Open College of the Arts

Learning Log

Photography 2

Documentary

This is part 1 of 5:
Part One: Introducing documentary

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Cover photo
Neighbourhood watch (image 2 out of a series of 5): 35mm, f/5.6, 1/50s, ISO100

1. Part One: Introducing documentary

About this learning log – 2nd of July 2016
This document is my learning log which I use for the course Documentary. This course is part of the BA (hons) Photography degree programme of the Open College of the Arts (see www.oca.ac.uk for more information). This learning log is like a journal, a logbook, a workbook, or a notebook I created to document my learning.

The purpose of this learning log is to record my progress through the course. It contains :

- my thoughts on the work I produce: my reflective accounts on how my technical decisions, ideas and contextualisation come together to create a successful (or maybe not so successful) final outcome;
- my ideas and observations as I work through the course;
- my reflections on the reading I do, exhibitions I visit, other photographers I meet or work with (this may or may not technically be part of the course);
- my reactions to the tutor's reports on assignments.

I have decided to use a digital log and not an analogue log (paper-based). The main reasons are:

- a log in digital form can be easily communicated (e-mail, dropbox) to my tutor or to fellow students;
- images often already exist in digital form;
- there is (almost) no risk of losing the log, because I have multiple backups.

I didn't create a learning blog on a website. Instead I created this document in Word. I like it better this way because:

- the log reads like a book (it has pages);
- it can be printed if desired;
- I have great freedom in designing the way the pages look;
- I can easily archive the learning log for future use or reference after the course has been completed.

About this learning log:

- It is structured according to the chapters of the course-book (OCA, 2012). Also, each entry in the log is dated and the entries are (mostly) in chronological order.
- All images in this learning log are my own work (© Maurice Timmermans) unless stated otherwise.
- Focal lengths are always 35mm equivalent focal lengths (efl) unless stated otherwise.

Student profile – 2nd of July 2016

Self-portrait: collage of two images, 58mm, f/8, 1/125s, ISO100 (from: Context and Narrative)

Let me tell you a little bit about myself. I am 49 years of age, married, 3 children (19, 17 and 14 years old). I live in Soest, The Netherlands and work as a self-employed project manager / interim manager. See www.tpim.nl for more information (note that this website is in Dutch). I urgently need to improve and change the images on this website. But that's a task I keep postponing.

I studied Physics at the Delft University of Technology and after completion I studied Logistics and Business Administration at the Eindhoven University of Technology. After my studies I worked for an engineering firm and for a management consultancy. Since 2001 I am self-employed.

In my teens and my early twenties I photographed using colour, b&w film and diafilm (35mm and 6x6cm b&w). I printed b&w images using the family bathroom as a darkroom. In my early twenties I stopped photographing. I found photography too consuming. During vacations for example I spent a lot of time looking through the viewfinder. The result was that I didn't experience vacation or travelling until I saw my photographs in printed form. That's why I stopped photographing so I could experience the moment.

In 2013 I started photographing again. I promised myself that I wouldn't be photographing vacations or family events. In this way it feels to me there is less risk of photography getting in the way of experiencing the moment. Still photography is like an overwhelming passion for me and I have to make sure that it doesn't take over my whole life.

From the start I worked very intensely on my development as a photographer. I produced a lot of images, created a Flickr-webpage (http://www.flickr.com/photos/mauricetimmermans), read a lot of books, took video-courses in photography (a.o. composition, b&w, colour, studio-lighting, digital workflow, Photoshop), visited museums and exhibitions, created my own 7x4 meter studio in my home and became a member of a local photography association. Every week I send an e-mail to family and friends with my "picture of the week". Every now and then I do a paid shoot. End 2013 I started my studies at the OCA with the course *Art of Photography*. After this course I took *People and Place*, *Context and Narrative* and *Gesture and Meaning* (which I will finish this month).

It is my ambition to start a second career as a professional photographer (possibly advertising / portraits) next to my career as a project manager / interim manager. To achieve this goal I need to evolve as a (professional) photographer and find my own style/voice. I need the feedback of a trained eye in order to improve my work. I hope to find this and to grow as a professional photographer when studying for a degree in Photography with the OCA.

So when giving feedback on or assessing my work please keep in mind that

- I'm working towards gaining a BA degree in Photography;
- I'm planning to work as a professional photographer within a few years.

I'm planning to gain my degree within 3 years from now. *Documentary* is my fifth course in the OCA degree pathway.

The past 14 months I struggled through the course *Gesture and Meaning*. I was very busy working as a project manager in The Hague (still am), so I had less time for photography as I hoped and planned for. This gave me a feeling of not getting anywhere and not producing results. This feeling did not stimulate being creative and inspired. Also I had some troubles getting used to the way exercises and assignments were given. Often very detailed, which limits the creative freedom of the student. Also a thorough and professional execution of some of the exercises took an enormous amount of hours. This produced a feeling of losing my inspiration and motivation.

I overcame this loss of inspiration and motivation by taking a lot of Lynda.com video courses and by taking a masterclass that builds up to an exhibition during the 2016 BredaPhoto international photo festival in September and October. For this masterclass I worked on a documentary project about the neighbourhood watch in Soesterberg, a small town close to where I live.

The masterclass made me enthusiastic about documentary and I really look forward to this course. I think I will be able to spend 12-16 hours per week on the course. This means I plan to finish the course in June 2017.

Planning

- August-September 2016 Part One: Introducing documentary
- October-November 2016 Part Two: The B&W document
- January-February 2017 Part Three: A colour vision
- March-April 2017 Part Four: Ethics and looking at the other
- May-June 2017 Part Five: New forums for documentary
- July 2017 Part Six: Preparing for assessment

Masterclass of BredaPhoto – 2nd of July 2016
Last week I finished this project. In January I passed the selection for the masterclass of BredaPhoto (www.bredaphoto.nl/en/). Since February I worked on a documentary project which suits the festival theme YOU (www.bredaphoto.nl/en/bredaphoto-2016/theme-2016-you/).
For me the masterclass was an excellent opportunity to work face-to-face with fellow photographers, students and tutors (different from what I am used to with the OCA).

The project is about the neighbourhood watch in Soesterberg. It took me a long time to get in touch with these people. They like to stay anonymous, they often do their rounds in regular clothing. After a couple of weeks I was able to make contact and I joined five members of the neighbourhood watch on their rounds several times during a couple of months.

I decided to work in black and white. Dark-Light, Black-White, Good-Bad. It is a bit like the way the members of the neighbourhood watch see the world around them. Plus the transition to the night can be made more easily without losing the visual unity of the series. I strived to make photographs which are not explicit, but leave room for the imagination of the viewer and make the viewer look for trouble / badness / scariness. The members of the neighbourhood watch are trying very much to spot criminality which maybe (if we exaggerate things) makes them a bit paranoid. These feelings I wish to communicate. I tried using a detached, “objective” style. Camera vantage point at eyelevel, images in landscape orientation, 35mm.

In the end 5 images out of 40 good photographs were selected which will be exhibited together with a screen showing text fragments from group chats of the neighbourhood watch.

Neighbourhood watch (1): 35mm, f/2.8, 1/60s, ISO6400

Neighbourhood watch (2): 35mm, f/5.6, 1/50s, ISO100

Neighbourhood watch (3): 35mm, f/2, 1/800s, ISO640

Neighbourhood watch (4): 35mm, f/4, 1/500s, ISO100

Neighbourhood watch (5): 35mm, f/2.8, 1/40s, ISO1600

Exercise: What is documentary photography? (page 19) – 8th of July 2016
Documentary photography is a changing practice. The technology changes, who has access to that technology changes, the topics change and the way the stories are told change. The boundaries between creative, art and documentary are blurred. This is what Miranda Gavin tells us talking about documentary photography. A definition of documentary photography is not given. Documentary photography is what the photographer says it is.

I agree with Gavin that a practical way of categorising a photographic work is asking the photographer what it is meant to be. We can also ask the viewer (the audience) what it is perceived to be. These opinions, beliefs and convictions may also change over time. In this way we can never know for sure whether a photographic work must be considered documentary. Maybe it is not important and not worth the quarrel.

Must we conclude that we cannot answer the question what documentary photography is? No. Last week I read a master thesis *Truth in photography* (Mullen, 1998). Mullen considers documentary photography to be a persuasive art. Documentary photography is "a form of storytelling that persuades the audience to see the subject matter in a particular light" (Mullen, 1998: 45). This is the way I experienced my work for the masterclass of BredaPhoto. And this is what I like my documentary photography to be while maintaining a close association with immediacy and truth. That last thing (truth, objectivity, staging, manipulation) is, I guess, a never ending debate. And that is what makes documentary interesting and exciting to work on.

José Navarro can be found on:
https://josenavarro.exposure.co/

Documentary Now! (Gierstberg, 2005) is sold out everywhere.

Mohamed Bourouissa can be found on:
http://www.mohamedbourouissa.com/

Eight magazine in 2004 (V3N1), Witold Krassowski, can be found on:
https://issuu.com/foto8/docs/vol3no1

Definitions of documentary photography – 10th of July 2016

A very narrow definition of documentary photography:
Documentary photography usually refers to a popular form of photography used to chronicle events or environments both significant and relevant to history and historical events and everyday life. It is typically covered in professional photojournalism, or real life reportage, but it may also be an amateur, artistic, or academic pursuit.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Documentary_photography

A classical and narrow definition:
Social documentary photography or concerned photography is the recording of how the world looks like, with a social and/or environmental focus. It is a form of documentary photography. It may also refer to a socially critical genre of photography dedicated to showing the life of underprivileged or disadvantaged people.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_documentary_photography

This definition I like better:
"documentary photography" is a type of sharp-focus photography that captures a moment of reality, in order to convey a meaningful message about what is happening in the world. Unlike photojournalism - which concentrates on breaking news events - or "street photography" - which focuses entirely on an interesting moment of normal everyday life - "documentary photography" typically focuses on an ongoing issue (or story) which it relates through a series of photographs.
http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/photography/documentary.htm

These are just a few examples of the many, many definitions which can be found. Luckily documentary photography can be what I want it to be. That's what makes this course much more interesting.

