

# DUTCH PHOTOGRAPHY NOW

A group of ordinary men and women are getting off a tour bus in what could be Spain or South America, or perhaps the Middle East. They're seen through the front window of the bus's cab, which reflects the bright sky and clouds outside. One woman holds her jacket tight to her body, perhaps in fear; another closes her eyes in what may be grief or just exhaustion. One man looks directly toward the viewer, his eyes intense and provocative – possibly threatening. The bus driver's eyes are closed, maybe against the sun, maybe in meditation.

The 2006 photograph 'Busfront #1' by Dutch art photographer Juul Hondius looks like so many images we've see in the news that often accompany headlines about mass migrations, social unrest or perhaps terrorist attacks in foreign lands. There's no evidence of a camera in the frame and the people look as if they're captured in a candid moment, unposed.

Yet, 'Busfront #1,' as with all of Hondius's work, isn't capturing real life; this is a fully staged photograph featuring a group of non-actors hired for the day and shot at the end of long sessions, when they've become bored and exhausted. The shoots take place in cars and busses to illustrate the universal idea of a journey – a simple, yet powerful motif that's common in photojournalism. Hondius plays with the conventions of the genre and turns the tables on viewers, so that they question the very act of looking.

'I'd like people to become aware of how their expectations determine the way they interpret my pictures and, more broadly, the people around them,' explains the photographer. 'It's about how prejudice dictates the way we look at and treat each other.'

In a sense, this statement can be made about much of contemporary Dutch photography today, whether, like Anuschka Blommers and Niels Schumm, they are working on portraits in a studio, or, like Viviane Sassen, they are working in distant lands or, like Katja Mater, they are creating abstract photos in combination with installations. They're all working in a way that undermines the authority of their own art

Contemporary Dutch photographers are transforming the medium. Catherine Somzé looks behind the lenses

form. You might call it anti-photography.

The aim of many Dutch photographers is not to capture reality, in other words, but to question the nature of photographic images and the way in which pictures shape reality. Perhaps paradoxically, many Dutch photographers do this by staging documentary-style pictures. These images evince a mistrust of the medium and of the very concept of realism.

For the past year, Colette Olof, the head curator of Amsterdam's leading photography museum, FOAM, has been considering the recent history of Dutch photography in anticipation of a tenth anniversary exhibition, to be held this autumn.

'The most important development in Dutch photography has been taking place in the realm of photography used as a conceptual art medium,' she says. 'The original function of photography to register and to document reality has been fully abandoned.'



BUSFRONT #1, 2006, BY JUUL HONDIUS

Dutch artists' conflicted relationship with realism can be traced back as far as the 16th century, to the 'Beeldenstorm' or 'Iconographic Fury' of 1566, when art in churches and other public places was destroyed (a movement depicted in contemporary Dutch photographer Gert Jan Kocken's successful series of photographs 'Defacing', shot mostly in 2007). An anti-realistic strain has been an undercurrent in the Netherlands' visual culture from Johannes Vermeer's 'hyper-real' paintings in the 17th century through the abstraction of Piet Mondrian's De Stijl movement.

In photography, a strong social documentary tradition gave way in the 1990s to a focus on portraiture that ran parallel to a rising interest in identity politics. Koos Breukel's photos of ballet dancer Michael Matthews dying of Aids and Rineke Dijkstra's portraits of adolescents at the beach and young Spanish bullfighters straight from the ring required viewers to think again at how they perceive 'otherness'. From there, it was only a small step to start staging images that question the very nature of reality itself.

## Call it anti-photography

In 2007, Sassen won the prestigious Prix de Rome for her portrait 'Arusha', part of the series 'Flamboya' that she shot in East Africa and Zambia. The viewer can't see the face of the woman in the image because she's almost completely in shadow. Yet the portrait is powerful precisely because of

what we don't see – it reminds us that we are always projecting our own ideas of other peoples' lives into the faces of strangers in documentary images and perhaps, also, in real life.

'These images show that contemporary photographers are building a new sense of the "real" in photography,' says Petra Kuipers, co-owner of Motive Gallery, a gallery in Noord that represents Sassen and photographer Martine Stig. 'This "new real" of contemporary Dutch photography questions realism by bringing documentary-style photography to a whole new level.'

Paradoxically perhaps, photography and reality itself have never looked more artistic.



