

# **Bertien van Manen**

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down  
before  
we go**

# Let's sit down before we go

By Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith

It is now more than twenty years since Bertien van Manen first visited the various, mostly remote parts of the former Soviet Union depicted in the photographs in *Let's sit down before we go*. These include Siberia, Uzbekistan, Kazachstan, Tatarstan, Moldova, Georgia, and the Ukraine. As she notes, back in 1994 when her first album of images from these regions was published, *A hundred summers, a hundred winters*, lit-

tle was known of the daily lives of their 'ordinary' inhabitants, and the documentary interest of those pictures was their most immediately appreciable aspect.<sup>1</sup> Over the years she has travelled and worked in many places, from the Appalachian Mountains to the Western Sahara, and published book projects relating to Romania, Nicaragua and, more recently, China. Yet, as she puts it, 'my curiosity and fascination for this part of





the world has never left me'. Looking back through her archives in 2010 she was struck by how little had changed, outside of the major cities, in the built environment and social fabric of these still relatively isolated areas. She admits that it is sometimes difficult even for her to distinguish between a photograph taken recently and one taken in the early '90s of a given location she has come to know intimately. Yet things have changed in other ways. Most notably, the default forms of attention we now bring to bear on a photographic image in a world saturated by such images, of which most of us are both producers and consumers, differ substantially from those of a mere two decades ago. At the very least, this suggests that her decision to revisit her archive and make this new selection from a different, less obviously 'documentary' perspective, giving equal emphasis to more formal or expressive concerns, is a timely one.

It might be argued that in certain ways Van Manen intuitively anticipated this democratization of image production (a fraught phrase, but let's let it stand for now). Her project *Give me your image*, for instan-

ce, presented during Photo España at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and at De Hallen in Haarlem in 2005-6, comprised tightly framed photographs of domestic interiors in various European countries, all of which focus on treasured family photographs selected by the occupants. Previous commentators have rightly saluted the patience, commitment and empathy required to win the trust of her subjects, which is manifest throughout her work. Her presence at party's or domestic activities, often in fairly confined spaces, appears to have been neither intrusive nor distanced, anxious nor calculating. The young woman raptly performing an exercise routine in her underwear, the anxious bride being helped into her wedding dress, the group of scantily clad young people sunning themselves in the snow seem equally indifferent to the fact of being photographed. Van Manen's own account of her working methods indicates an unusual openness to collaborative effort: "I use simple, analogue cameras, allowing me to work spontaneously and less intimidatingly for the people I photograph... The uncomplicated cameras lie around in the house, everybody



can use them." Among the unanticipated results of this subtle, if partial elision of the distinction between photographer and photographic subject is the arresting image in *Let's sit down before we go* of a young boy laying on the top of a wardrobe. Though this photograph fits seamlessly into a body of work redolent of van Manen's particular sensibility it was not, in fact, taken by her. It was instead snapped by the young boy's brother while van Manen was away visiting their aunt in a neighbouring village.

That this image is in no way anomalous is striking evidence of a vision that is at once highly subjective and inherently accommodating. In making this new selection Van Manen has welcomed into the fold pictures 'overlooked' in 1994 for *A hundred summers, a hundred winters* as well as "images I did not choose then on account of unsharpness or over-exposure", sometimes even going so far as to accentuate such aspects of the image in the darkroom. One intriguing result of this revised approach, which accords with a more relaxed contemporary aesthetic, is the obviation of an unhelpful degree of psychological projection evident in earlier re-

sponses to such images, in which a blanched face, say, was all too easily read as evidence of inner torpor or physical privation. After all, our perception of hardship or poverty in the daily lives of others rarely tells us much about how they themselves perceive their lot. (That Van Manen is alert to the ever-present dangers of exoticization is evident from stray pronouncements such as "Never take a picture of what strikes you at first" or "I photograph what I recognize".<sup>2</sup>) The enhanced bleaching of individual figures in some of these images has the welcome effect of diverting the viewer's attention somewhat from unwarranted psychosocial speculations onto questions of formal composition. This in turn serves to enrich our appreciation of the natural integration of individuals, families and communities into their material surroundings. The fact that this chimes with recent tendencies in the social sciences to emphasise the ecology of materials merely confirms the prescience of Van Manen's intuitions. Her astute balancing of psychological and pictorial concerns also incidentally allows for a better understanding of how her work might be related to that of certain of

her predecessors and peers. Whereas several previous commentators have invoked the important, though disparate precedents of Nan Goldin and Robert Frank – *The Americans* is an acknowledged early influence – other antecedents might as readily be added to the mix, such as the Stephen Shore of *American Surfaces*. Van Manen’s eye for pattern, clutter and layering in the makeshift environments people construct around themselves suggests she is attuned to both the formal qualities and metaphorical import of such quotidian world-making.