One question needs to be answered. Does a documentary photograph always have to capture a moment of reality? Suppose for example that I wanted to make a series of photographs about a person and his dreams. And in this series there would be staged photographs which depict his dreams. Would this be documentary? I hope it would. I think there are ethical limitations to the degree of staging, manipulation or re-enactment the documentary photographer can apply. When a photograph is presented to viewers in a context or in a way the viewer is likely to expect the photograph to be capturing a moment of reality, then the photograph should do exactly that. A photograph should "mean" what it "says" or meet the viewer's "Qualified Expectation of Reality" (Wheeler, 2002: 127).

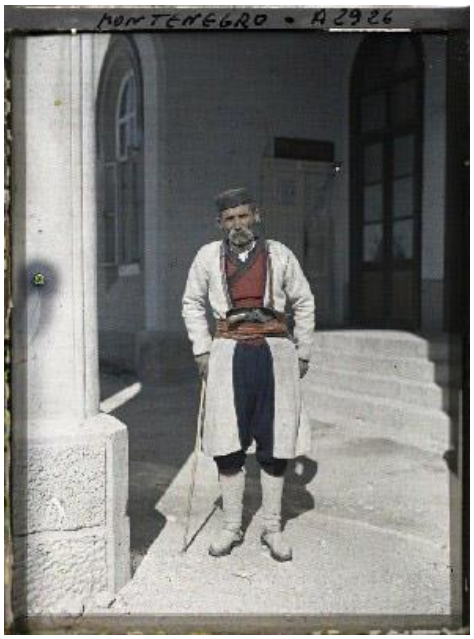
Research point (page 22) – 10th of July 2016
Sources:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Documentary_photography

Nanook of the North is available on: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nanook_of_the_North
The film is a 1922 American silent documentary film by Robert J. Flaherty, with elements of docudrama, at a time when the concept of separating films into documentary and drama did not yet exist. Flaherty has been criticized for deceptively portraying staged events as reality. "Nanook" was in fact named Allakariallak, while the "wife" shown in the film was not really his wife.

Nyla, wife of Nanook

I think the film shows a western and romanticised way of looking at the Inuit people.

I especially liked the images of Albert Kahn. The images are in colour and seem rather straight, depicting street scenes.



China (1912) and Montenegro (1913); part of the Albert Kahn project

Exercise: Realism (page 23) – 10th of July 2016
Found the essay on: http://www.oca-student.com/resource-type/waltontransparentpictures

In the essay two possibly colliding views are stated:

- The photographic image is the object itself (André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image").
- Every photograph is a fake from start to finish (Edward Steichen, "Ye Fakers").

Both views are true. Through the photographic image we “see” the objects photographed and at the same time we rationally know that every photograph is or at least can be a fake. In the case of a painting we don’t experience the same way of being able to “see” the objects painted. Why is that? Even now in the age of digital photography we rationally know that a photographic image can be created even without the use of a camera, much like the way a painting is created. It seems to me that if it looks like a photograph we *want* to see through it, we *want* it to depict reality. Maybe it is reassuring to believe what our eyes are seeing. Without this we would not be able to live our lives, constantly questioning the reality of what we see.

I think the reason why photography is especially realistic must be studied not philosophically but psychologically or even biologically.

Brian Bielmann: Sequence of Extreme Sports Motion Merged Into One Image (surfer: Jordy Smith)

We even view an image like the one above as realistic and through it we "see" the way the surfer has ridden the wave. At the same time we rationally know the image is a composite and we have no way of knowing reality, for example if the surfer really jumped that high.

Exercise: What makes a document? (page 25) – 10th of July 2016
Many if not all of the philosophical aspects of answering the question "What makes a document?" are covered in the coursebook Documentary, this post and the comments on it.

In her video http://oca-student.com/node/100125 Miranda Gavin proposes a different, a very simple and practical way of answering this question. Just ask the photographer whether the photograph is meant as a document. I think this notion should be extended to what the viewer thinks. Just ask the viewer whether he or she perceives the photograph as a document. Of course these opinions, beliefs and convictions may also change over time.

Must we then conclude that a document cannot be defined? That it is only a document because people say it is? No. If I must answer the question whether a photograph is a document to me I would also use the definition in the dictionary. A document is a piece of written, printed, or electronic matter that provides information or evidence or that serves as an official record (www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/document).

At first the Spanish photograph featured on page 24 of the course book was not a document to me, because it did not provide me information. After reading this post, I learned that it depicted the grandfather of José Navarro and that it was taken in Spain, during the Spanish civil war. Only then the photograph became a document to me.

The above text was posted to http://weareoca.com/photography/what-makes-a-document/ at the 10th of July 2016.

Exercise: Personal photographs (page 26) – 11th of July 2016
From the archive of scanned slides (diafilm) of my parents I selected the following 5 images. I tried to select images which also tell a story to people other than myself (universally narrative, evoke feelings).

Family album 1: Saint Nicholas and Black Peter come to visit me and bring presents (1970s)

Family album 2: My father is building the garden of our newly built home (1978 or 1979)

Family album 3: This is what is left of our caravan after the accident. I was driving (1980s).

Family album 4: During the renovation of the bathroom, my father and I transport the old bathtub down (1980s)

Family album 5: My mother and I walk arms around each other at my wedding (1994)

I posted the images and asked to write short captions or explanations of the photographs on the course discussion group (http://www.oca-student.com/course/photography-2-documentary#quickset-course_page_horiz_tabs3)

31st of July:
The reactions of my fellow-students and my tutor:

Family album 1: Saint Nicholas and Black Peter come to visit me and bring presents (1970s)

1. I have a sister who lives in Holland so I know a little about the Christmas traditions. So this is Sinterklaas and Swarte Pieten (please excuse spelling). My understanding is that They visit on 6 December and children who have been good get a present and if they have been naughty they get sticks in their shoes. The boy in the photo looks quite pleased so I think he has been good.
2. Fancy Dress.

3. "Why oh why, did I have to be born into this family?!?" or "Beam me up Scotty....." for anyone who is a star trek fan.
4. I reckon the young boy is you near Christmas time . Unlike Anne I have no knowledge of Dutch traditions so whilst I recognise Father Xmas the other figure is rather interesting to say the least! Possibly taken in the family home owing are the adults relatives of yours perhaps?
5. Blackface Controversy - Should the Netherland's Zwarte Piet be banned?

Family album 2: My father is building the garden of our newly built home (1978 or 1979)
1. This looks like someone, you maybe, planting trees around the boundary of a piece of land, maybe a new house?
2. Making a garden from scratch.
3. "When I've sorted out the garden, I'll get started with building the house".
4. New build / home.
5. New trees are being planted as part of the area's urban regeneration.

Family album 3: This is what is left of our caravan after the accident. I was driving (1980s).
1. Oh dear, this caravan has seen better days. Hope this wasn't as a result of an accident!
2. Caravan needs a bit of work.
3. "The morning after a wild all night party".
4. My initial thought was this was used as a place to rest during the build of above.
5. Family's summer holiday cancelled as caravan is ram-raided by thieves.

Family album 4: During the renovation of the bathroom, my father and I transport the old bathtub down (1980s)
1. Getting rid of the old bath, maybe this is the easiest way. Having a new bathroom installed. I think it is winter as the winter jasmine is coming into flower on the wall.
2. Bathtub slide.
3. "If she wants anything else moving I am going to ask for a divorce".
4. This made me smile , I assume it wouldn't go up/down the staircase and needed to be dropped out of a window.
5. The Bathroom Bandit - Man caught stealing bathroom fixtures.

Family album 5: My mother and I walk arms around each other at my wedding (1994)
1. Dressed for a wedding, or maybe a funeral as both are wearing black! I wonder why both seem to be looking at their feet! Maybe the ground is rough, or could they be dancing??
2. Support.
3. "I'm sure that sherry was a bit off darling....".
4. Like Ann this could be taken at a wedding or funeral , the clothes seem rather sombre perhaps for the former. Close relatives , the man's is protectively across the possibly older lady's shoulder.
5. Mourners gather for funeral of important local figure.

1=reactions of Anne
2=reactions of Celena
3=reactions of Jane
4=reactions of Judy
5=reactions of Chris

Reflection on reactions and conclusion

- Because of the lack of context, the viewer has no idea what the photographer wants to show. Providing captions or explanations is difficult. Some people who reacted tried to make up a story or used humour. Others studied the details in the photographs looking for clues, for example: "I think it is winter as the winter jasmine is coming into flower on the wall."
- Many reactions come close to my own captions.
- A very different interpretation is easily made, for example: "…this could be taken at a wedding or funeral…".
- Because of the juxtaposition of the images the viewer tend to interpret the images as being related, for example: "My initial thought was this (the caravan) was used as a place to rest during the build of above (the new home). The juxtaposition of images create a context by itself.
- The viewer's own experience and cultural background influence strongly the interpretation of an image. For example the first photograph of Saint Nicholas and Black Peter can easily be interpreted by people living in The Netherlands. This is a December tradition in The Netherlands which causes a lot of controversy over recent years because of its racist implications. People outside of the Netherlands might never have heard of this tradition. Still two out of five people who reacted know about the tradition.
  For me the recent controversy sheds a whole new light on a photograph of a December celebration in the 1970s. I have to asks myself questions like: Was I brought up as a racist? Am I a racist just because I appear in this photograph? Would I still celebrate Saint Nicholas in the same way now I know that some people feel offended by the Black Peter tradition?

This is not documentary / *Suburban Dance* – 31st of July 2016

In my opinion there is not enough actual photographing in this course. So I have to compensate by doing some extracurricular work.

As an exercise I created the following series of three photographs by taking them out of their original context and by this creating a new story. I presented them in black and white and in colour with the title *Suburban Dance*. On Facebook and in the course discussion group I asked people whether they preferred colour or black and white and whether they could provide an interpretation or an alternative caption.