ANTE, 2010

## MARTINE STIG



In the early 2000s, **Martine Stig** (1972, Nijmegen) gained recognition with photography series that explored the medium's ability to capture what's barely visible, portraying models blushing in 'Blush'

and post-coital couples in 'After'. In recent years, Stig has used photography in the frame of multi-media projects, triggering viewers to create their own story based on a few visual hints. Conceived in collaboration with graphic designer Vanessa van Dam, the acclaimed project 'Any resemblance to existing persons is purely coincidental/Stories of Mr. Wood' is a compendium of photos, drawings and objects documenting the existence of an imaginary character, 'Mr. Wood.' In her newest series, 'Ante' (2010), Stig tagged along with photographers who were hired to take official class photos at schools. She zoomed in on faces of individual children. Since it's a convention in the media today to use former school photos once someone has become a celebrity or died unexpectedly, these individual portraits encourage viewers to project the future of each child.

Represented by Motive Gallery

## PAULIEN OLTHETEN



**Paulien Oltheten** (1982, Nijmegen) travels the globe in search of a startling or compelling detail or a gesture and then asks passersby to recreate it. She presents the resulting image together with other photographs of the same subject but shot from a

different angle or performed in a slightly different way. She sometimes provides the photographs with explanatory notes. In one of her latest projects, developed in Japan and including a set of photographs and a video presented together as a single installation called 'Walk on a Line...', she includes herself in the photographs and videos. She shows us that behind images, there's always someone shaping reality, a continuous reality that single photographs and even moving images can't faithfully recreate.

Represented by Galerie Fons Welters.

See 'Walk on a Line...' at Rotterdam's Fotomuseum Wilhelminakade 332, Rotterdam (010)203 0405/nederlandsfotomuseum.nl). ▶ 16 Jun.



WAY TO HOLD THE MONEY, 2011

## VIVIANE SASSEN



2007 Prix de Rome Award winner **Viviane Sassen** (1972, Amsterdam) alternates between editorial work and commercial assignments for luxury

brands such as Miu Miu and Louis Vuitton, with fine art photography shot mostly in Africa. Regardless of the exhibition context, be it a museum, a magazine or a billboard, her pictures are fraught with ambiguity and at times disquieting elements. Her pictures exude a sense of documentary authenticity although they're highly stylised and staged. Sassen brings together different genres to create images of Africa that are neither sentimental nor shocking. Her work defies stereotypical depictions of the continent as a place of war, hunger and 'joy in spite of hardship'.

*Represented by Motive Gallery*



BELLADONNA, 2010



CALAIS DUNE 2, 2009

## JUUL HONDIUS



The photographs of Charlotte Köhler Prize winner **Juul Hondius** (1970, Ens) often look like documentary though they're the

result of a time consuming staging process. What looks at first like a group of refugees being deported, a homeless man sleeping on the street or a smoke cloud after an explosion turn out to be scenes created from scratch by Hondius himself. The subject of these images is photojournalism and its conventions, which Hondius mimics and subverts. In this way, his photographs are comments on other photographs and the way in which war photography romanticises the pain of others.

*Represented by Galerie AKINCI*

## DANA LIXENBERG



DOOST VAN DEN BROEK

When shot through the 4x5 camera of **Dana Lixenberg** (1964, Amsterdam), reality inevitably becomes a Lynchian backdrop to a gruesome performance. In previous series, she portrayed marginalised people and communities, while intentionally avoiding direct references to her subjects' lives. Lixenberg's latest series 'Set Amsterdam' features unlikely places in the city, such as a former bomb shelter and a Ghanaian church, where the human presence is felt only in the precise arrangement of objects that evince rituals and the passage of time. The shadow of death lurks everywhere alongside kitsch, religion, sex and entertainment. See her work at FOAM, Keizersgracht 609 (551 6500/foam.org). ▶ 29 May.



THEATER 97, 2009

## ANUSCHKA BLOMMERS & NIELS SCHUMM



Photo duo **Anuschka Blommers** (1969, Purmerend) and **Niels Schumm** (1969, Naarden) effortlessly navigate between the world of fashion and that of high art. They've won the Best Young Fashion Photography Award at the Festival International des Arts de la Mode in Hyères, they feature in international publications such as *i-D*, *Flash Art* and *The New York Times*, and they've exhibited at the Stedelijk Bureau in Amsterdam and the Groninger Museum. Their hyper-realistic portraits of regular people and still lifes of such unremarkable items as potatoes transform the ordinary into the exceptional and almost unreal.

