

'I wish photography had another dimension'

For four decades he captured the important news events of the day, "without fuss, in order to inform the public". This autumn, photographer Vincent Mentzel is Cultural Professor at TU Delft.

"I can spend ages looking at this photograph," Mentzel says. "Why is Beatrix looking like that? What is she thinking?"

We met at the Kunsthal in Rotterdam, venue for the exhibition, 'The Netherlands in Focus', a retrospective of Mentzel's work featuring more than 200 photographs, which opened in the spring of 2011. We were looking at a photograph of Queen Beatrix taken in 1986 during celebrations marking the centenary of the Dutch Penal Code. The photograph depicts the Queen seated on a bench, hands folded in her lap as if in prayer. Around her stand dozens of men: ministers, lawyers, judges. In the foreground are journalists, spokesmen and security guards. But only the Queen looks into the lens, giving the image a somewhat surrealistic air.

The photograph emphasises Beatrix, but also her entourage. Mentzel: "That ceremonial assembly of men shows respect. The day was all about authority, and that is beautifully captured here. But each of these men has his own little world. Perhaps he has a wife at home who he beats."

How man relates to the space he inhabits is a question that fascinates the photographer. The theme of Mentzel's lectures at TU Delft will therefore be "the human dimension".

Over a period of two months, he will advise students as they draft reports on this theme. You are only a person of a certain scale within an environment, and you cannot take in everything. That is Mentzel's message.

Should scientists spend more time thinking about 'the human dimension'?

"What do I think about science...?" He frowns. "Scientists are focussed on a^2 , b^2 , c^2 . They work out that men can go to the moon and they send them there. The calculations are correct, after all. However [laughing] they're also overjoyed when the astronauts return alive. Indeed, you may well have worked everything out, but something can always come along to spoil the fun. You're only a person of a certain measure. You must always take the unexpected into account."

How do people react when something unexpected happens, something beyond their control?

"Take that accident with the nuclear power station in Japan. Nuclear power stations cannot simply explode, but they do anyway. That accident produced something intangible, something in the air that you can't do anything about. I then ask myself: What does a person do in the face of approaching radiation? And then I use photography to show this, and that can be in a very representational or abstract way. So these classes will not be lessons in portrait photography. I use photography to compel students to investigate something."

What kind of camera do you have with you now?

"A nice Canon. I don't know which one... hold on a minute." He takes out his camera, an EOS5D with wide-angle lens. "I'm not really that technical. Not at all in fact: I don't know anything about it. It doesn't interest me. I did enjoy the work in the darkroom, although I'm no expert. I was fortunate to meet a really good image processor, and now he does that work for me. He is someone who speaks my language and identifies with my feelings."

What is your language?

"I like to bend the image to my will, for example by allowing the light to burn through in some places. But apart from that my photographs are without fuss. When I photographed for the newspaper, I had to inform the readers, although of course you still try to be distinctive in this."

You don't regard yourself as an artist, but your work does hang in museums. Where is the dividing line between photojournalism and art?

"Take for instance the work of the New York street photographer Weegee. Shortly after he died his work was shown in the MoMA. Weegee took superb 'straight from the shoulder' shots of policemen, prostitutes or people with bullets through their heads. The man really had his own signature style."

But you also have your own signature style?

"Yes, but sometimes I have difficulty recognising my own signature. Pieter Broertjes [former editor-in-chief of de Volkskrant newspaper, ed.] came to visit me once. My house is a huge mess. Broertjes said, 'Yes, an artist lives here'. But that's not how I regard myself. I do like being with artists. I loved being with the Cobra painter, Eugene Brandts, sitting there among all those pots of paint. I also like to get paint on my hands. I'd much prefer to paint or draw the things I photograph...but I can't. Painting or sculpting with chisel or clay gives the ultimate feeling of freedom. I find photography...I won't say too easy...but I really wish it had another dimension, something more than just that flatness."

How do you go about doing your work?

"Every photograph involves a huge amount of tension. It starts as soon as the phone rings. The newspaper and its readers have certain expectations and this gives me a knot in my stomach. Then I have to get going, and all kinds of trivial worries come up: Will I get there in time? Will I be able to park my car somewhere? And then it really starts. You arrive at the location and are restricted by all kinds of rules. There are the PR people, and the security guards pushing the press away." As an example he refers back to the photo of Beatrix during the centenary celebrations for the Dutch Penal Code. "Imagine that situation. I'm surrounded by people, with only a split second to decide what to do. Push through all the spokesmen and security guards and kneel at the Queen's feet, or exploit the entire situation? I chose the latter option."

And when you take portraits?