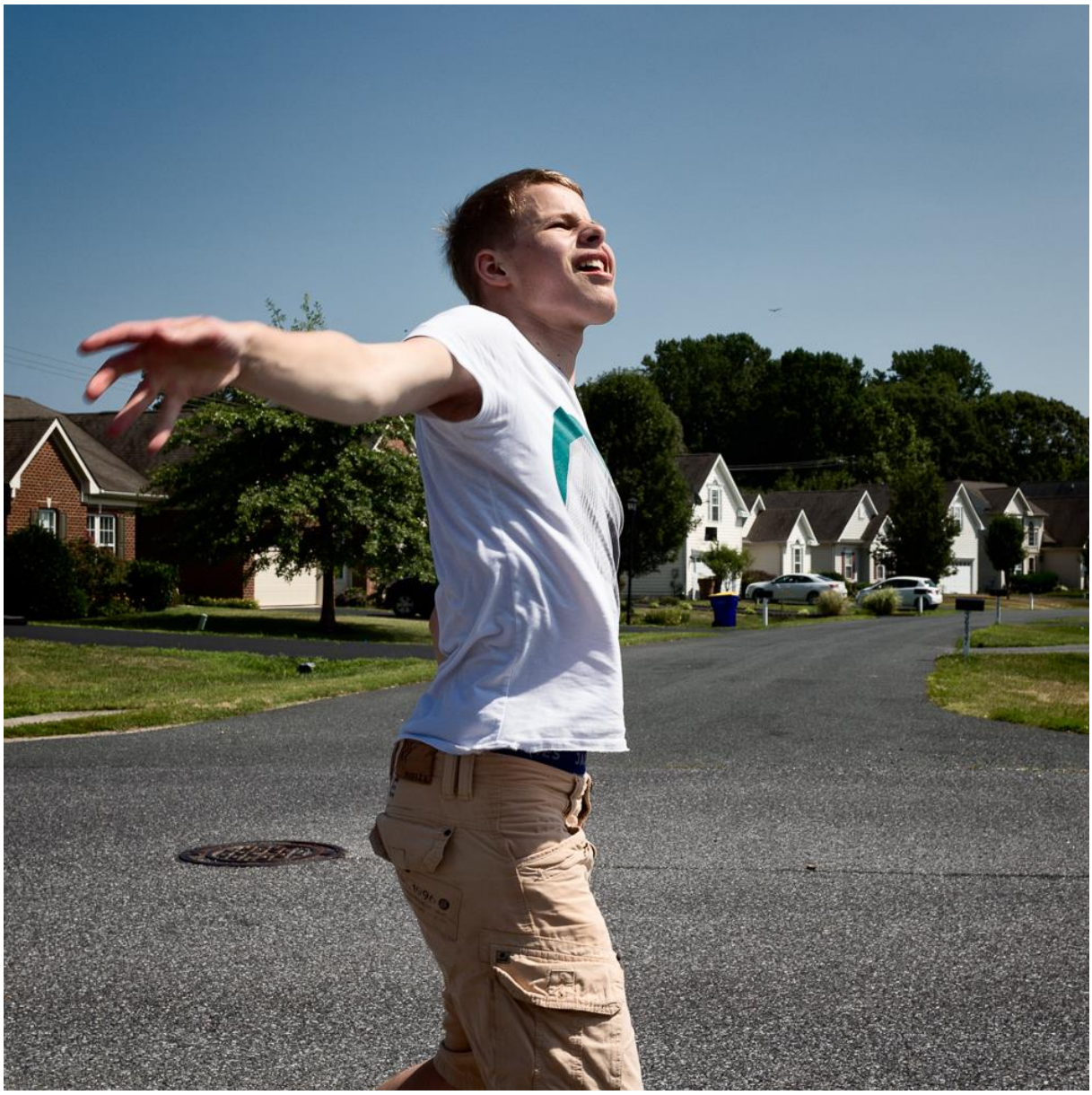
Everybody preferred colour (not one exception). The reasons given are that it suits the content (the story, the feeling) better and that by using colour the person is separated better from the houses. Although I like the black and white series, I prefer colour myself too.
Most people associate the series with joy, sunny weather, exuberance and freedom.

In post I chose a colour temperature slightly on the yellow side, contrasty look and a light vignette (which darkens the sky / makes the sky more saturated).

Suburban Dance: 38mm, f/8, 1/400s, ISO100 (series of three images)

Suburban Dance 1: 38mm, f/8, 1/400s, ISO100

Suburban Dance 2: 38mm, f/8, 1/400s, ISO100



Suburban Dance 3: 38mm, f/8, 1/400s, ISO100

The images were taken out of their original context (my son catching and throwing a Frisbee). Juxtaposition of the three images created a new context (together with the title).

Is this documentary? The images depict exactly what happened in front of the camera, the photographs are not staged or posed. But the images together with the title suggest a story which did not exist when the photographs were taken. The story is completely fictional. That's why I do not consider this documentary.

Dealing with boring subject matter – 5th of August 2016

As an extracurricular exercise I photographed the development in Rehoboth Beach, USA were we spent a few days this vacation. The neighbourhood made the impression on me of being neat, tidy and very boring. There were no people on the street. People mainly stay inside their air-conditioned houses. I tried to photograph this barren landscape of the Big American Nothing. Tried to juxtapose detail shots with urban landscape shots.

Today I am selecting and editing the series. Now how to deal with this boring subject matter?

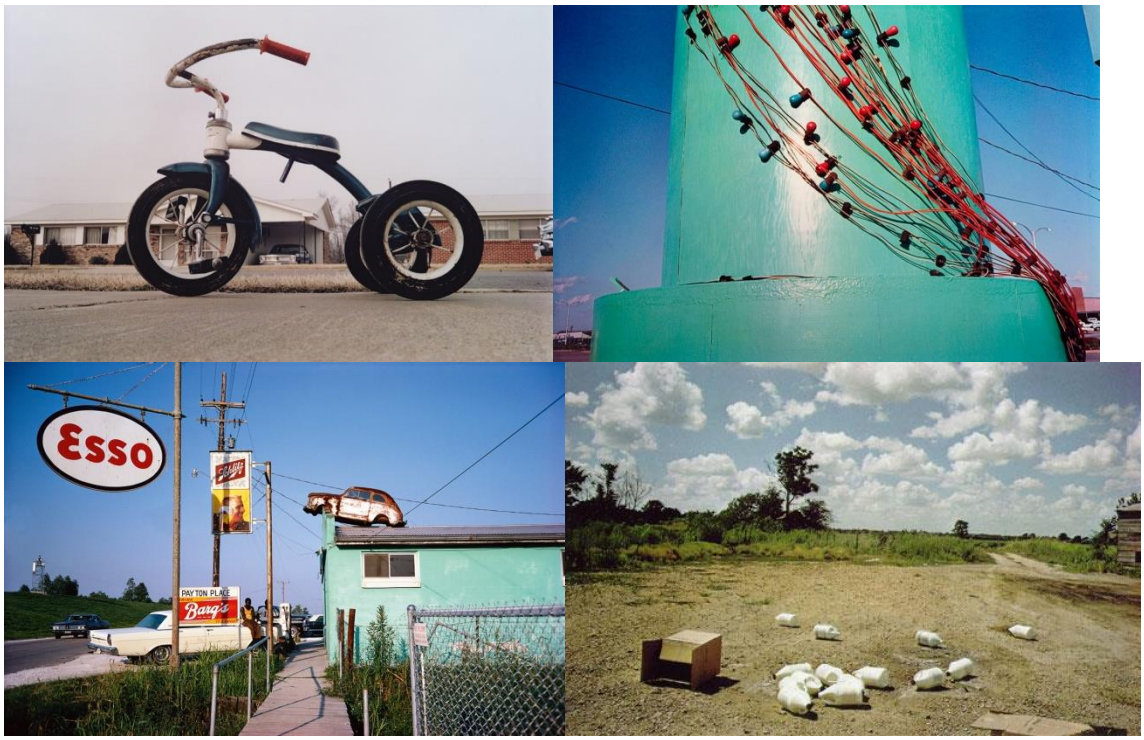
1. Juxtaposing a detail shot with a landscape shot in which you can see where the detail is (too explicit).
2. Juxtaposing detail shots and landscape shots which contain similar shapes or colours (a kindergarten exercise).
3. Juxtaposing shots in such a way that lines run from one image into another, so separate images can be seen as a whole (too complicated, too subtle?).

I do not want to depict something which was not there. I want to convey a feeling of barren emptiness. So none of the above are a good creative strategy. But then all I seem to get are boring pictures. Maybe this is the way it should be… What is boring should be boring…

Barren prosperity (contact sheet of a first selection)

Last week I visited the Stephen Shore exhibition in photography museum *Huis Marseille* in Amsterdam. Together with William Eggleston a photographer of the everyday, the banal. Both photographers are able to present boring subject matter in an interesting way (by the use of composition and colour).

Collage of Stephen Shore photographs



Collage of William Eggleston photographs

*Stephen Shore: The corner of Beverly Blvd and La Brea Ave (*June 21 and June 22, 1975)

Watched the following videos on YouTube:
Eggleston:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jZ_HkaTXh8

Stephen Shore (corner of Beverly and La Brea)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vu1MWwzTpn4

Now, do I like the photographs of Eggleston and Shore? Is there beauty in the banal? Some photographs I do like, but some are still boring to me, although they are art with a capital A.

My conclusion to get my own work going is to pursue the boring further by looking at the photographs better, longer, with more attention.

Barren prosperity (contact sheet of a second selection)

Barren prosperity (contact sheet of the final selection)

Now I am happy with the result. It is a barren, constructed place, showing patchwork. This is what I consider documentary. The photographs show reality and convey my feelings about the place / situation at the same time.

The results are shown below. Photographs are meant to be shown like the configuration in the contact sheet (three photographs showing diagonals, followed by three photographs showing horizontals).

Barren prosperity 1: 38mm, f/8, 1/80s, ISO100

Barren prosperity 2: 38mm, f/8, 1/40s, ISO100

Barren prosperity 3: 38mm, f/8, 1/80s, ISO100

Barren prosperity 4: 38mm, f/8, 1/50s, ISO100

Barren prosperity 5: 38mm, f/8, 1/50s, ISO100

Barren prosperity 6: 38mm, f/8, 1/30s, ISO100

Reading: Context and Narrative – 5th of Augustus 2016

Last month I studied *Context and Narrative* (Short, 2011) again. A straightforward book, a good and easy read, filled with inspiring examples. What I learned this time:

- Be passionate about and have respect for your subject. Be genuinely interested.
- Use text.
- *Nan* by Tim Mitchell (Short, 2011: 21) was inspiring to me. The series shows a combination of b&w and colour images and combine photographs in an associative way (texture, light, colour, content). This is a way of working which I would normally not do or not think of. I would like to try this approach myself. A first try is the *Barren prosperity* series.
- *Shootback* by Peter Ndolo also was inspiring. I would like to give my father suffering from dementia a camera, hoping that he will be able to communicate through images. Communicating through speech or writing is impossible now.

