

Grandpaaaaa

by Pauline de Bok

Mid eighties. They arrived from the south and were on their way to the Dutch polder where they would eventually settle. With everything they owned – horse and wagon – they found themselves in front of the old Waalbrug in Zaltbommel, a two lane bridge with metal dividers. Traffic roared past. The bike-path was too narrow, the next bridge too far away. The only option was to bolt it. Ten o'clock in the morning. One, two, three, what the hell: go! On the right the divider, on the left trucks thundering towards them. He yelled himself hoarse encouraging the horse. Like in a movie. He knew things could go wrong but he was enjoying himself. Even now, thinking about it.

Knowing how to get things done without the help of others, that is Jaap de Ruig. He is his own man; you do not tell him where to go. Detour? He decides. Looking back seeing his route from the air, all his struggles and wanderings make him sigh but he doesn't want to think it was all for nothing. What is a goal without the road that leads to it?

His way, their way. His and Mariët Meester's. They have been together longer than they've been alone. They live together, travel together, sometimes for a novel or report Mariët is working on, sometimes for one of his art projects. Symbiosis, yes. The less romantically inclined would call them a team, two inseparable independent beings, an autonomous team. Autonomy, he says, hesitating slightly, wearing off the jagged edges quoting Bataille: life cannot be autonomous AND livable. He should know; he's run up against it repeatedly.

Mid nineties. Endless ditches. I do not have an adress, only directions. A farmyard, a dirt road past sheds and stables. High hedges, behind that a big wooden caravan and a garden. Green grass, blue skies, white clouds. The outdoors.

In a ramshackle shed he has his studio. He opens a door and sunlight filtered through a grimy window shows us a space empty except for one thing: a huge metal construction full of white webs. It stands in a layer of water to keep spiders prisoner. I am breathless. The webs seem to light up in the sombre barren space, purity amidst decay. When I approach I see the spiders

building away at the work of art. Jaap feeds them by bying maggots, waiting till they become flies and then removing the wings one by one to prevent them from flying away.

The simplicity, the complexity, the slow change, it is all so mesmerizing; I could watch it for hours. The beauty that usually passes as filth, has been liberated out of its damned corner. I imagine this work of art in the atrium of a modern building, a bank or something, but no. This thing requires care and attention. It is fragile. Who is going to tear the wings of flies? The cleaning staff? The person responsible for art purchases?

Ten years later wings turn up again. In his film *The Power of Imperfection*. The sky above a Spanish landscape. Birds approach. They only have one wing but still they fly. As they get closer you notice that they are not birds at all but hands, his hands, multiplied, flying with one wing.

Before seeing the spider island, his animal cadavers encased in polyester (a lamb, the embryo of a calf) had already grabbed me. He had photographed them, had glued the oversized prints to wooden panels and then altered the image. It seemed like a lost world, but is in fact a hidden world, a world seldomly shown. Awe, shock and fascination riveted me to the spot. The images overpowered my first impulse: look away. Not wanting to be a wuss, you look and look. Again that beauty in what is originally considered dirty, gross and revolting.

It does not want to become just beautiful, because you know it is not innocent. He carried those cadavers, arranged them with bare hands while the stenching rot dripped of them. Could I do that or would revulsion win out? The sweet smell of death should fill the space of where these works are hanging. We get off too easily.

Not him. Three times in his career he tries to find closure. The first time is a photo showing him carrying his favorite goat Coza on a wheelbarrow to her grave. The second time is a picture showing him as cadaver amongst cadavers; beared torso, mouth hanging open, eyes turned away. A disturbing picture, could he go any further or had he already gone too far? I don't know. It is a haunting image, but irritating at the same time. Maybe because it shows something he usually manages to suppress: pathos. The third time is when he digs up Coza, registering everything; a camera, mike and light attached to his chest. He digs with bare hands, he does not want to protect himself. Her bones were almost clean. He put them in a suitcase. He likes order and cleanliness.

Now for the cadavers. He burnt them, he cleaned death. Stench and ugliness transformed into something light and pure by fire. A gross of dead mice continued their existence as ashes in test-tubes next to photos of their corpses. A gallery of honour for vermin – not his word by the way. Some find his work macabre, disgusting, cruel and sick. Some think he transgresses boundaries. Others are convinced he is driven by the desire to shock. Not so, he says. The opposite in fact. Wanting to shock is like wanting to be funny; it is doomed to fail. No, he was looking for a way to express the human suffering he had seen during his travels. Then he ran into dead animals in the polder. It did not horrify him, he had become accustomed to it as a child. His mum was administrator at a slaughterhouse. He biked over to see her sometimes. The floor of the main hall was covered in blood. Between barriers pigs waited to be electrocuted. A device was held against their head and bam they were dead. A pin would be fired into the cow's heads, they would drop to the ground like boulders. One moment there is life, the next there isn't. Working with cadavers he noticed a certain serenity came over him, death demands respect, there is beauty in working with death, you get things for free. That also makes it easy. It was one of the reasons he moved on and left the cadavers and the ashes behind. And then closure arrived from the outside; a father attached on each side of a portrait of his deceased daughter a mouse picture with ashes, as guards as it were. A better destination for his art is hard to imagine. It makes me sigh with relief.