Represented by TORCH

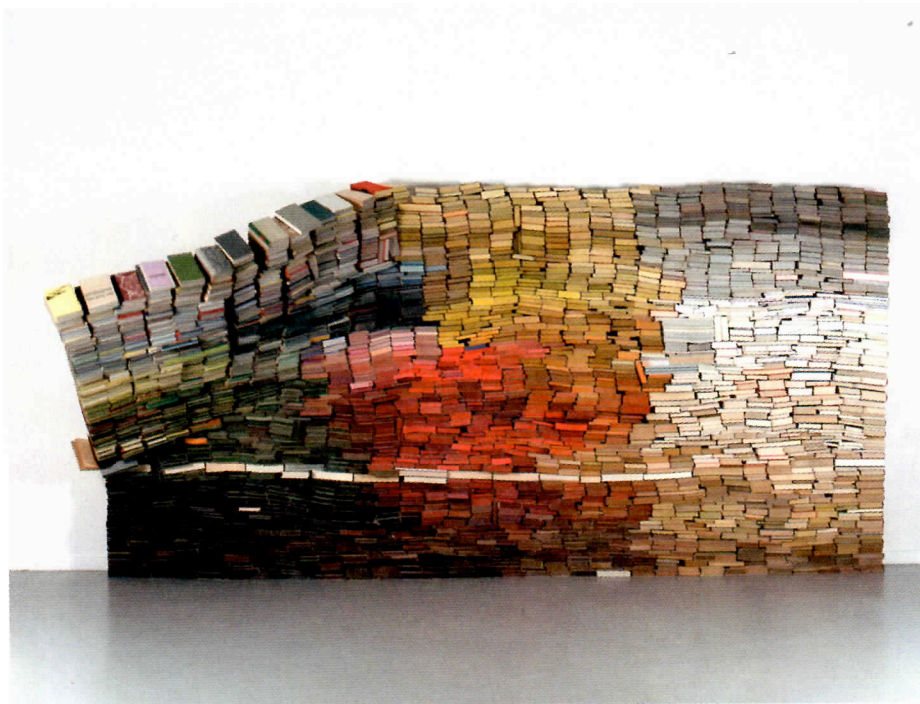


TANGA, 2010 (REPUBLICATED FROM 'THE GENTLEWOMAN' MAGAZINE)

## ANOUK KRULTHOF



Performance and installation art are as important for the photographic work of **Anouk Krulthof** (1981, Dordrecht) as is photography itself. Her series often feature models interacting with a person or an object. She then captures what she calls 'in-between moments', in which gestures and body language challenge common understanding. In the series 'Becoming Blue', she portrayed people playing out actions related to fear and in 'Playing Borders', her models were captured reacting to installations. The succession of images implies a narrative but one which is still open to interpretation.



ENCLOSED CONTENT CHATTING AWAY IN THE COLOUR INVISIBILITY, 2009

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UNTITLED, 2010 (FROM 'LIÈGE' SERIES)

## THOMAS MANNEKE



**Thomas Manneke** (1970, Stoppeledijk) is a proud heir to the Dutch social documentary tra-

dition. His books and photography series 'Vilnius', 'Odessa' and 'Liège' constitute a trilogy shot over the past few years in Lithuania, Ukraine and the south-east of Belgium, respectively. They constitute compassionate portraits of these cities where poverty and past glory occasionally merge with nightmarish intensity. In Manneke's kind-hearted vision, however, love seems to blossom even in the unlikely circumstances and the power of inherited habits is readable in the mirrored gestures of a graceful mother and her son walking down a partly-broken down, age-old street.

Represented by Galerie Diana Stijger

## MELANIE BONAJO



**Melanie Bonajo** (1978, Heerlen) was recognised internationally in 2009 with 'Furniture Bondage', a series of witty photographs portraying nude women tied up with and uncomfortably burdened by household objects such as brooms, stepladders and flower pots, in what can be read as a light-hearted, quasi-feminist indictment of consumer culture. For 'Modern Life of the Soul,' her 2007 collaboration with Kinga Kielczynska, shot in a primeval Polish forest, humans devolve into plant-like creatures as part of an ironic, and gruesome anti-Darwinian narrative.

See her exhibition '\*\*\*\*\*86 Details of Paradise,' at outLINE Gallery, Oetewalerstraat 73 (693 1389/outlineamsterdam.nl). ▶ 21 May.



FATAL FLOWER GARDEN, 2007