Exercise: Reading Martha Rosler and Mary Klages – 6th of August 2016

Mary Klages on Postmodernism (in core resources which come with the course):

- A philosophical text. Many parallels with (Mullen, 1998). How to translate these ideas to documentary photography? There is no underlying truth, only subjectivity?
- Will art go the same way as knowledge? Art which is not able to be translated into digital form will cease to be art?

Martha Rossler In, Around and Afterthoughts (also in core resources)

- During my studies at the OCA this is the third time I am asked to read this text.
- In the core resources there is only one page of the essay. On the internet I found a complete copy.
- A text which needs a lot of background info / knowledge to read. This third time I understand more of what the text is about.
- Exploitation is always an issue when photographing. I preferably solve this dilemma by making the photographic project a joint undertaking of the photographer and the subject. Being clear and honest about your intentions is critical.
- Documentary has shifted from trying to reform life to trying to know (understand) it. Next step maybe is documentary which tries to feel life (conveying an emotion or feeling).

Exercise: Reflective commentary on Bazin and Sekula – 6th of August 2016

Bazin speaks of "*the essentially objective character of photography*". But does he mean that photographs are objective? I think his text is more nuanced than that. Bazin also states that

> "*For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man. The personality of the photographer enters into the proceedings only in his selection of the object to be photographed and by way of the purpose he has in mind*."

We can conclude that Bazin does not say that photography is objective, but that it has an objective character. So what is that objective character? Bazin speaks of the "*irrational power of the photograph to bear away our faith"*. In other words: a photograph looks real, and therefore we believe it to be real, although we rationally know photographs can mislead.

Sekula says: the meaning of a photograph (the message) is the result of an information exchange which is context determined and culturally determined. So the photograph has no intrinsic or universal meaning. I agree, but the statement Sekula makes does not help us any further in understanding why this is an issue with photography and not with painting or writing for example.

My own position is that photography has an irresistible power to convince people. This power to convince is far greater than that of a painting or a piece of written text. I think the photographer must use this power responsibly. If a photograph in a context suggests being objective and true, than the photographer has a responsibility to be truthful.

Exercise: 2011 Hereford Photography Festival (page 30) – 6th of August 2016
Reflective commentary on Donald Weber's *Interrogations*
I was triggered by the concept of photographing suspects during police interrogations. Immediately I assumed the photographs were staged. I assumed they were taken in the actual interrogation room and that they only looked real. It is one thing to get permission of the police to photograph in the interrogation room but it is a very different thing to photograph suspects in such a way they can be recognized. I don't think it is ethical to photograph suspects and I think it is not a good decision to publish these photographs. For these reasons I assumed the photographs were staged.

Then I did some research on the internet:
www.lensculture.com/articles/donald-weber-interrogations
www.pdnonline.com/features/State-Power-Donald--3817.shtml
and found out that these photographs were made during actual interrogations. The police agreed to Weber taking photographs if he had the written consent of the suspect. About 20% of the suspects gave permission to be photographed. I still think the project is ethically wrong. At the time of giving their written consent the subjects were in custody of the police and could have given their consent for the wrong reasons.

Still the photographs are fascinating and make the viewer think about (institutional) power / violence and the effect it has on a person. We cannot know whether the stories these images tell are true. The simple presence of the photographer in the room influences the behaviour of both the police and the suspect. Both the police and the suspects might have wanted to gain something by letting the interrogations be photographed.

Donald Weber: Interrogations

Donald Weber: Interrogations

Jon Levy has a criterion for documentary photography: whether something is documentary or not is determined by the original intent of the photographer. He also states that it is about how the photographs “work” (effect on viewer) and not about how they look. So if you want to know whether something is documentary: ask the photographer and the viewer.

Planning the assignment – 11th of July 2016

In Soest, the town in which I live, we have a gasoline station which looks a bit run down. One would expect only few customers to go there and fill up. This is not true. Fuel prices are the lowest in the area and often traffic jams of waiting cars build up, sometimes blocking the cross roads. When that happens the owner comes out of his booth and starts directing traffic. Shouting and making wild gestures.

The gasoline station is well known in Soest. I think many years from now, people will still remember De Birkt and the (strange) family who owned it.

Photograph of gasoline station De Birkt, owned by the Plekkepoel family (found on the internet)

Photograph of gasoline station De Birkt, owned by the Plekkepoel family (found on the internet)

I am curious about the Plekkepoel family. What is their business strategy? What does their day-to-day business look like? I am planning to use my full frame camera with a 35mm lens. I will work in colour. I will print the photographs using a colour calibrated monitor and an Epson Pro 3880 inkjet printer.

I aim to shoot portraits of them in their booth and in their workshop. I aim to shoot them while directing traffic. I would also like to make photographs of the place, the architecture and some meaningful details. I am aiming to make at least 30 good photographs and make a final selection of 10 photographs which tell the story best.

I do not know exactly what to expect and I don't know exactly what story I want to tell, but I just would like to get to know them. I plan to make contact and ask them if it is all right with them if I come to make a series of photographs and visit them multiple times during the next couple of weeks.

On the 12th of July I got this feedback of my tutor:

> *Maurice,*
>
> *Your idea sounds interesting, make sure you do a lot of research on documentary portraiture and shoot a lot of images so you have various styles to choose from.*
>
> *Celena*

On the 8th of August I called (cold call) the gasoline station and spoke with Plekkepoel jr and with Plekkepoel sr. Plekkepoel sr was hesitant about the idea. I managed to convince him to pay him a visit and talk about the project some more.

On the 11th of August I visited the gasoline station and met Jan, his wife Maria and his son Daniel (for the first time). They were OK with the project and they agreed that I would start right away. Wow, I am happy I managed to bring about this project.

Info on creating photo essays:
www.collectivelens.com/blog/creating-photo-essay

I took the following video courses on Lynda.com:

- Photojournalism and Photo Essay Fundamentals (with Paul Taggart)
- Shooting a Photo Essay: An Artist at Work (with Paul Taggart)
- Insights on Photojournalism (with Paul Taggart)

Earlier this year I took other Lynda.com courses about creating a photo essay.

What I learned:

- Before the shoot(s): Research and planning
  - Research the subject and research what other photographers did on the subject.
  - Decide on what kind of images you want to get (wish list).
- During the shoot(s): Get different types of shots:
  - Establishing shot (place / subject, often overview, wide angle)
  - Detail shot (of the place, of the subject)
  - Action shot (movement, something happening)
  - People interacting
  - Portrait (environmental, formal)
  - Ending shot
- During the shoot(s): Make sure you get variety:
  - Choice of lens (wide / telephoto)
  - Detail / overview
  - Action / static
  - People / no-people
  - Different lighting conditions (for example day and night)
  - Different vantage points (for example high / low)
  - Light / dark (high key / low key)
  - Different colour (blue, red, yellow)
- After the shoot(s): Selecting, editing and sequencing
  - Do your selecting in between shoots: then you know what is missing and you can shoot what is missing the next time (filling in the holes).
  - Select the number of images down from over 1.000 to 100 and then to 30 or so.
  - Do the final selection and sequencing (10 images). You can ask for the opinions of the subject or of your peers.

The courses by Paul Taggart show in practice how he shoots, selects and sequences his photo essays. Very instructive. The following photographs are taken from his website
www.paultaggart.com/home/

Paul Taggart: Antarctica - Whale warriors (establishing shot, signature shot or leading shot which tells the whole story)

Paul Taggart: Antarctica - Whale warriors (establishing shot, alternative)

Paul Taggart: Antarctica - Whale warriors

Paul Taggart does not have much captions/text to go with the images. In my opinion some images get stronger if you know the context (have extra information in the form of text). The following image is of a daughter who does not want to become the successor of her father as a breeder of Icelandic horses. See also: www.herdiniceland.com/

Paul Taggart: Herd in Iceland

Research of the subject
Mini-documentary about the gasoline station (in Dutch):
http://www.npo.nl/het-klokhuis/06-07-2005/PRIDFIX2011_00919

Research of what other photographers have done regarding the subject:

Warren S. O'Brien: Sinclair Service Station (1938)

Ed Ruscha: Twentysix Gasoline Stations (1963)

Eric Tabuchi: Twentysix Abandoned Gasoline Stations (2008)
www.lensculture.com/articles/eric-tabuchi-twentysix-abandoned-gasoline-stations

Vanessa Leissring: Petrol Stations
http://vanessaleissring.com/gallery/petrolstations/

Kind of images I am aiming for:
The images must show the gas station and the way it is run by the Plekkepoel family. In a way it must be a portrait of both the station and the people running it. The images must show the day-to-day business.

- Establishing shot. This image should show the station (a bit run-down) and the queues of waiting cars. Preferably the sign which show the prices of the fuel should be in the shot. This tells the reason why this station is so busy: low prices.
- Portraits of Jan, Maria and Daniel. Preferably natural (not formal) portraits. Environmental.
- Detail shots showing the station (without people).
- People interacting.
- Action/movement.
- Delivery of the fuel.
- Directing the queue of waiting cars (directing traffic).
- Image which conveys the sense of flow of customers.
- The Plekkepoels know a lot of people. Jan, Maria or Daniel talking to customers.
- Night shot (maybe as ending shot). Inspired by Vanessa Leissring.
- Formal group portrait (not sure whether this will fit the series, I prefer natural (unposed) portraits for this project).

Executing the assignment – 16th of August 2016
First visit: 12th of August (morning); 411 photographs taken. Selected 10 images. Missing: portraits and detail shots, installation for soil sanitation must be re-shot.

Second visit: 13th of August (afternoon); 278 photographs taken. Selected 13 images. Missing: portraits of Maria, action/movement, people interacting.

