Ça a été

Bas Vroege

‘Ça a été’. It is probably the sentence that was quoted most in dissertations on photography of the last twenty years. Citing these famous words of Roland Barthes could cost you a crate of beer at the editorial office of the magazine I ran for years. Since both the magazine and Barthes are no more, I can commit this mortal sin of olden days and remain unpunished.

But photography is no more, either. At least not what it was supposed to be: proof of something that was once physically in front of the camera, recorded analogously. Today, the vast majority of the images that reaches us through the printed media is digitized: sooner (by the photographer in the field) or later (in the editorial office, during layout) scanned and saved on a hard disk in ones and zeroes. I did not ask them, the retailers, but I suspect that this Christmas for the first time they will sell more digital cameras than conventional ones. In the world of professional photography, too, fully digital cameras advance, it is only a matter of time before they will obtain a dominant position there, too: if not this Christmas, then surely next year, during the feast of St Nicholas (December 5). The analogous image is done for.

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Has this also once and for all ended the credibility of the photographic image? It is just how you look at it: the meaning of photographs has always been

strictly dependant upon its context. Benetton sells children's clothes using a photograph of the blood-stained clothes of a soldier fallen in battle, Nobuyoshi Araki's photographs for a beer campaign are greedily seized by the art world. At the most, digitization will simplify the manipulation of images. It will, however, make this manipulation more difficult to trace, for a digital copy is by definition identical to its original and the dating is unreliable. This has made it impossible to recognize the components of a composed image and it has also made it impossible to indicate which other image or images has or have produced which image. The credibility of the image completely relies upon the context in which it is presented, like the nature and reputation of the medium in question (in this case: the printed press). The status of the photograph as evidence should therefore be brought into line with written communication, with text. Court will have to yield to this in the short-term but I suspect that the average newspaper reader will need some more time. Even so; the most conscientious editor sometimes makes a mistake.

But there is more. Not only the medium is becoming digital, reality itself is, too. After all, we spend more and more time in front of screens that are temporarily or permanently connected to ever more expanding networks. Today, a growing number of people spends more time watching a television or looking at a computer monitor than the total of all other activities. One-sided? It is just how you look at it, apart from the standard office applications you can shop on the Internet, play a game with total strangers, listen to the tracks of the latest CD's or to a local Westcoast radio station. It is also very easy to have a lengthy discussion, some even have (safe) cyber sex. In short, a parallel, electronic society is coming into existence which has taken on physical society culturally, as well as economically and socially.

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In a number of series, that generally took a few years, Theo Bos (Pijnacker, 1959) successively photographed record attempts (1987), recreational behaviour in the Netherlands (1991), his parents' house (1993) and he realized a project on representation of mass tourism (1995). All in all, they are all about human shortcomings and our permanent pursuit to escape them. Record attempts fail significantly more often than they succeed and serve no other goal than to give the actor in question a (temporary) feeling of invincibility. From the series about recreation (commissioned by the *Rijksmuseum*, by the way) a number of images is printed in my visual memory: the karting race through the streets of respectable, deserted Neede (Monte Carlo in Gelderland) and the swim contest for dog and owner in the open-air swimming pool in Montfoort. In a rather abstract manner the installation on the house of his parents shows the persons in question amidst the well-conserved household goods they purchased 'wisely' twenty years earlier. In none of the projects the persons involved and their view of life are ridiculed: irony reigns here. They form a mirror of human imperfection and the continuing efforts to overcome that imperfection (which are, by definition, doomed to fail).

The first two projects had a traditional form; they were presented in simple passe-partouts on the wall and could also be depicted well in books. The third and fourth project both had an installation-like character, the project about mass tourism made use of an existing outdoor utility panel as used in tourist centres. Essentially, the work has a documentary character. Contrary to the dominant practice in this area, Bos does not focus on the printed media but on exhibitions. Being a representative of a younger generation this is self-evident for him. Form and content of the work are closely connected and because of this they vary widely with the nature of the project.

Suddenly there it was, that terrain surrounding the Utrecht barracks. The photographers were kindly requested to make an original but still meaningful proposal to bring into vision this area bordering on the old Utrecht town centre. Soldiers used to march there, the few lost UNPROFOR trucks will leave soon, too, and once they are gone, 'kids' will play there in the gardens of contemporary versions of the unbeatable house with a through lounge, or people will stare at screens in plate-glass buildings on the lawns of a trendy business park.

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This induced Theo Bos to bring new artillery to bear: the CD-ROM. Unsurpassed medium for recording large amounts of data, no matter what: numbers, text, images, sound, video, whether or not arranged in an interactive structure. And therefore carrier for telephone directories and hyperrealistic games. *The Perfect Picture* is exactly in that field of tension. On the one hand, a telephone directory-like stock-taking of the barracks, systematically recorded by a 'grid' (on every intersection of lines a photograph was taken in four wind directions) and on the other hand an interactive game. A game that craftily takes advantage of the megalomania we are all suffering from (enjoying ourselves building a town with the box of blocks) and at the same time provides the real planners insight into the town planning preferences of the average local resident.

And thus *The Perfect Picture* connects past and present. As far as the state of affairs in town planning is concerned, as well as in the field of photography: on the one hand, making use of the strictly documentary qualities of the analogous photographic image (the stock-taking of the terrain) and on the other hand, the manipulative possibilities that the electronic box of tricks provides the digital image. Hybrid, as life itself. 'Ça a été', too: the barracks' terrain and photography are no more.

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About the author
Bas Vroege (1958) studied Economics at the Erasmus University (in Rotterdam) and Photography at the Sint Joost Academy in Breda. He was manager of "Perspektief" in Rotterdam and also editor in chief of the magazine of the same name from 1980 until 1993.
In 1993 he set up "Paradox," an organisation that produces exhibitions and publications in the field of photography, video art and new media.