

Tuomo Manninen's Plateau of Humankind

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How photography came to Manninen

Tuomo Manninen is a photographer. After a childhood in Jyväskylä, innocent of visual culture, he studied Lutheran theology at university. Then he started taking photographs. As a professional photographer. Writing, he felt, was too easy, and never really true. Writing without Photoshop does not exist, says Manninen. One day, he photographed the board of a financial company. Someone told him: "You need to learn to do group photographs, young man!" And that is where it all started. He started to take photos of highly diverse groups of people, in Helsinki: pizzaiolos, piano movers, transvestites, etc. In 1994 he published his images in the magazine of the *Helsingin Sanomat* (Finland's answer to the *New York Times Magazine*).

Travel is a formative experience: a young man in Nepal

In 1995 Manninen left to spend a year in Nepal. He went with his wife, the now famous journalist and documentary maker Kati Juurus, who has since garnered many prizes and much acclaim for her deeply humane approach to situations such as immigration and incarceration. At the time, Juurus was a "junior program officer" for UNICEF – which offered a monthly 400 dollars to the spouses of said officers. Manninen viewed this sum as an artist's grant. He travelled out with all his photographic equipment, determined not to go on taking group portraits. "Nepal will be different!" But the artist's signature mode soon caught up with him. In Kathmandu he went to the gym. Around him, he watched the bodybuilders. Bodybuilders are never alone. And nobody had ever photographed Nepalese

bodybuilders. “It is a story that needed to be told – that I had to tell – with my images.” Well aware that bodybuilders whose staple food is rice will never attain the physique of those whose basic diet is animal protein – their models, whose images were pinned up on the gym walls. Back in Helsinki, Manninen showed this work in the Zone gallery, which has since closed.

You and me, we and us

And so, gradually and spontaneously, in a way that was carefully worked, too, the group acquired its proper place, a fundamental, essential position in Manninen’s work. The respect due to the *persona* and social function appears to be its lifeblood.

In 2000, having amassed a considerable amount of material, Manninen exhibited his photos in public space, in shops in the streets of Helsinki: workers in the city where they work. An exhibition to be visited by tram, by bicycle. An exhibition in Helsinki, then. And he turned it into a book, soon on sale in photography bookshops. It was the first draft of a title that we find throughout Manninen’s career: “ME/WE.” I am you and you are me. Except that in Finnish, ME means WE. We are therefore we and we, together from now on.

Plateau of Humankind

In January 2001, legendary curator Harald Szeemann was walking around Helsinki. He was mulling over his forthcoming Venice Biennale, “Plateau of Humankind.” He went into a bookshop and bought Manninen’s book. And then he contacted Frame, the hub for Finnish artists. Frame at that time did not yet know Tuomo Manninen and was miffed. But in any case, a few months after that Manninen could not believe his eyes as he stood in the Arsenale in Venice, in front of sixteen of his own large-format group photographs. He still hadn’t met Harald Szeemann, with whom he would do another exhibition two years later.

It seems perfectly natural that the man who conceived the exhibition *Plateau of Humankind* should have wanted Manninen to feature so prominently at the Arsenale. For his work stands at the intersection of numerous traditions of the portrait, which it both updates and puts in perspective. Free of bluster and rhetoric, it inclines towards a portrait of humankind that is at once “truthful” and “equitable.” Whoever his subject,

whatever their activity, wherever they live in the world, the artist's representation is egalitarian. There is no exoticism, no hierarchy based on belonging: this "fair trade portraiture" creates images that fully allow each individual their identity, their specificity and their appearance, without slipping into the folklore, condescension or compassion that are generally part and parcel of representations of the geographical or cultural "other," especially when these representations are by western photographers. The earth is for all men, each person occupies their place, legitimately. Manninen's photography is a "Plateau of Humankind" all of its own.