Third visit: 13th of August (night, gas station closed); 11 photographs taken. Selected 1 image.

Fourth visit: 16th of August (morning); 46 photographs taken. Selected 4 images. Missing: portraits of Maria, Group portrait, re-shoot Colombia connection.

Fifth visit: 16th of August (afternoon): 155 photographs taken. Selected 4 images.

After the fourth visit a kind of fatigue kicks in. I find it increasingly difficult to see interesting scenes to shoot. I have lost my fresh eyes to look at the gas station.

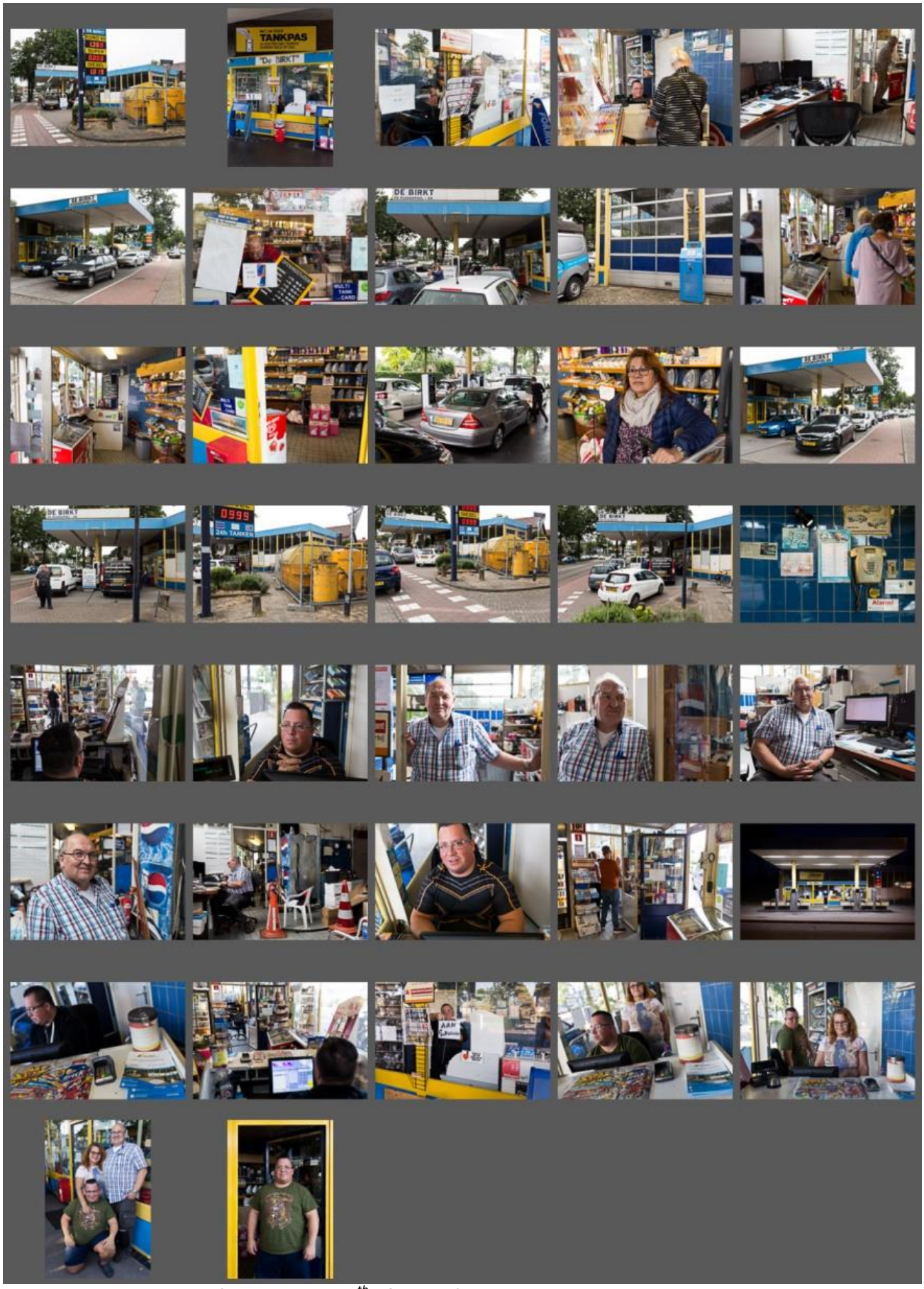
I was not able to shoot the delivery of fuel. The trucks comes 2-3 times a week, but the arrival is not accurately known in advance. So this image on my wish list is still missing.

The first selection consists of 32 images. I will make a further selection and print those small size and show them to the Plekkepoel family. I will also use the same prints for final selection and sequencing.

18th of August. Selecting. Revisiting the one and two starred images. Three starred selection (and up) is now 37 images and four starred selection is 16 images. Now do some fast editing and printing the top 40 images. Show them to the Plekkepoels and then let it be for a couple of days.

Laying the puzzle (selecting and sequencing) – 20th of August

Laying the puzzle (selecting and sequencing) – 20th of August



Gasoline station De Birkt (contactsheet 18th of August)

We visited friends this weekend (not photographers) and I asked them to make a selection and a sequence of the images (without influencing them). It was nice to see them selecting many of the same images as I selected. The choices they made result in a more explicit/literal way of telling the story. The sequencing they chose was more sequential.

Laying the puzzle (selecting and sequencing) – 21st of August

It was interesting to see they picked the leading photograph (my favourite shot and portrait orientation) as the first in the sequence. An interesting idea to start with the leading shot (to draw people's attention). The leading shot is often more interesting to look at than the establishing shot. This is similar to the choice Paul Taggart made for the *Antarctica – Whale warriors* series.

On the 26th of August I visited a friend who studies at the Photo Academy in Amsterdam. He made the following selection and sequence:

Laying the puzzle (selecting and sequencing) – 27th of August

He chose the images which show how busy the gasoline station is.

The problems with all the selections and sequences above are that there is too little variety:

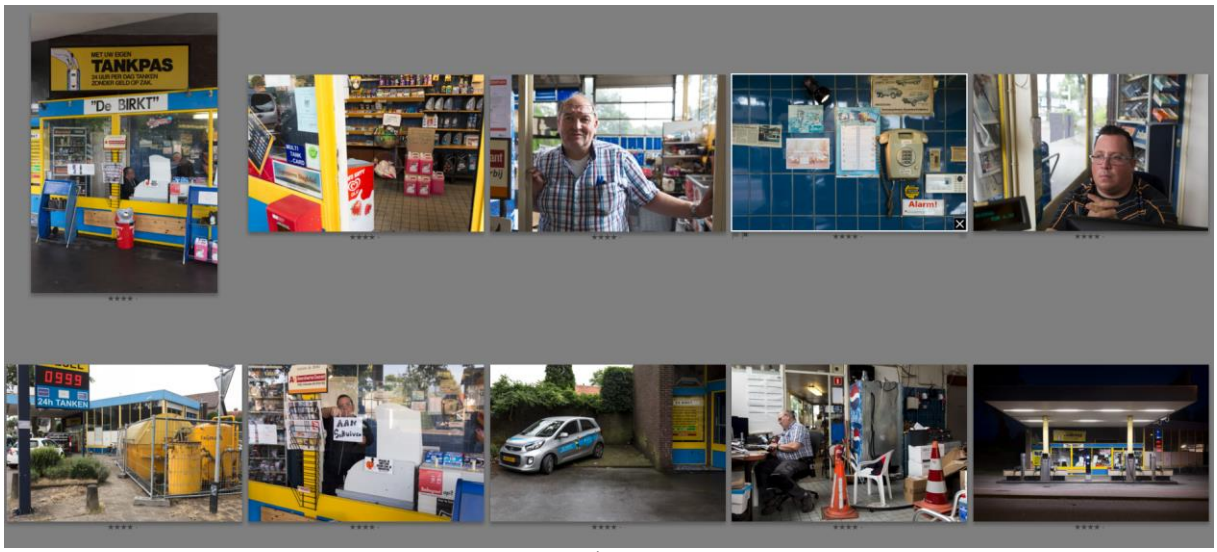
- Many of the shots have the same colour: light, white, light grey and blue.
- Many of the shots show many details (visually busy).
- All of the shots are taken with 35mm, showing much of the context / background.
- Too few detail shots.
- Many of the shots are very literal, the viewer does not need to put in much effort to interpret the images. Too much reportage style, a too literal depiction of what happens in front of the camera.

Then I realised that I forced myself too much trying to tell the story which I have in my mind, resulting in a bad selection of images. So I selected only the images which I really like and fit my way / style of shooting. I selected the more “quiet” images.

Laying the puzzle (selecting and sequencing) – 28th of August

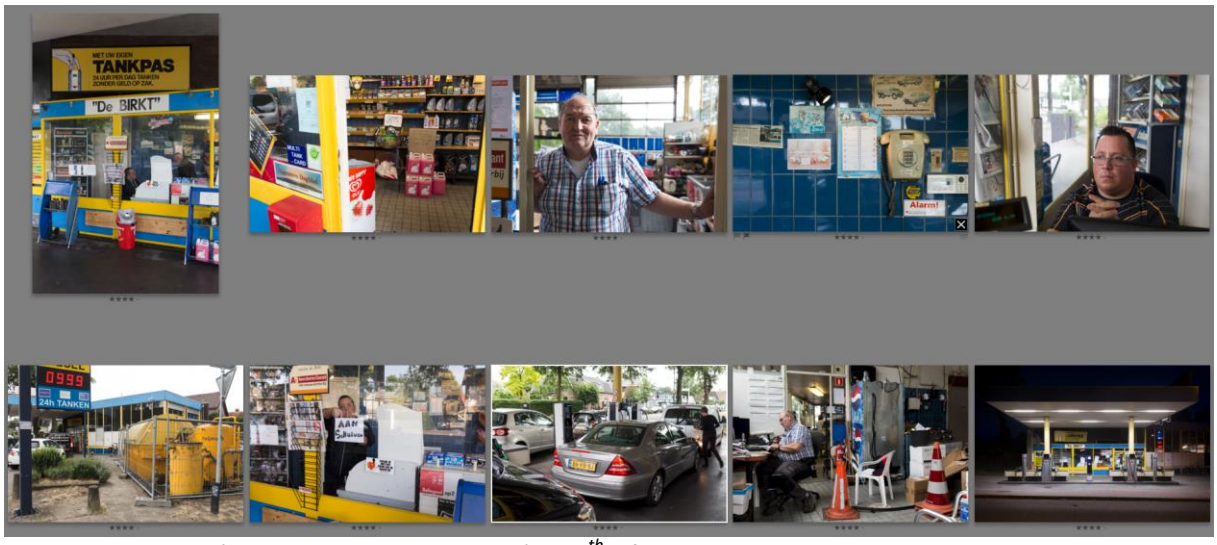
OK, now the selected images do not look all the same. Better now. But now I suffer from total creative lockdown and insecurity about which to select and how to sequence. So I started to work on computer screen (Lightroom). Much better. Now I instantly see which images look the same (colour, degree of detail) and I have a better overview than when I work with prints.