Van Manen’s natural inclination toward collaborative production extends beyond her work in the field, and the choice and order of images in the book *Let’s sit down before we go* owes much to the collaboration with photographer Stephen Gill. The result is a finely modulated sequence featuring some inspired juxtapositions, pointed but never laboured. The image of a ceiling fresco of the *Last Supper* under restoration in a small church, shot through the bars of a temporarily abandoned gantry, is paired with one of workers sharing a simple meal in the back of a bus. A bleached-out photo of a christening ceremony is rhymed with a comparable snapshot of a more lively social event. A picture of a

plate laden with fruit, sweets and dumplings perched on the edge of a table covered by a rumpled white cloth is set alongside one of a row of well-worn empty prams in a communal hallway. Alongside the various photographs of individuals caught in moments of absorption or repose or isolated activity – invariably purposeful, never merely idle – are numerous images of casually close physical contact. The cumulative impression given is of a bounded but dynamic world whose rhythms are loosely regulated by time-honoured rituals.

I met Bertien van Manen only recently and am still wending my way gratefully through her various bodies of work, to which she is an informative but by no means prescriptive guide. Quietly spoken in person, she has an understated gift for words, which complements her instinct for images. What I have read of her written accounts of her travels are as compelling and disarming as the pictures they sometimes accompany. Her stories speak matter-of-factly of the everyday joys and challenges, tribulations and rewards of close-knit communities, as observed by a welcome, if intermittent guest. Like the photographs, they register a sense of unforced interconnectedness, suggesting





how one thing usually leads to another, if sometimes in unexpected ways, whether that be a fleeting encounter or an enduring friendship. Sometimes in her writing one senses that a particular anecdote is intended to preserve a moment that has somehow eluded the photographer. Yet any intimations of regret at a lost opportunity are tempered by the certain knowledge that there will always be others, to be cherished equally.

1 All quotations attributed to Van Manen, unless otherwise indicated, are from a short, unpublished introduction, dated October 2011, to *Let's sit down before we go*, Mack, London, 2011.

2 Camilla Jackson in *Bertien van Manen – East Wind West Wind*, The Photographer's Gallery, London, 12.4-4.6.2002.

*Let's sit down before we go* is the solo exhibition by Bertien van Manen. More than sixty photos will be on show, created between 1991 and 2009. During that time, Van Manen regularly and extensively travelled with a small 35mm camera through Russia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Tatarstan and Georgia. She stayed for long periods with the people she met on her travels, learned their language and usually became friends with them. This produced intimate and sometimes tender photos resulting from a personal and sincere relationship. In Bertien van Manen's humanistic approach, photographer and subject are equals and the mutual respect is palpable.

**Bertien van Manen** started out as a fashion photographer – and she still has an eye for detail and pattern – but inspired by Robert Frank's book *The Americans* (1958), she decided on a more documentary approach. For a time she photographed in black-and-white, but she changed her style radically in the early 1990s. From that point on, she travelled with great regularity through Eastern Europe and Asia. Her many travels and intensive contact with the people she met resulted in the book *A hundred summers, a hundred winters* in 1994. A logical follow-up was *East Wind West Wind* (2001), which was shot in China. In 2005 Van Manen published *Give me your image*, comprised of photos of interiors in which the residents had placed a private photo of their own. *Let's sit down before we go* (2011) is her most recent photo book. The character of this book is less documentary than her earlier books and therefore allows more room for the viewers' imagination.

The work of Bertien van Manen was in numerous solo and group exhibitions including the Museum of Modern Art (New York), The Photographers Gallery (London), Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), and Photo Museum Winterthur. Her work is included in major international collections such as Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam), The Museum of Modern Art (New York), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), Maison Européenne de la Photographie (Paris) and The Metropolitan Museum of Photography (Tokyo). Bertien van Manen lives and works in Amsterdam.

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