that experience through with you to tomorrow – because then you will discover another line of approach. Unless artists do not offer these new insights and limit themselves to academic formalism, which, in this case, is recognizable, repeatable and predictable looking. That is besides how you can describe our contemporary version of Plato's practical idealism – there are eternal ideas, only perceptible through reason. Our consumption-oriented aesthetics is to be found in this Platonic nightmare. It is a ubiquitous aesthetic banality that intimidates us and that nullifies any need to find an initial answer to our questions, trained as we are to accept and worship that banality. Photography has played into the hands of this very Western fear of levelling, which triggers the impression that the meaning of all pictures is evened out. Today this fear is focused on the Internet. The American techno-critic Jason Lanier writes about the threat of digital Maoism, whereby we would have to give up our individual characteristics in favour of a larger whole, an online collectivism that denies the core of our taste and behaviour. The algorithms that steer Google and our purchase behaviour are like millstones that are grinding our individuality.

Koen Broos deliberately places himself completely outside of that self-referential world in which nothing surprises us anymore and everything must reassure. With his photographs he seems rather to strive after the opposite: to save photography from the clutches of the dominant image culture of the recognizable, predictable and repeatable. The pictures of Koen Broos come just before that moment when there can be talk of recognizability. It is the moment when there is not quite anything yet, besides a vague promise, which can turn out for the best or the worst. In order to seek only the inexplicable or the disquieting in the spirit realm of these pictures, you have to remain insensitive to the energy that they give off. Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote about the difference between *langage parlant* (speaking language) and

mutatis mutandis

photography Koen Broos

The Shadow Artist, by Harold Polis

langage parlé (spoken language), where the ultimate status of the things around us, and how we think and talk about them, is entirely contained within the *langage parlé*. The stage before that, when things are essentially a possibility, is reserved for the *langage parlant*. Looking is an individual active deed, no automatism guided by reflexes or algorithms. That phenomenology, explored in depth by Merleau-Ponty, also belongs to the core of what Koen Broos is trying to shape. It is a noble attempt at escape that always lasts for the duration of a picture.

Is there anything that we have not yet seen? That is in fact the question which Koen Broos is seeking to answer. He is a full-blooded modernist. That demands courage. Because he is placing himself in a dying tradition which is on a drip of syrupy theories, reigns supreme in art-history museums for the most part, and has perhaps even become a term of abuse. Look for a formal language that suits our world that is spinning ever faster. Broos does so. In one of the most famous art essays of the past century, 'Avantgarde and Kitsch', the American art critic Clement Greenberg writes: 'A society, as it becomes less and less able, in the course of its development, to justify the inevitability of its forms, breaks up the accepted notions upon which artists and writers must depend in large part for communication with their audiences. It becomes difficult to assume anything. (...) In the past such a state of affairs has usually resolved itself into a motionless Alexandrianism, an academicism in which the really important issues are left untouched because they involve controversy, and in which creative activity dwindles to virtuosity in the small details of form, all

larger questions being decided by the precedent of the old masters.' Although Greenberg's text dates from 1939, it can also hold, *mutatis mutandis*, for what we are going through today. Our visual life is filled with air, corporate ugliness, bad fashion photography and even more painful forms of soft porn, bodily or intellectual self-torment, the contemporary variant of Greenberg's academicism. Koen Broos refuses to accept that situation and goes in search of the non-identical, which he finds in the shadow, the twilight, the dusk and in poorly lit living rooms. Perhaps that is the third law of Broos: the more we think we know or see, the more impenetrable the shadow. Against a rational, transparent and also journalistic approach, Koen Broos therefore places not-knowing, not yet recognizing, not quite being able to see yet. We who think we understand everything, or cherish the illusion that the meaning of everything is just there for the taking, accept only a clearly drawn and delineated ground plan of reality. At least, that is how we are brought up, with reason as our guiding principle in a disenchanted society. Against that exultant rationality, Koen Broos places the ungraspable picture, a snapshot of the nuance, the shadow, a person who doesn't quite know what to look at. Out of the darkness of his pictures looms the opposite of resignation. Scientific research is extremely well suited to unveil reality in all its phases, but we people have just as much need for the representation of the promise that lies hidden in the things around us. The work of the shadow artist Koen Broos brings this tension to the fore. It is a quiet revolt in pictures.

Harold Polis / 2015