

## Without movement, the light goes out

Stefan Vanthuyne, 2021

Photography allows us, for a brief moment, to discover a world that isn't our own, to receive a glimpse of the lives that aren't ours. How it does that, and who really gains something from this, especially when the poor, the immigrants or the socially marginalized are the people whose lives are on display, has been the subject of substantial discussion and debate for many decades. Most of these discussions deal with what documentary photography is and who it serves; they deal with power and privilege; they deal with representation and exploitation. They deal with how these images can create change or how they maintain the status-quo. These are all discussions that surround documentary work, take their cues from it, but also sometimes run the risk of overriding what is really at the heart of it: the lives and the stories of the subjects. All of this, needless to say, is very delicate; all of this heavily depends on the motives and intentions of the photographer, and even more so on the position he takes, relative to his subjects.

Vincen Beeckman moves and works within communities and places that are often overlooked, avoided or ignored. Although he doesn't restrict himself to it, Brussels is the city to whom he has been most devoted. He knows her soft tissue, he knows where her scars are located. During a yearlong project in Le Petit Rempart, an emergency shelter for the homeless, Beeckman notes how the light in the room goes out when there's no movement. Earlier on in the small zine he mentions this as well. He writes how nothing seems to have changed since his visit prior to this one: it was "As if I had pressed Pause and then Play." On the cover of *Le Petit Rempart*, a child protects her eyes from the hard flash with one arm – "Anna always is a little bit scared of hope", it reads on the side. Another child is half hidden behind a couch. The adults don't shy away from the camera. A woman, stretched out on the canapé, asks him to take her picture. Some seem to be amused or charmed by Beeckman being there; they show themselves as warm people, simply smiling or posing closely together with a friend. They don't challenge or defy him; they mostly seem unimpressed by his little picture snapping machine with the hard white flash. One man is missing an eye, but he makes no attempt to conceal it. They smoke cigarettes. They look tired.

Beeckman is not an activist, he doesn't demand social justice through his work. He is not a social worker either; he doesn't solve these people's daily problems or long-term issues. He is not really their friend, either. He is someone who comes and goes, a sociable presence in their lives. He is someone who enters the room and by doing so turns the light back on for them, even if only for the time of the visit. He is offering them his good energy, his attention and his photographs, as a way of communicating. He offers them a connection. Whether he makes the photographs himself or he retrieves the disposable camera's he hands out to the people living on the streets (if he gets them back at all, which often is a matter of time and trust), as he does with the *Cracks* project, Beeckman is a diarist, keeping track of his subject's lives through the different film rolls he shoots or develops, which he then meticulously lists and numbers in his journals that are filled with small pictures and written entries. About a woman with kind dark eyes and a cigarette who received news that she has to leave the country. She can't work because of her bad health, even though she has dreams of opening up a shop here. An old man, who hangs out near the tram stop, says he wants to marry her. Just to help her out, nothing more.

Some people in the photographs sleep. When there's no movement, the light goes out.

When Beeckman visits, or when cameras are being passed around in his absence, some bright flashes of light go off. There are explosions of life; along these people's paths that don't always lead to good fortune, there are firecrackers of joy and excitement. Photography becomes a reason to move, to pose, to perform. Still, they refuse to be frozen or framed; instead everything in the frame is vibrant and vital – even pain. But there are also long and lingering glows of tenderness, like in the work Beeckman made together with Claude and Lily, where there is not a single image where these two hard-beaten human bodies are not touching each other; where there is hardly a photograph where one doesn't have his or her arm around the other, where they cling onto one another for safety, for warmth, for life, for love.

Beeckman's position is that of an engaged observer. He will never claim he fully knows or understands their experience, but he expresses a genuine and sincere interest in it. He looks for their personality rather than their condition. What he hopes for is to build a relationship, one that would not be possible without the connecting potential of the medium he works with. As such, all of his projects are participative by nature. There is however no fixed agreement, this Beeckman understands and respects; it is one that is open for change, change that he has to take or leave; such is the context in which he operates, such is the life his subjects and collaborators live. Even if there would be expectations, there are no illusions. The resulting images might be unappealing, or shocking. But in their direct honesty they never fail to move.

The photographs are not objects to be looked at as precious things; rather, they are part of a real exchange of moments and stories. They give value and validation to the people involved; they are thoughtful and appreciated gifts. Trust comes from giving their image back to them; from letting them own it instead of taking it away from them. It gives them a moment of recognition, a sense of dignity. Photography, then, is an excuse for Beeckman to return to them, to check up on them. In that sense it is about caring for them. He is not close, as he is not one of them. Still, he is never far away; sometimes all it takes to visit them is a phone call. And then he comes, and he turns the light on again.