

A Life and a Work



JOHAN VAN DER KEUKEN

Johan van der Keuken was born in Amsterdam on April 4, 1938. His grandfather introduced him to photography when he was twelve, and in 1955, he published his first photo book, *We Are Seventeen* (years old). The book consisted of a series of portraits of his friends at school, and although Van der Keuken

himself thought of it as a sober record in the classic Dutch tradition, it was hailed as the manifesto of a new era, as well as chided for the somber and cheerless image it managed to give of Dutch adolescence. With hindsight one can see how it was part of the world-wide generational revolt we associate in other countries, such as Britain, with *The Angry Young Men*, in Germany with the *Halbstarcken*, in France with the *Nouvelle Vague*, and in the United States with Marlon Brando, James Dean and Elvis Presley. In the Netherlands, the angry young men of the arts called themselves the *Vijftigers* – the Fiftiers. Van der Keuken became one of their prominent members, along with the writer Bert Schierbeek, the poet and painter Lucebert, and the Rimbaldesque poet-rebel Remco Campert. All of them at one point or another

worked with Van der Keuken or had films dedicated to them, for instance, Bert Schierbeek (*THE DOOR*, 1973) and three films with and about Lucebert (*LUCEBERT, POET-PAINTER* (1962, short), *A FILM FOR LUCEBERT* (1967, short), *LUCEBERT, TIME AND FAREWELL* (1994, short), after his friend's death.

After *We Are Seventeen*, and still hesitating between photography and film, Van der Keuken won a grant to study at the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques (IDHEC) in Paris, the Mecca of many a budding cinéaste not only in the late 1950s. Although he later confessed that he found the atmosphere stultifying, he must have been there during the same period as future directors such as Volker Schlöndorff, Costa Gavra, and Theo Angelopoulos. Feeling like an outsider, he continued with his photography, emulating the tradition of Brassai, André Kertész and Cartier-Bresson, and eventually publishing a book of photographs entitled *Paris Mortel* (1963). By that time, however, Van der Keuken had befriended two Americans, James Blue and Derry Hall, also at IDHEC, and together they made *PARIS À L'AUBE* (1960), a short film about Paris in the early morning, at once in the tradition of Marcel Carné's *PARIS QUI DORT* (1925) and reminiscent of the Joris Ivens' Paris film (*LA SEINE A RENCONTRÉ PARIS*)

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Vague, if we think of the early work by Godard, Truffaut or Rivette's *PARIS NOUS APPARTIENT* – all films that have Paris as their chief protagonist.

Returning to the Netherlands in 1960, he made a series of portrait films, with a preference for exceptional children, exceptional sometimes for the way they coped with physical handicaps (*BLIND CHILD*, 1964; *BEPIE* 1965; *HERMAN SLOBBE*, *BLIND CHILD 2*, 1966). He continued with his portraits of artists, painters (*A FILM FOR LUCEBERT*) and musicians (*BIG BEN WEBSTER*, 1967), for which he received international acclaim, though again, less so at home. For instance, a number of commissioned films involved him in controversy, notably *THE SPIRIT OF THE TIME* (*DE TIJD GEEST* 1968) and *VELOCITY 40-70* (1970). *BEAUTY* (1970), a film of high artifice verging on camp, but strangely powerful and in its stylized violence utterly compelling today, was particularly misunderstood.

As with so many other European filmmakers, the late 1960s inaugurated also a new period for Van der Keuken, producing often very oblique, but also quite angry and aggressive films, in which a general anti-Establishment stance had to signify political engagement. Sensing the dead-end of such polemics, and also the narrowness of the political discourse in the Netherlands, Van der Keuken undertook a remarkable series of projects, beginning with *DAGBOEK* (*DIARY*, 1972), followed by *THE WHITE CASTLE* (1973) and *THE NEW ICE AGE* (1974) – films later shown together as a trilogy under the title *NORTH-SOUTH*. The period ended with *A FILMMAKER'S HOLIDAY* (1974) and *THE PALESTINIANS* (1975), a short film made in Lebanon, on the eve of the outbreak of civil war, about Palestinian refugees. An openly partisan film, commissioned by the Dutch Committee for the Recognition of Palestine, the film is perhaps the closest Van der Keuken came to making a *cinema verité* or *direct cinema* documentary. But it was also so openly pro-Palestinian that it lost him many friends, especially among the left-wing Jewish-Dutch filmmaking community.

