The art of doubting. On the Suspicious Portraits by Johan Clarysse

Patrick Allegaert, 2011

Some time ago I saw Johan Clarysse in the library of the Dr. Guislain Museum. With deep concentration he was reading and looking in two of the rare classics of the history of psychiatry, the iconographic Photographique de la Salpétrière and the Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpétrière, both published in the seventies and the eighties of the nineteenth century on the instigation of the famous Parisian neurologist Charcot. Next to the texts in which the doctor describes his patients you can find the famous photographs by Albert Londe. At Charcot's request several of his patients were portrayed by this immensely talented photographer. For Charcot this visual aspect was very important. He tried to develop a 'visual psychology'. In his naive ambition the doctor thought that one would be able to read the illness from the image, from the photograph. The accuracy of what the eyes of the doctor see is what Charcot, as a didact, wanted to convey to his students. In other words, the doctor can determine at sight what mental illness is afflicting a patient. Fortunately, today we are able to assess the hubris of this view. The photographs lost their diagnostic relevance at the beginning of the 20th century and became psychiatric history.

However, in the twenties of the twentieth century the series of photographs was rediscovered by the French Surrealists. André Breton and Louis Aragon hailed them as documents of 'an extreme human sensitivity'.

Johan Clarysse also had a look at another old series from the history of psychiatry, the so-called collection Meijer, named after the Dutch physician who, also at the beginning of the twentieth century, had a series of photographs made of his patients. His motive for this series is somewhat unclear. Presumably he wanted to 'visualize' lunacy and instruct his students in the perfect 'diagnostic eye'.

Johan Clarysse was clearly doing some very targeted research for a series of portraits that he presents here with the title Suspicious Portraits. 'Suspicious' refers to strange, suspect, and the photographs that he studied in the museum library are only one of his sources of inspiration for this series of portraits. Also portraits of relatives and friends, next to artists like Lars von Trier, the outsider artist Willem Van Genk, and the writer-philosopher Slavoj Zizek all form the starting point of this series. What they all have in common is that are famous or not famous, notorious or unknown, and they all seem to have something warped. Each time they are about people who – through their expression, pose or action – do not belong to the mainstream, they radiate something very fascinating.

The Suspicious Portraits form a collection of images of people who do not let us off, perhaps already one of the reasons why they seem suspect. They are not to be caught easily in one of the easily manageable codes of 'sweet', 'amiable', 'nice', 'healthy' on the one hand, and 'angry', 'scared', 'unhealthy' on the other hand. No, what they radiate is at the same time intense and unreal, all too human and yet unnamable: they are unclassifiable.

The portraits challenge the spectator: how do we watch when we watch, what do we see, and what do we then think? With what ready-made judgments do we watch and how do they prevent us from seeing something different. In other words, the artist wants to question our watching as a

meaningful act. Clarysse makes portraits that break open our watching, that make us rediscover and question our way of watching and judging. They are portraits that serve the doubting of things: to see something, to look again, to re-see something, to see differently, to know something, to suppose that we know something, but much more that we do not know something, the art of doubting.

Next to the photographs that he has made himself Clarysse often recycles existing photographs and images. He omits things, he changes the way of framing, he makes the images tilt in layered paintings where he plays with the tension between detailed painting and 'unfinished', between a nervous painting and a precise brush. He works with small and large formats. In short, he makes images of people who are at the same time focused and open, who reveal and who disguise, who give us certainties only to immediately take them away.

It is in this duplicity that these paintings touch us so deeply. The expression of the portrayed person, the way of looking in every human encounter provides us certainty, the certainty of this particular glance. We recognize it, we know what to do with it, or at least that is what we think we can. But at the same time there is the mystery of that glance, we will never be able to completely see and read into someone else's expression.

Of course, related to all this there is an interesting art-historical connotation that forms a kind of a statement for Clarysse. We know portraits from our art history: the genre was in the first place the prerogative of famous clergymen, monarchs and princes, the paintings were the representations of power and certainty. Clarysse re-uses the portrait genre to express something else: not supremacy but vulnerability, not the closed dogma that upholds a pretence of certainty but an open search for a more profound encounter which succeeds and fails at the same time.

Johan Clarysse shows a strong fascination for the portraits by Théodore Géricault, more precisely in the work The Cleptomaniac. It is one of the top works of art in the Museum of Fine Art here in Gent. It is interesting to draw a parallel between this painting and the Suspicious Portraits.

Théodore Géricault, one of the central figures in French Romanticism, rejects a cold and stern Neoclassicism and develops a deeply sensitive and individualistic style.

The Cleptomaniac is one of a series of portraits that Géricault made of mentally ill people around 1820. This series with the title Monomaniacs is in its choice of subject and execution both striking and exceptional in the history of painting. Géricault does not paint 'picturesque' portraits, in other words, lunacy is not tied down first to be portrayed later as 'merry' or ' idiotic'. The suggestive style, fluent and strong, with a fast stroke is characteristic. The lunatics are certainly not idealized, but their portraits indicate a certain dignity that presents them as full persons. The cleptomaniac is a special case in this series. His appearance is rough and wild because of the dishevelled hair and unkempt beard. But he is striking because of his intense expression. His fixed eyes look indirectly and reveal the mental confusion of the monomaniac. The Cleptomaniac is evidence of the search for the real through sharp observation.

Two centuries later Clarysse may well have the same motive: how can one visualize the truth of a person? How vain is this attempt? Is it possible to ultimately capture the mystery of what drives a person? Clarysse balances between this difficult question of certainty and doubt. And trying to find a balance between these extremes is very much a present-day concern. Where neurosciences greet

the message that we will possibly know and even explain and predict everything that drives and preoccupies a human being, we have here an artist who demands attention for the mystery, who visualizes the surplus value of the elusive.