

FOREWORD

A tall man stands in a square, on a street, walks through a train, and sits on a bus. How much taller is this 'Tall Man'? Let's say: a head taller than average. Tall enough that other tall men also think: there goes a tall man.

The tall man needs something. His hands are big, his voice carries far. He has two options; he can, ambitiously, want to bend the world to his will. He already towers over everything; he only needs to manifest his stature in his behaviour, his actions, and his opinions. Surely he is heard, surely he is seen. It is nature, and thus apparently his birthright. A lion is a lion. That's the idea.

In that scenario, the tall man stands above the world. But what if the tall man wants to be in the world? That is an essential difference. He cannot go through life bent over, cannot make himself smaller than he is. So he looks for an intermediary. He has to find something that he can put between him and the people that brings him and them together. One day, he finds out: a camera.

1) Rob Rombout is a photographer and filmmaker. 2) He is also a tall man, even by Dutch standards. No doubt it is my lack of imagination, but I refuse to see any other reason than these two facts.

Almost every photographer explains his photographic need psychologically: "I was so shy, and through the camera I overcame my shyness". And: "I never felt I belonged, but the camera gave me a means of connection".

I once heard a photographer say: "I took up photography because I didn't know what else to do with my hands".

When you look at Rob Rombout's portrait photos, you notice the closeness. I don't mean close-ups. I mean that he waits, until a pose falls away, until your jaw relaxes, your shoulders droop. Only the camera allows him to get that close.

In his collected photographs, you see soft faces, relaxed eyes. For the portraits Rob took of me, he employed a, shall we say, verbal method. Rob is a walking barrel of anecdotes - and that barrel is leaky, because the anecdotes keep sloshing out and don't run out. When I was in front of his camera, he talked and talked, and there came a moment when I no longer wanted to parry his anecdotes with my own (as I said to my girlfriend: I've finally met a man who talks more than I do!) but rather I let the jokes wash over me until eventually I was just listening and no longer actively thinking, no longer actively posing.

Henri Cartier-Bresson once spoke of 'the decisive moment', where a photograph captures a dynamic moment,

an acute event, which most speaks about what is 'important' within an event. For Rob, with the decisive moment, it seems as if something stops, and comes to rest. The photo he took of me is not my favourite picture of myself - because who wants to see themselves disarmed? But the photo speaks of who I am.

What Rob is looking for, and now I am speculating again, is himself. He is a tall man, with long hair. He wears heavy shoes, black clothes. He is a photographer, filmmaker, and teacher; he is from the Netherlands, lives in Portugal, and works in Brussels, and he has made films all over the world. I have seen him always improbably patient, I have never caught him voicing a harsh opinion. What I mean to say is there is no pretence to be found in his person. That's what he looks for in his photos.

These are anecdotes that I remember from Rob: that on a French island in the Indian Ocean (Île d'Amsterdam), many weeks sailing away from the rest of the inhabited world, he experienced a ritual in which the youngest soldier had to dress up as a bride and dance with the other soldiers - and that Rob found it scary. That he was tied up in his bed on the way to the island, as the ship went over the waves almost vertically. That almost by chance he got hold of a hotel in northern France. That he slept in tents at the North Pole (the island of Amstardamoya) with four lines stretched around the tents and blasting grenades attached to them, to deter any curious polar

bears walking by. The first morning Rob steps out of his tent, right on a line. Boom. No problem, said the guide, we can place those three remaining lines as a triangle around tents. The second morning Rob got out of his tent, boom, steps on the line again. Now the camp could no longer be shielded. Luckily the polar bears were not aware of anything.

I am sure there are better anecdotes to illustrate Rob's life, but what they have in common is chance, the determining circumstance, which is effectively the definitive circumstance. That there is no strictly preconceived plan. As a maker, Rob is a tall man who doesn't want to bend the world to his will, but wants to be in the world making a difference to how it is perceived.

When Rob made a short film about me, he recorded all the interviews beforehand in a studio in Brussels. Only then did the filming begin: in Latvia, we travelled around by bus and train. Why Latvia? No idea; maybe because neither of us had been there before? I remember having a deadline: that I was worried about the approaching US elections. That I was reading a book about Lincoln. That the Pokémon app had just come out. That I was having a chronic relationship crisis. None of it mattered. What mattered was that we were travelling on a train from Riga to the Russian border and for a shot I had to stare idly ahead. Rob, that big guy, was right on top of me, with a cameraman and a soundman.

The dining car was lined with varnished wood, and a waiter in a tuxedo jacket prepared cocktails. It was pre-war glamour, but faux glamour. Because in the coupé screens were playing Russian music videos, video clips that – again, something I learned – were at most one or two inches of bikini-textile away from pornography. And I stared ahead, Rob beside me. A take that had to be done over and over again.

Performance artist Marina Abramovic once said; I love the moment when it stops being a performance, and it becomes your real life. On the train, somehow my deadline fell away, and my worries; Rob's patience became my patience, I no longer sat doing anything, and I sat alone: a moment of simplicity that could have lasted longer.

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