From Szeemann to Working Men via Artforum

That summer, during the Biennale, the famous New York contemporary art magazine *Artforum* wrote to tell Manninen that they wanted to run a portfolio of his work – "but we'll need it next Monday." That gave Manninen six days to come up with a project. He called a Finnish friend living in Saint Petersburg: "I have to produce a series of group photos. This week. Can you organise that for me?" Sure thing. "Okay, fine," Manninen told *Artforum*, "I'm working on a great project, groups in Saint Petersburg. Would that be all right?" Yes, of course it would. Manninen obtained a visa for 22 hours. By the 20th hour, he had photographed six groups. Back in Helsinki, he developed, scanned and sent the whole thing to *Artforum*. On time. This was the portfolio that brought Manninen to the attention of the second of the authors of this chapter, who, seven years later, showed his work to the first one. And then, in 2008, Analix Forever organised the exhibition *Working Men*, co-curated by the authors of this text, and published a book by the same title. Writing of Manninen's work, we said:

"It could be said of Tuomo Manninen's photography that it is a modern version both of the Dutch guild paintings of the Golden Age and of the photographs of workers by August Sander, that eminent representative of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), which were such a landmark in the 1920s. Like them, Manninen's images show individuals defined by their activity. Like them, they do so with proper respect for the individual and the social function they perform. But unlike them, these photos take a more sensitive, more embodied approach. Viewed through Manninen's lens, workers seem to live intensely. They are relaxed, and we can sense a sound sympathy between them and the photographer recording their personage. After all, is not he too a 'worker,' an individual who feels solidarity for their condition?"

Manninen's representations of 'working men' are conventional, and perfectly relaxed with the fact, just as they readily signify the dignity of the person working, whatever their function, from the chimney sweep to the fisherman, from the chorister to those who play the role of Father Christmas during the Christmas holidays. But there is no monumentalisation. Manninen invariably takes his photos on the site of the work itself. The bodies he photographs there are lively, offered, open. This is the ungainsayable demonstration of fellow feeling.

Here, then, is the worker presented in state that is the opposite of traumatic, utterly belying the notion that work breeds alienation. In these corporatist 'family pictures' workers form an entity, without either contraction or ostentation. Where, in the 1980s, those duettists Clegg & Guttman cast a sense of inexpiable suspicion over the public group portrait (the American artists seemed to make it something chronically old-fashioned by denouncing the conventionality of its postures), Manninen rehabilitates the genre in a way that is fluid and generous, by creating an image that is at once descriptive, sociological and transitional."

Manninen the humanist in Soweto

The project of photographing groups in Soweto was conceived in 2005, when Manninen made his first trip to Johannesburg on behalf of a Finnish company that wanted him to produce a report on the inhabitants of Soweto. The artist was fascinated by the human, social and political realities of this post-Apartheid South Africa where the white-black dichotomy was such that in almost every communication put out by the country, there had to both blacks AND whites. And it occurred to him that in a country where 85% of the population was black, there might be scope for a bit of reportage about the exclusively black Soweto, but following Jacques Séguéla's precept that "to create is to think against the grain." Group photographs in Soweto? Who, on hearing these words, does not immediately think of the poor and the violent, and perhaps rappers, ex-criminals, the old prison veterans from Apartheid now free and searching for dignity? Manninen chose a different tack. Preparation took six years. In 2011 he set off for Johannesburg, with the support, among others, of the president of the Kunst Foundation, Quelle Sylt, and explored Soweto with Tumi Mokgobe – the first time anyone in Soweto had seen a car driven by a white, blond-haired Finn guided by a black born in Soweto, sitting next to him.

In Manninen's Soweto the blacks play golf, form a chamber orchestra, picnic with their families in the park, dressed in their Sunday best, admiring each other's dandyish looks, which one of them points to. These exceptional images were shown at Sylt in autumn 2013 and at Sophiatown, in that unusual part of Johannesburg which is not totally black and not totally white, in spring 2014.

A signature style

Without a doubt, there is a Manninen signature, at least in most of his photos. These are defined by three parameters: the group portraits are full-length, their construction is frontal and perspectivist, and the format is square (this can be due to Manninen's preparatory work, using a square-format Polaroid). An interesting aspect is the work's constructivist rigour. This refers both to the painterly tradition that began with the Renaissance and to the modernist tradition of structured visual form (dynamics). The result being that Manninen's images are immediately familiar. They use a register of composition and articulation to which we have long been accustomed. The advantage of this feeling of familiarity is that we can go straight to the content.

Concentration

Manninen's images require absolute reciprocal concentration. As the artist explains, "The attention span that groups can give me is a maximum of ten minutes. Once I have photographed a group, I have a commitment, a responsibility, I am never going to do another group on the same subject. I therefore have a duty to do the best I can, and if it's not perfect, that's my problem, not theirs, and I'm not going to start again, for if I try to get the same group together again it won't work, there won't be that initial, natural concentration again, it would be 'posed' because of the sense that we have to do better, that it wasn't good enough – that is impossible and would destroy the very idea of the work, it would be a kind of unacceptable betrayal. During this moment of extreme concentration, during these ten minutes of absolute attention that the group gives me, and that I give it, that's when it has to happen, there's no way you can go back and correct things after that." The artist's emphasis on concentration indicates a rejection of narrative, of stories that may be hidden behind the image. The focus on the photographed subject is intense, it does not allow itself openness, drifting, wandering. Nothing here gives substance to something

beyond the image, an imaginary dimension that would make the image a pretext. The concentration is there in the image itself.