The barn the studio was housed in is close to collapse today. The horse is stabled at a friend's place. In their hundred horsepower blue van they get stuck in traffic between their flat in town and their place in the country. His studio is on the third floor, a white room with an antiseptically clean work-surface. This is where he keeps his equipment. His work fits into two document boxes.

But hey! Where is the farmer, the great outdoors, real things, dirty hands, the revolting stuff, animals, where is the toil and labour? The farmer in him has been partly replaced by being a driver. He is more a driver now than he is a farmer. He is not ashamed, the car feels like an extension of his body; driving feels natural. Part sport, part game of dexterity, a team sport, a ballet. He loves speed, the risk, he loves being master of his domain. What about the environment? He smiles; quite often in life he shortchanged himself because of his principles. Still, it is a detour that is his alone, getting his driver's licence at age forty-three.

Making his videos he still has to struggle and fiddle with stuff, fighting its inherent problems. But when all is finished and everything has been cleared away, what stays is digital. Film gives him freedom, there are more registers to work with, he records movement, makes sound, edits, multiplies, samples. He creates a small universe where he is lord and master.

It starts with an image that evokes a question and begins a conflict. Once he notices image and question somewhere, a struggle starts to distill an original approach that will break through the usual way of thinking and create something that was not there before. Something inevitable, he used to say. He knows now that he was too strict with himself. Inevitability is something you strive for.

Makes me think of the maggotman. How many times have I seen that short? And I still look forward to it – there it comes – but at the same time I feel revulsion and I try to shield myself. That will never change; he touches something incongruous inside me. He is a darling, a cute little guy writhing with pleasure and making noises of contentment. Very tenderly placed in a huge hand. He is in fact five maggots glued together with a paper head. The maggots writhe because they want to get away. Or maybe they writhe because that's what they do.

The maggot man was a coincidence. He got the maggots for something totally different. A naked girl in a boat, all made out of paper, sunbathing while she is floating in a sea of maggots. He had the maggots anyway, so could he do something else with them? He started experimenting. Sounds crazy, but maggots were a familiar sight for him. As a boy he found the fishing rod of his late grandpa and started fishing, imitating others. Put the hook through the maggot. You buy the maggots at the hunting outfitters store. And that is how he found himself seated at his worktop attaching a string to a maggot. Like a dog on a leash. What if... Experimentation led to the maggot man.

He uses maggots for his work but he also uses himself, he wants to be part of it all. He wanted to be maggot amongst maggots. Made himself a body encompassing suit. Mariët had to stitch him up and start the camera attached to the ceiling. Wriggling like a maggot on a sheet in the front room in sweltering heat, he noticed Mariët watching the news on TV. The freshly inaugurated prime minister spoke. Taking her eyes off the screen, she looked at him; two men, same age.

One day he glued his fingers together so his left hand would resemble a fish, a school of fish, moving from right to left across the screen. His right hand picks one out at random from time to time, making the unlucky fish become alone again and a hand.

For hours he circles a small table and lets his index and middle finger, nails varnished red, dance like legs, seducing. On the computer he would later edit his head in between those legs. Crazy making. He challenges himself. He tires himself out. But never randomly, always in a balanced structured manner. He is not a savage throwing himself headlong into adventures.

A blue delivery van, nothing special, but a little house is hidden inside, a marvel of space use. Result of his golden rule: with your hands you can make almost anything. In 2004 they toured Europe. *Screening Europe*. He showed his video-art and filmed, Mariët writing her next novel.

Living on a shoestring is an art they still master. They visited the Roma in Rumania, who feel to them like long lost relatives. Being there evokes a feeling of community, strength, daring, more laughter and lighter living. But no romance please, it only works because it is temporary. He moves on, a loner at heart.

Travelling he looks for images, miniatures, reflections, a plastic bottle chased across the street by wind, a dog sleeping amidst rushing legs until it is kicked out of the way. Metaphors for life, suffering, how humans struggle to survive, to make something of this life. And how touching that is. *Ecce homo*.

‘Grandpaaaaa,’ I hear in my head, just like that, at the oddest moments sometimes. And again his short; an old gorilla, an albino with a pink baby-face, staring into space, lazily lifting an eye-lid from time to time. A voice calls out weakly: ‘Grandad, it’s me, Jaap, your grandson. Grandpaaaaa, grandpaaaaa.’

I hope they hear him: his grandfather in Zwolle, a hardy socialist who died when Jaap was seven, and his Danish grandfather Hakon Spliid, the well known artist he never got to meet.