This is my confusion: Why do I want to show quiet images of a busy gasoline station? What is the story I want to tell?



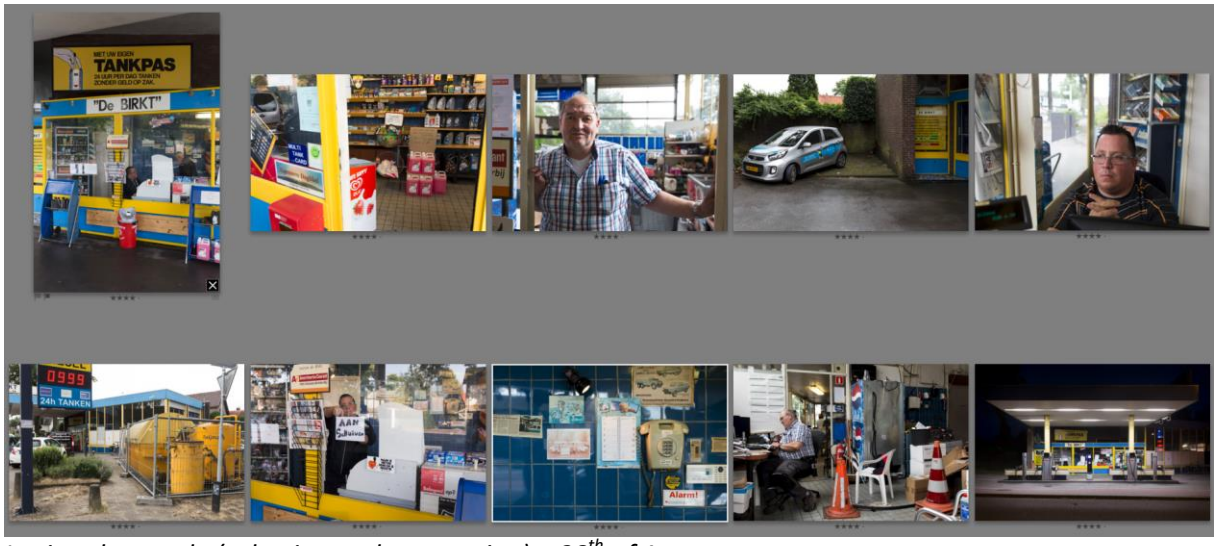
Laying the puzzle (selecting and sequencing) – 28th of August

8th and 9th image: both oriented to the left. One has to go. Ending shot is a night shot: nice, simple, cliché and tacky. Yes I’ll really chose this image to be the last image. It’s the only image which gives an overview of the station.



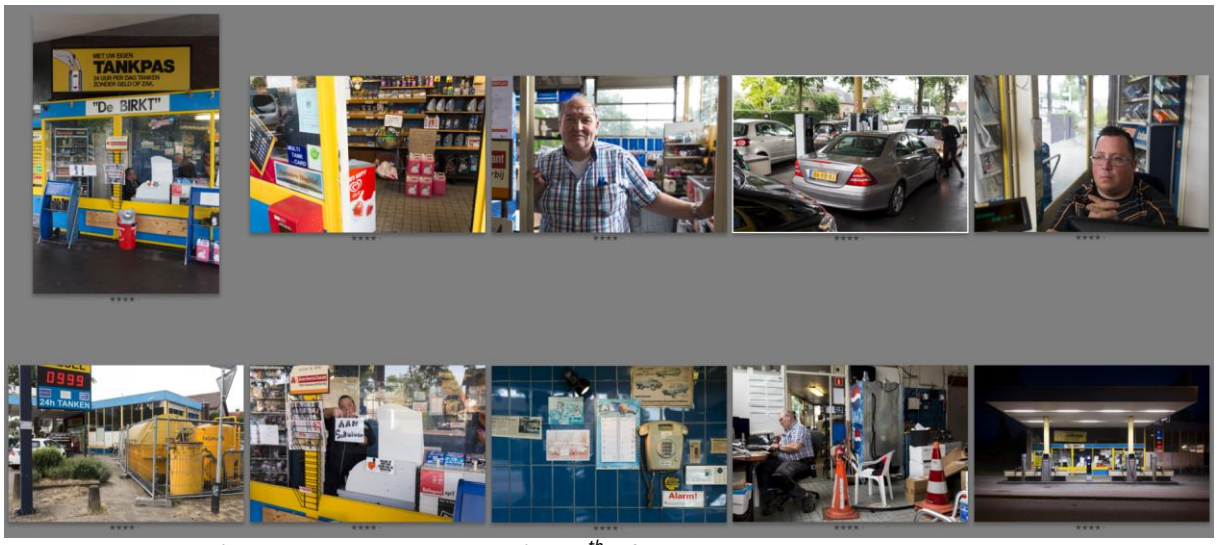
Laying the puzzle (selecting and sequencing) – 28th of August

This better, but images 7-9 are all busy (much detail). I need a quiet image for image 8.



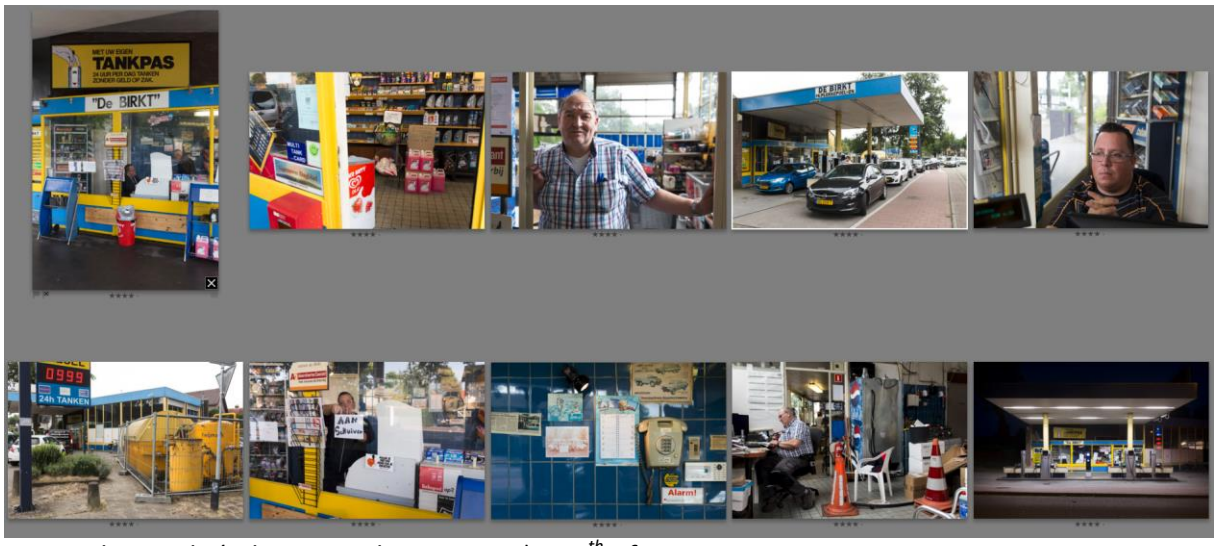
Laying the puzzle (selecting and sequencing) – 28th of August

This is better. Images 4 and 5 are both oriented to the left, but now it doesn't bother me. Problem: this series doesn't tell the story of a busy gas station. I need an image with many cars waiting:



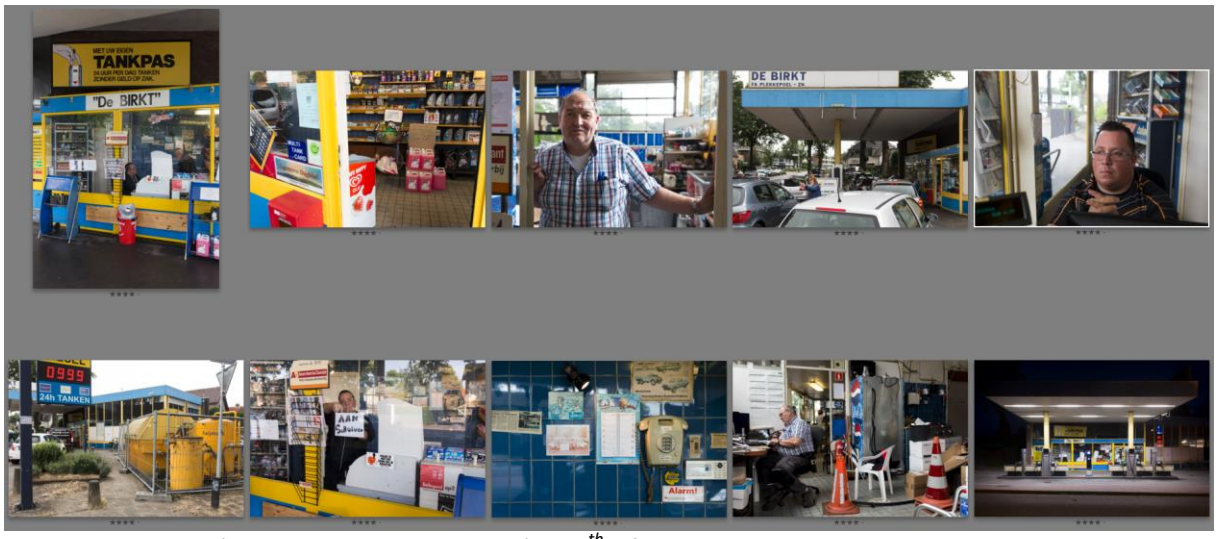
Laying the puzzle (selecting and sequencing) – 28th of August