Art and society, from the individual to the political

This work by Manninen is also a fascinating illustration of the complex relations between art and politics, which interest us so much. Presented as a photographer of social groups, what Manninen does is necessarily “political.” However, the term “social photography” sounds anachronistic, as if it belonged to another age, that of the modernist, socialist utopia, and not to the age of triumphant individualism now dominant in the (n)occident. Unless, of course, Manninen, as a photographer of the “social” world, is also the photographer of social photography in this era of triumphant individualism. Undoubtedly, he manages to combine representations of the social and the individual in a single image: this is the miracle that occurred in Soweto.

Motopoetics 2014

At the *Motopoétique* exhibition shown at the Lyon contemporary art museum (MAC) in spring 2014, Manninen presented six large-format photographs of groups of bikers: a group of motorbike mechanics in Kathmandu (1995), Hell’s Angels in Finland (1996), the Brothers of the Wind in Riga (1997), mechanics in Saigon (2006), women from one of the chapters of the Bikers’ Unions in Helsinki, and finally, bikers in Ramallah (2013). Manninen’s twofold interest in bikes, in both their owners and those who repair them, indirectly evokes the machine’s close relation to the body. We could say that these are double portraits, portraits of the persons and portraits of the machines, but this double portrait is all one, underscoring the idea of a continuity between man and bike. A carnal continuum, a symbolic mechanism. Always at rest, these bikes photographed by Manninen are there to serve the body, just as the bikers’ bodies, also at rest, are there to serve the machine. The specificity of the human body represented on the one hand, that of the photographed machine, on the other, dissolved into the identical character of man and machine, in their common identity. In *Brothers of the Wind*, a third identity merges with the two others: that of children, of the family. According to the artist, this is one of the few photographs in which he took two groups in one: bikers and a family – or, if we include the machine, three groups.

The constructed icon

The construction of Manninen's images is based on a highly structured methodological principle. Why structure? In order to impose a logic of order, the feeling of a solidity, of something enduring. Structure is an implicit sign of the rigour with which the photographer approaches his task, as a calling. The images become iconic, evoking the sacred, the injection of a powerful regimen of truth. Another distinctive formal aspect of Manninen's group portraits is the use of intermediary states, a suspension, and sometimes in a quite literal sense. We could define Manninen's idea of the portrait as work on the suspended body, the body suspended between two actions, suspended between two temporalities, not yet at rest but already no longer active.

The question of the pose is, indeed, key here. How is the body of the person photographed to be positioned? Manninen makes room for individuality and singularity in collective representation, and does so while retaining the veracity of the image and keeping simulacra at a distance. Here, life is being shown: the characters breathe, break free. This intensity of life linked to a systematic photographic treatment creates the feeling of something iconic for the viewer. The viewer feels that the image is inhabited, that it is not so much a fictive construction performed by actors as a borrowing from reality, a reality neither travestied nor instrumentalised.

Priority to the subject

Manninen's art of the portrait does raise a number of ethical questions, as he is well aware. We know of the debates engendered by two of the most common types of portrait made nowadays, the intimate portrait and the compassionate portrait. It is as if our age rejected objectivity, as if this objectivity "hurt," as if the realist example set by August Sander in the early 20th century is now bereft of a mental register of expression. This currently fashionable renunciation of objectivity may lead us to conclude, sadly, that it is no longer possible nowadays to represent the human body in a rigorous, analytic way, even at a distance. On the contrary, it seems that it absolutely has to be made attractive, either by giving us the impression that a secret is being divulged (intimate photography), or by encouraging us to weep with pity over what is shown (compassionate photography). In both cases, what is photographed is never humanity but what the voyeur expects to see. Here, voyeurism competes with humanitarian complacency. In comparison, Manninen's photos are

distanced and precise, and overtly counter these two contemporary orientations. They intend not to encourage beholders to indulge themselves in the act of looking, but on the contrary, by faithfully recording the real, to allow the photographed persons to appear as what they are.