Another work of art. In a cavernously high space I saw the video-installation *The Burden for the first time*, projected on a sparkingly white wall. A man stands in an open window, lifts a rock above his head and hurls it down. On the floor a second projection shows how the stone makes a hole and disappears. An eerie shriek lacerates the space. Only later do I notice that the naked body of the man, curled up in a foetus-like position, was projected on the stone. There is another version, the work is still progressing, but even now it makes me think and watch it in fascination.

In his description I read what *The Burden* means: all our lives we are busy discarding the conditioning we received as youngsters. Art has to be advertised with words. A pity. I would rather not read about the meaning of these films. Or what they mean to him. Explanations are always arbitrary and limiting. Our regard should not be guided by words but by the work itself.

But that is not always true. Sometimes a title becomes part of the film, the heart of it even. There are the index-fingers hammering on the edge of the table, as horses carrying toy indians run across the plains. *Playing my father away*. The toy indians had arrived by mail from Denmark. Twice a year – at Christmas and on his birthday – he would receive a package sent by his Danish dad. His Danish dad hadn't done the right things, he realised that, the man had children with two women. Not done. That is why he never really got to know him.

Playing, he still does it, with the earnestness of a child. He himself shirks away from the word *playing*, but is there a better word? It is a state of mind, make-believe to be able to explore and experience something else. This is the way a child discovers the world, and an adult finds things that are not readily apparent or up for grabs.

A box full of discarded bits of wood in his grandpa's shed was a treasure trove. When his grandfather died he found himself with his mom and grandma. He wanted to be an architect. His father was an engineer in an architect's office. His packages from Denmark sometimes contained Lego or Meccano. He explored the world, driven by his own curiosity. If he wanted to know something he would look it up in the local library. It was one huge journey of discovery. This is where he read how to keep an aquarium with midget gouramies, an aviary for budgies and rice birds.

There were men who could teach him stuff. They must have noticed the eagerness to learn in the primary school kid he was. When an electrician was repairing something in their house he would be watching closely. At the end of the day the electrician gave him a screwdriver containing a small lamp. In the laboratory of the slaughterhouse he was allowed to look at specimen through the microscope. He helped an athletics trainer repair equipment and ended up spending more and more time at this man's house. The man had two daughters. No son. This man taught him that you can almost always repair something, it just takes time, effort and you must have the guts to do it.

In high school the art teacher was everything to him. He spent every waiting hour in his classroom together with his friend Erik. Today Erik van Ommen has become a well-known artist,

specialized in painting birds. At home he built himself a drumset and several string instruments. He began reading books about politics. Following in the footsteps of his Dutch grandfather, the socialist, and encouraged by the spirit of the time. Trotsky. Herman Gorter. Not only *Mei* but also the utopian *Pan*. And Krishnamurti, the Indian sage who said that everyone should be his own master. And others. Love was to save the world. If one percent of the world would meditate, peace would be at hand.

He took it all very seriously. He meditated, did not eat meat, fasted and everything that would pollute he would skip. All for the good of the world. In the mean time he had gotten to know Mariët. They both went to art school. One beautiful work he made in those days. A sound system consisting of copper pipes, candles and a little ball producing a series of sounds that would never repeat themselves. That was jimmying, playing, a discovery through the world of matter. He painted surreal canvases and meditated longer and longer, four hours a day, only then everything was OK, the world whole. As soon as he got up he would sink into a deep depression. He nearly disappeared into his mind. This was not a detour, this was a dead end. One morning he left Mariët at the breakfast table and went south.

Hitch-hicking, walking. In a French village he saw a sign *Fromage pur chèvre*. He bought a piece of cheese and stayed two years on that estate. He got a handle on his addiction to meditation, but the longing stayed for nine years. From dawn to dusk he indulged in hard labour. He cared for goats, lived of them. Animals freed him from his mental dungeon. Coza was one of them. Later he would put his life as a goatherd in a hundred and sixty sentences. He would project those onto a wall, sentences of life regained, *tasting pigfeed, cutting up a slaughtered goat, helping horses mate, selling a sick goat as if she was healthy, smelling the breath of a horse...*

A year later Mariët showed up. He built a small gypsy caravan and again a year later they started travelling around Southern Europe. She had finished school and found in language her medium of expression. He started with photography, no art, please for heaven's sake no art anymore, just pictures to go with her texts. No research, no expression. That the chemicals needed for photography were damaging to the environment he accepted – just. During a flamenco festival in the south of Spain they had a ham sandwich for the first time in years. There was nothing else. It was rude not to accept.

They lived too frugally he says now, they were skin over bone, tried to attain a state of purity. They lived a nomadic WE. That is how they ended up with the Roma in Rumania in the early nineties. They stayed for months to learn about the daily life of these people.

This is where he realised the limitations of photography. It made the poverty of the gypsies beautiful, it made their poverty a source of revenue to him. It became rather jarring. His questions demanded a different form, at least research that would not just conclude: that is the way of the world. They collected money, bought a school and returned to Holland, to the polder and to the city. He knew what he had to do now; find with his hands a material form that would express what had been recorded inside him. And that it starts with playing.

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