Or this:



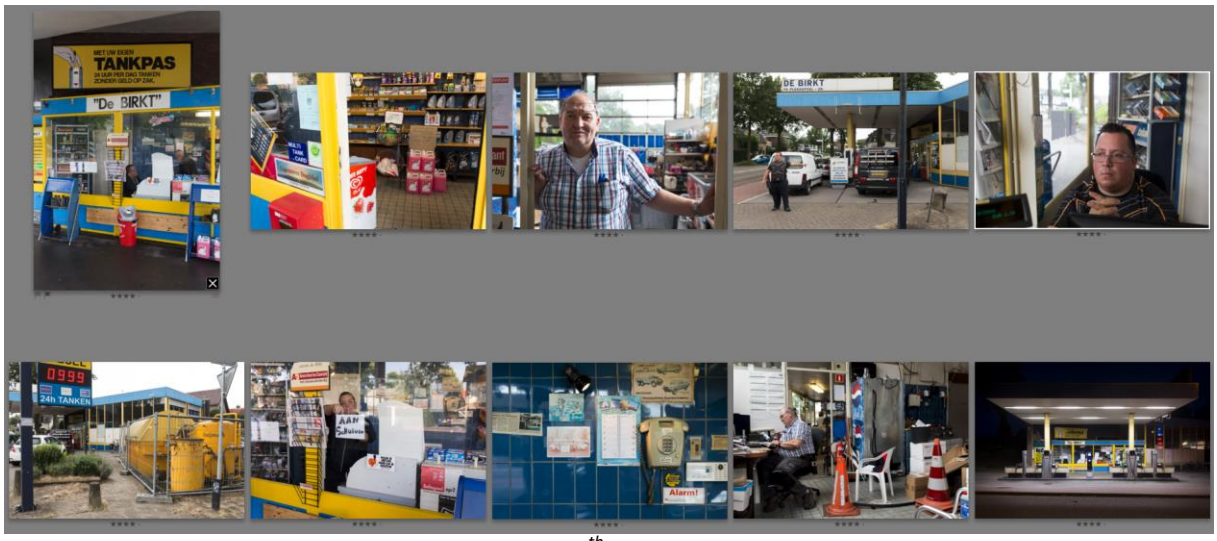
Laying the puzzle (selecting and sequencing) – 28th of August

Or this:



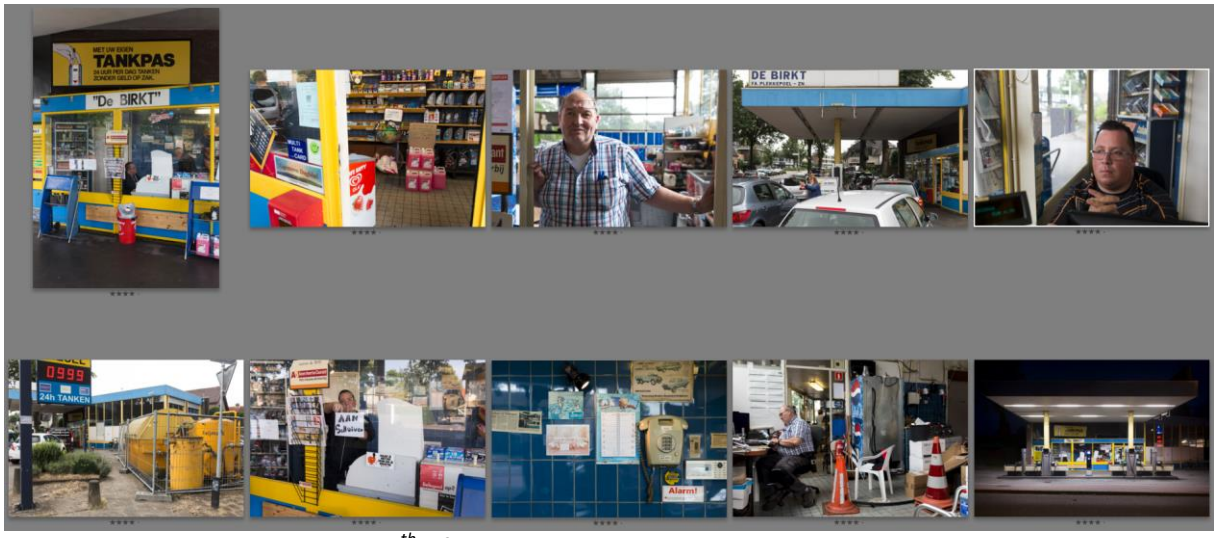
Laying the puzzle (selecting and sequencing) – 28th of August

This is better. Now, Maria is also in an image (this was lacking).



Laying the puzzle (selecting and sequencing) – 28th of August

In this alternative it is more obvious that they are directing traffic. We lose Maria and we have another image of Daniel. Too explicit? The viewer has too much overview? Now we have 4 images with Daniel in it. Too many…



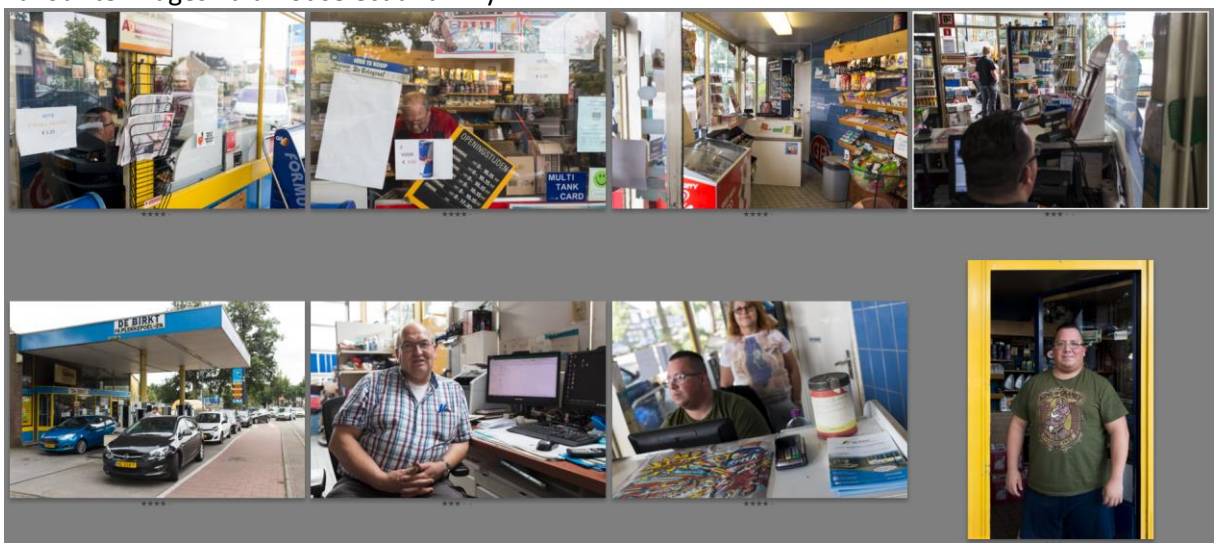
Final selection and sequence – 28th of August

So now we have a final result. **Reflection**:

- We have a variety of colour.
- We have a variety of visually busy and more quiet images.
- We do not show license plates, customers are not recognizable, which is good for privacy.
- We have a rhythm and variety of images showing people and inanimate things. We have portraits close, and people more for away.
- We have Jan, Maria and Daniel in the images.
- We show it is a busy station because prices are low (images 4 and 6).
- We tell the story of the soil sanitation (image 6).
- We have humour (or an attempt at it) in image 7. The sign says “queue up”.
- We have some detail shots, but next time I must remember to shoot details really up-close.
- The story of the Colombia connection is lost in selection.

- Overall the series is visually very busy. Next time I must remember to also shoot with a longer lens. This will include less of the background, will result in a shallower depth of field and thus result in a visually more quiet image.
- There are only few actions (movements) in the images. Next time I must remember to shoot more action.
- Maria is only visible in one image. But this is in line with how I experienced the gas station when I visited it.

Favourite images I did not select and why:



Images I did not select

Reasons:

- Images 1-4 are very light and visually very busy. Too much overlap with images 2, 5 and 7 in the final selection.
- Image 3 is my favourite. I planned to shoot this image from the start of the project. I believe it is a successful image and if I had to select one image, this would be the one. Still I did not select it because I needed a portrait up-close (image 5 in the final selection) and I wanted to avoid overlap with image 2 in the final selection.
- Image 5 was planned as the establishing shot. The viewer has an overview and instantly knows what the series is about. But I think this image does not make the viewer curious about the rest of the images. The viewer may think he already knows the whole story. It does not draw the viewer into the story. With the final selection I made I make the viewer work a little harder and only in the end the viewer has an overview to end the series with. It's kind of a conclusion the viewer can also draw himself after seeing the first nine images and combine these in a mental overview.
- Image 6 would be an alternative for image 3 in the final selection. I did not select it because his desk is already in image 9 in the final selection and I wanted Jan in the doorway, making reference to the second image in the final selection (also a doorway). This is kind of like the viewer is entering the station when looking at the first images in the series.
- Image 7 shows the Colombia connection (the box for donations to an orphanage in Colombia) and Maria standing behind her son. It has too much overlap with image 5 in the final selection, also it has much white, light grey and blue in it. These colours are already too often in the images.
- Image 8 is a posed portrait. I felt the posed portraits do not fit the series. What I like about this image is that Daniel is wearing a t-shirt (King of Cranky) he got from one of the customers, because the customer found Daniel always to be cranky.

Design of a presentation on a wall

An alternative design with an alternative selection of twelve images:

Design of a presentation on a wall (alternative with 12 images)

As an exercise I made a selection of the minimum number of images which tell the story:

Minimum number of images needed to tell the story

The final result – 28th of August 2016

Gasoline station "De Birkt"
"De Birkt" is a gas station in Soest, The Netherlands which is owned by the Plekkepoel family. It is run by Jan Plekkepoel, his wife Maria and her son Daniel. The gas station has the lowest fuel prices in the area since the last 40 years. It looks a bit run down, but many people drive up there to fill up the gas tanks of their cars. Often traffic jams of waiting cars build up, sometimes blocking the cross roads. When that happens the family come out of the building and start directing traffic in order to keep the flow of customers going. Shouting and making gestures.

