

There will be time

About poetry, visuality and contemporary forms of reflection

*... There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.*

T S Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (extract), 1917

Eliot's famous poem, written in another time of war, tells the sad tale of Prufrock's self-regarding fear of meeting people at a tea party. His limited life is too impoverished for him to bear its retelling in chance social encounters when questions are asked and have to be answered. Instead, he has to prepare himself and his face, to murder his real identity and create another one, subject to hundreds of indecisions, visions and revisions. Yet this prepared face does not satisfy him, and at the end of the poem he retreats into an impossible, fantasy world. Eliot paints Prufrock as neither sympathetic nor laughable. The poet's intentions remain unclear in fact, but the whole text can be read as a challenge to individuals who refuse to open themselves up to the observations of and interactions with others. Those who refuse to let go of complete ownership of their identity and to find the pleasure of communion with others are described here as lost and drowned in their own isolation.

If Eliot's account of an individual lost in society were true of local tea parties in 1917, how much more true would they be today? After all this is a time of relentless activity when social networking sites provide limitless opportunities "to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet"?. In my understanding, grappling with this phenomenon and revealing it for today in the way Eliot revealed it for his age, is a crucial element in Toos Nijssen's fascinating video portraits. Her simple film portraits are time limited, the subject being asked to sit in front of the camera for a precise interval of from 10 minutes to one hour. By doing so, the artist demands that people simply sit and neither say nor do anything – something that contemporary individuals, who are arguably always concerned with the appearance of activity, might find intrusive. At the same time, the demand to give up time is also a gift of time to simply sit, wait and (inevitably) reflect.

One thing that is interesting in watching the videos is sometimes how literally the prepared face of an individual crumbles over time. There seems to be a general pattern to

the behaviour of the sitters, one that is not always repeated but elements of which are usually present. It starts with the sitter making an initial scan of the new surroundings. Once the presence of the camera and the bare contents of the studio are registered, the sitter is left with his or her thoughts. While pulling faces can be amusing in company, there is no one to laugh at the antics so they quickly disappear. At this point, if you, as a viewer of the work, have equally given time to the artist, you will often start to see a transition to a more uncertain series of faces where those "visions and revisions" of Eliot come forcefully into play. Many, particularly the longer portraits, finally go beyond this stage to a more settled and long lasting phase where the face seems to be somewhat withdrawn as the portrait becomes more introspective and perhaps unguarded, at least for a few moments. Now it is the viewer in voyeuristic mode that has a chance to look at the face before them and judge, in Eliot's words, if it "dare disturb the universe".¹

The videos often cycle now between the trying out of different faces and this more reflective condition until they come to the allotted end of their time.

In contrast to Eliot's despair at Prufrock's inability to think himself out of his self-obsession, Toos Nijssen video portraits suggest two things. One is that it is possible visually to lay down your guard when exposed to the camera, if only fleetingly. The second is that the presence of this mute recording technology (the camera) can serve to reveal something more psychologically telling than the human eye. It is the camera that eventually registers this state, though human viewers are still necessary to analysis its meaning. These viewers are, however, coming into play after the fact of the action and there is no direct human confrontation with the sitter. Though this puts the viewers of Nijssen's work in a powerful, voyeuristic position, it also cannot help but mirror back to the viewer their own prepared face and their own social defence mechanisms. In this way, the visual language of portraiture offers something different for Eliot's literary technique, providing

a potentially endless series of observable examples where the subject appears to be given the circumstances to open themselves up to a possible exposure to an (absent) other.

When a part of this project was filmed and subsequently shown in the Woenselse Markt in Eindhoven, there was a closure between viewer and portrayed that made this exposure or encounter even more layered. Having set up her studio in the middle of the market and filmed people from one of the few ethnically mixed areas of the city, Nijssen projected the collected portraits onto the windows of an apartment block overlooking the same location. The

people who were filmed, as well as their family and friends, came to look at themselves portrayed. According to the artist, this whole process of recording and later projecting the images created spontaneous discussions and meetings between people, a social situation she enjoyed constructing. This process of spontaneous encounter is likely to have been greatly aided by the nature of the work itself, for it does not only call a community together but also provides an insight into the ways a more open kind of exchange might be possible, simply by providing time for the unfolding and crumbling of defensiveness to take place on screen and, in certain cases, in real public space as well.

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¹ Thomas Stearns Eliot. *Prufrock and Other Observations*. London: The Egoist, Ltd, 1917; Bartleby.com, 1996. The text "Do I dare disturb the universe?" appears on lines 45-6 further down the same poem as the rubric above.