

Paulien Oltheten
(b. 1982, the Netherlands)

If we are to believe that photography still holds the power to make us look at the world differently, taking to the streets with Paulien Oltheten is a good place to be persuaded. Interested in the way we behave and relate to one another, Oltheten is an acute researcher of humankind whose use of photography is fluid and experimental, allowing it to bend and grow into new and unexpected directions.

Drawn to the geometry of bodies, their movement and interaction within the public sphere, she records fleeting moments through photographs, drawings, videos, text and sound-clips, building an archive of observations that, to date, stretches over 12 years. The process started organically, born from a sensitivity to physical detail. "At first, when I see something that I want to photograph, I'm not so much socially engaged with the situation, but I really see it formally; I see it as a pattern." Using this archive, Oltheten builds relationships between images, developing these conceptual patterns into a myriad of stories that challenge a simple perception of human behaviour.

The photographic moment is elastic in Oltheten's work, which balances on the border between documentary and fiction. First, she may notice a small hand gesture, a minute interaction between two people talking or a couple walking up the stairs. These actions may result in one photograph that captures a split-second, it may become a sequence of five or she may intervene and ask her subjects to recreate the moment. It may be reflected on back in the studio, where the artist sometimes re-enacts the movements in order to analyse them better or perhaps consigned for a year to the archive, subjected to analysis at a later date to then be paired with another image. "I see my images as ideas. I need time to understand what that picture is and to build up contact with the image. I can't take a picture and the next day exhibit it. I have to feel a connection with it," she says.

This work process allows photographs to elude time and space, leaving them open to generate new meanings. "The understanding always comes afterwards. That's why an archive is helpful or necessary even because it gives me time. I don't want to restrict one image to a certain moment or series only." Combining arresting moments of chance, staged interventions and retrospective editing, Oltheten becomes a director, making touching, absurd and humorous studies from the everyday, pieced together from her vast archive: "Sometimes I see this big amount of images as an obstacle. Someone once advised me to look at it not as a mountain or an obstacle but a lake that you put all the images into. Then, you fish out the ones that are interesting. I'm always readjusting."

As a photographer, Oltheten's relationship to the medium is resolutely unfixated. Despite her relative ambivalence to the physical form of her work, she relishes the finite, the peace of having her images fixed in a solid physical object like a book. On the other hand, her practice also encompasses performance, using live presentations to explore storytelling on a more temporary and spontaneous dimension. Drawn to other artists who cross boundaries, Oltheten says, "I've just applied for a workshop with a choreographer and filmmaker, Yvonne Rainer. She's famous for being a pioneer in the dance scene of the 60s and 70s in New York, as she introduced normal daily movements into her dance practice. She made a manifesto of what she doesn't want in the dance performance. You get this strange dance with seemingly disconnected moves and repetitions. I'm using photography, but sometimes I feel more connected to her work than to a street photographer for example."