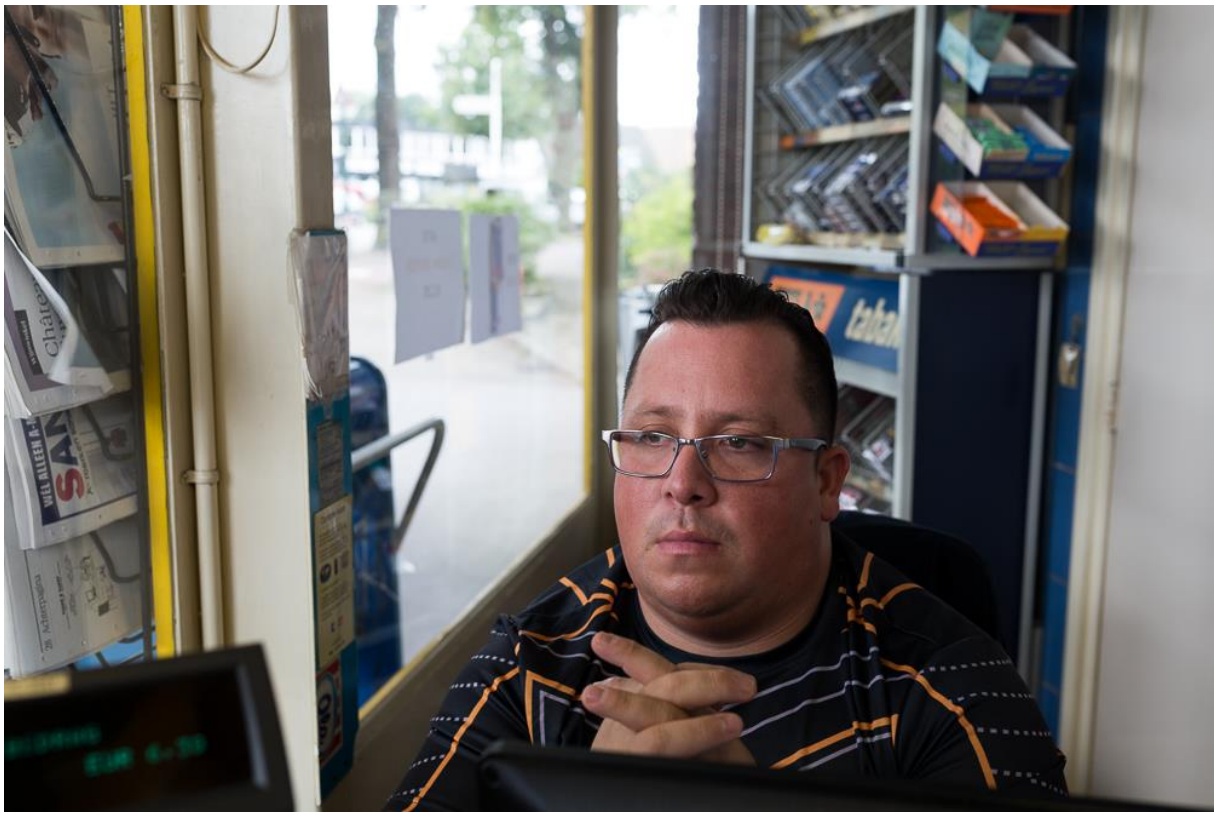
This photo essay consists of ten images and is a portrait of both the gas station and of the people who run it.

De Birkt 1: 35mm, ƒ/4, 1/40s, ISO100 - Daniel is servicing a customer

De Birkt 2: 35mm, f/4, 1/30s, ISO160 – Entrance to the shop

De Birkt 3: 35mm, f/4, 1/40s, ISO125 – Jan Plekkepoel

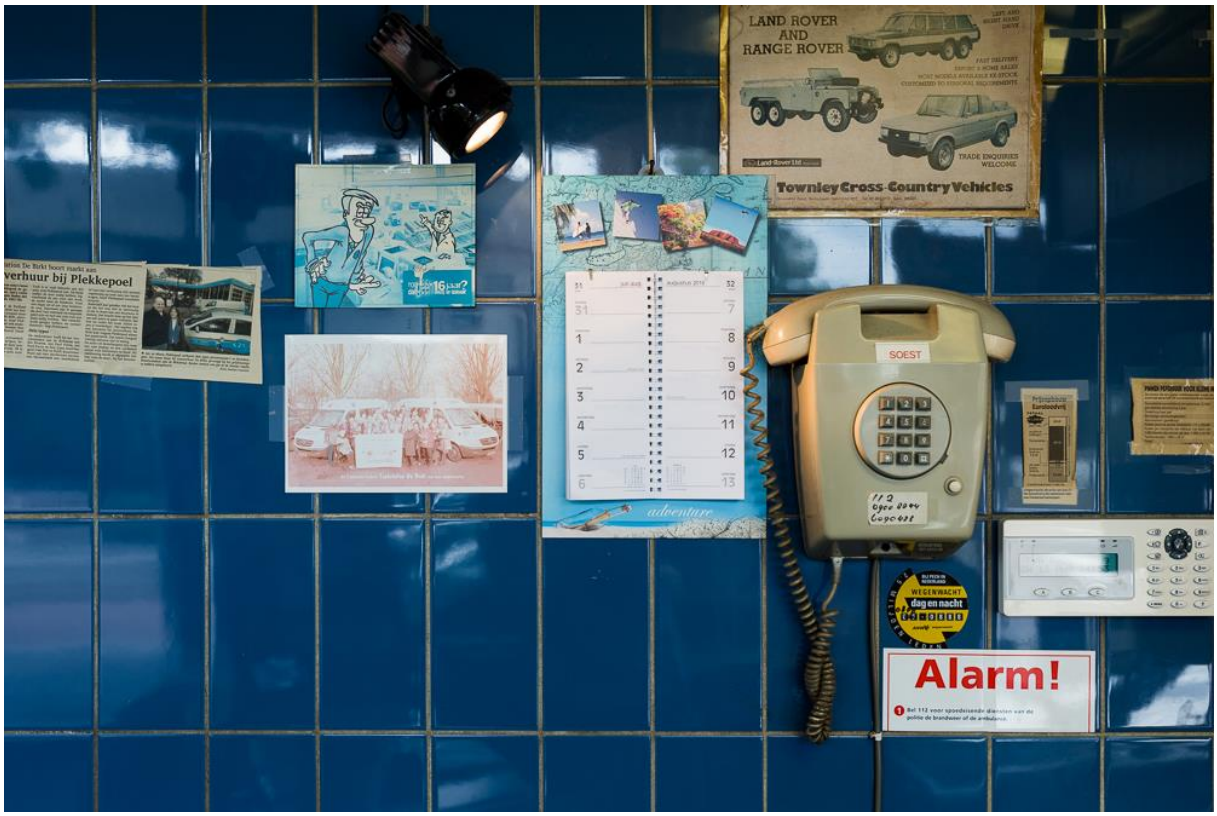
De Birkt 4: 35mm, f/5.6, 1/125s, ISO100 – Maria is directing traffic



De Birkt 5: 35mm, f/4, 1/40s, ISO125 – Daniel keeps an eye on the flow of customers filling up while he is waiting for the next customer to pay for gas

De Birkt 6: 35mm, f/8, 1/40s, ISO100 – Today "De Birkt" is the only gas station pricing diesel less than one euro per litre. The installation for soil sanitation is cleaning up a spill caused by leakage.

De Birkt 7: 35mm, f/5.6, 1/40s, ISO100 – Queue up. Daniel is trying to communicate to customers with a self-made sign.



De Birkt 8: 35mm, f/4, 1/60s, ISO100 – Detail of the wall in the shop

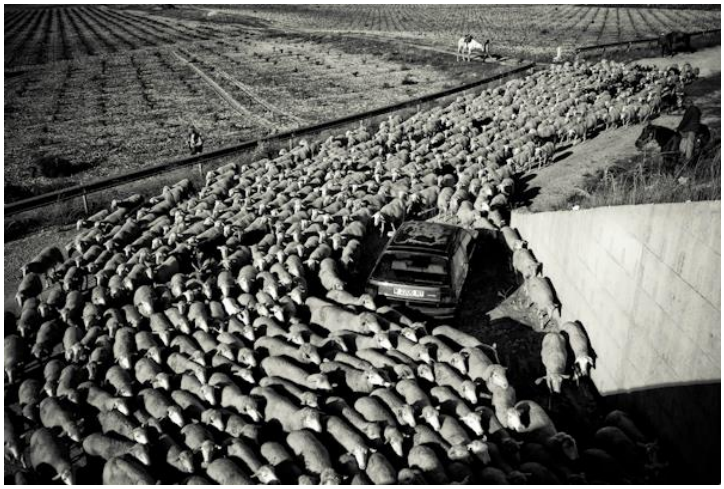
De Birkt 9: 35mm, f/4, 1/60s, ISO100 – Jan is working behind his desk

De Birkt 10: 35mm, f/8, 4s, ISO100 – The gas station is switched to "automatic" at night. Customers can pay using a cash or credit card.

Reflection on tutor report – 7th of October 2016

I want to say thank you to my tutor for her report. These are my reactions / conclusions / what I learned from the tutor report.

- Yes, I will submit my work for formal assessment after completion of the course.
- Thank you for all the compliments. I will try to keep up the good work.
- Thank you for your suggestion of looking at Jose Navarro and Sebastiao Salgado. Salgado is one of my favourite photographers.
- I will try to do more experimentation.
- I am working on the assignment for part 2 now. It will take me maybe 4-6 weeks to make the 8 images due to planning and logistical issues. In the mean time I started working on part 3 of the course. Part 3 opens up the possibility for me of visual storytelling with fictional documents. Room for experimentation! I am working on an idea, have to do some research, then I will let you in on it and ask you for your opinion.



Jose Navarro: Trashumantes, southbound

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