"If I go to someone's home and they are very kind, I get really nervous. Such people are often full of expectations and they've practiced posing in front of the mirror. So I try to knock them off balance, get them to relax a little. I'll chat with them a bit, 'Nice >>



*'You must always take
the unexpected into account'*

painting you have there, and what lovely books'. People must surrender to you. They often ask how long I will need to take the photo. Well, taking the photo itself only takes a minute, but the prelude lasts much longer."

He laughs. "I once told Beatrix that she would first have to put me at ease, by pouring me a cup of tea. And sometimes you just get lucky. That happened to me when I made a portrait of Joseph Luns when he stepped down as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1971." Mentzel puts on a pompous voice: "Where should I stand?" Luns asked. And right at that moment a woman walked by. Luns raised his hat and I pressed the shutter. It's a clumsy image, but it's exactly right, given that it is his farewell photograph."

You take lots of photos of politicians.

"Yes, and I also get along well with many politicians. I have a particularly good friendship with Ruud Lubbers, but that wasn't always appreciated. One time we were chatting in the Binnenhof when one of my colleagues shouted: "Hey Mentzel, piss off for once!" [This happened in 1982. Lubbers was the newly elected Prime Minister and had just made his maiden speech. He was walking back to his office with his papers. It was the

shot all the photojournalists wanted, but then without Mentzel in the frame - ed.] And those friendships also weren't right. You must critically follow people." [As a result of this incident, Mentzel took fewer photographs of politicians - ed.]

Here in the Kunsthal there is also an exhibition of photos made with the iPhone, including one taken by you. Do you like taking photos with your mobile phone?

"I've already taken three photos for the NRC Handelsblad newspaper with my iPhone. And during the Painters Week event in Domburg, I took photos with it. The organisers had asked me how I was going to work. 'With the iPhone,' I said. That left them speechless for a minute. I use the Hipstamatic app a lot. The program looks like a camera, and you can put a black & white or colour film in. It really fools you. It's great! And you can put in films from the 1920s or the 1970s. It's a real laugh. I think these technical developments are fantastic."

Did it take you a while to get used to these technical advances?

"I used to go around with a big case so I could send in photos using a fax modem, with all the beeping and pulsing. That all changed

Cultural professor

The tradition of the guest author has been revamped, its scope broadened to include other artistic disciplines. From now on the guest artist will spend two months as 'cultural professor' at TU Delft. In addition to writers, visual artists, composers, film makers and photographers will also be invited to serve as cultural professors. Vincent Mentzel is the first cultural professor. He will start work at TU Delft on 23 September with a public lecture, entitled 'Cultural Promotion'. In the subsequent period, he will host a series of seven meetings exclusively for students. Mentzel will end his cultural professorship on 25 November with a public lecture.

around 18 years ago when I got a Mac from the newspaper. I was told I must use it, but I held off for a year. Can't I just send normal prints, I'd ask?"

You like to take photographs with the iPhone, yet you still have your SLR with you. So you go around with two cameras?

"Yes. During the transition from film to digital, I always went round with two cameras as well. I didn't yet trust digital photography. At that time I always took photos with film first, and then digital. And a good thing too, because when I look back at those jpegs, they're actually worthless now, 10 or 12 years later."

What is the advantage of the smartphone?

"People hardly notice it, and that's great. I also experienced the same thing before, when I would take photos with a little Leica. You're not walking around looking like some Japanese tourist or somebody from the press. People don't push you away, but you do still need to photograph from close by, although some nut has made a long lens you can attach to your iPhone. And then the phone rings, and you're standing there with this enormous thing pressed to your ear. But the technical developments keep coming really fast. A colleague of mine at The New York Times went out on patrol with the military in Afghanistan. The soldiers were all photographing each other with their smartphones, so he started doing that as well. A whole new way of working has emerged, a different relationship of trust."

Are you happy to have retired?

"It's terrible. I had to go when I reached 65, as that was when all the pension funds started paying out. It's enough to drive you mad." (TvD)



Who is Vincent Mentzel?

Vincent Mentzel (b. 1945) has been active as a photojournalist for more than 40 years. Mentzel studied at the Rotterdam Academy for the Visual Arts from 1963 to 1967, but left the academy in 1967 without taking a degree, following a dispute with the director. In the same year he met the Amsterdam theatrical photographer, Maria Austria, and went to work as her darkroom assistant. It was from her that he learned the photographer's trade. In 1970, Mentzel joined the NRC Handelsblad newspaper as a staff photographer. During the 1970s he took many photographs of politicians around The Hague. In 1973 his photo of Prime Minister Den Uyl received an award from World Press Photo as 'Best Netherlands Press Photograph'. Mentzel also became renowned for his foreign reporting, in particular his work in China, Japan and Tibet. Mentzel's photographs were used for the image of Queen Beatrix on the Netherlands' stamps and coinage. He has made official portraits of the Queen on four occasions.