In 1978, the director returned to a subject closer to home, focusing on what one might call the micro-politics of the Netherlands as both very local and yet tied into the global economy. The film is called *THE FLAT JUNGLE* (*DE PLATTE JUNGLE*, 1978), and is about the coastal region, the Waddenzee and its inhabitants, former fishermen who now make a living digging up worms on the sea-shore at ebb tide, picking and packaging them for sports fishers all over the world. *THE FLAT JUNGLE* introduces a new Van der Keuken, at once lyrical and sharply analytical, with an eye that takes in the colorful plastic bottles that pollute the countryside at the same time as it documents the myriad manifestations of coastal micro-life, each leaving its transitory trace between land and water. Aware of the fragile nature of the ecosystem, while paying homage to the taciturn stoicism of the locals, in the tradition of John Grierson or Robert Flaherty's *M* of

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by the French cinephile community, with an article by Serge Daney in *Cahiers du cinéma* consolidating his fame in France. It paved the way for his international reputation, with Ron Burnett's article from the same year the first sign of his new pre-eminence.

In 1985, Van der Keuken became seriously ill, but recovered from what was diagnosed as intestinal cancer. Experiencing this recovery as a special gift, freeing him from the need to either explain the world or change it, he undertook another remarkable series of projects that took him to India, Thailand, Tibet, Central Africa and Latin America. In Hong Kong he made *I LOVE \$* (1986), catching the city in a feverish phase of transition. But as with other directors before him (one thinks of Renoir, Rossellini and Louis Malle, for instance) it was India that helped resolve a crisis and stabilized his own identity in transition. For Van der Keuken, Madras in particular was the catalyst, giving him a vision of human life, where opposites not only coexisted, but where the contradictions actually gave access to a deeper understanding of what it is we are meant to do, to see and to bear witness to, during our brief stay on earth. *THE EYE ABOVE THE WELL* (1988) was the first result of this wisdom, which discovered a new value in the weight, as well as gravity of tradition, religion and ritual. As he himself acknowledged: "To show that this tradition is not part of a perfect world, I included a sequence in which everything falls into chaos; you see crumbled steps and crippled people. [But] I found a way of editing to show both. That was new to me. It released me from the guilty look."²

There followed three films – *FACE VALUE* (1991), *BRASS UNBOUND* (1993) and *AMSTERDAM GLOBAL VILLAGE* (1996) – which confirmed that Van der Keuken had indeed discovered a way of finding the world in a face, a posture, a phrase like *Bewogen Koper* (brass in motion), the original title of *BRASS UNBOUND*. The faces might betoken lost worlds, as in *FACE VALUE*'s little girl, made up in the costume of the Dutch Golden Age, or in the bridal photo, taken in Rochlitz, 14 April 1990, a small town in what then was still the German Democratic Republic, only months before unification. Or the worlds he documented might be becoming-worlds. These becoming-worlds, Van der Keuken found above all in Amsterdam, turning his attention to his hometown, in a gesture at once generous and proud, all-embracing and meticulously particular. *AMSTERDAM GLOBAL VILLAGE* is a tribute as well as a triumph, a film that finally reconciles one of the city's most famous sons to the fact that the city remained, for much of his life all but indifferent to his existence in its midst. A young Moroccan courier speeds on his motorbike through Amsterdam, delivering photos to clients all over town, linking different lives that Van der Keuken follows into their living rooms, their work spaces and coffee shop hang-outs, but also into their past lives:

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musician, now working as a cleaner, returns to his village in the Andes. We meet a female DJ, a fashion photographer, a Thai kickboxer and his family, and a Dutch Jew revisits the house where she lived before her husband was deported to the transit camp Westerbork, as well as the family where her five-year-old son survived, while she went into hiding. Van der Keuken has spoken of how the circular form of the Amsterdam canals (the *Grachtengordel*) had inspired the structure of AMSTERDAM GLOBAL VILLAGE. But I am also reminded of Gilles Deleuze's description of Amsterdam as a rhizomatic city,³ in which the spirit of Leibnitz had become architectural form.

In 1998, Van der Keuken was once more diagnosed with cancer. This time, he decided to make it known, and to undertake a journey with uncertain outcome. The result was his last completed film, *THE LONG VACATION*. Together with his wife Nosh, who had done the sound on his films for the past twenty years, he filmed while he traveled and traveled while he filmed, returning to Africa, Asia, and other places that had given him images which became his, just as he had given them a place in the memory of the world. *THE LONG VACATION* was the highlight of IDFA 2000, where he was indeed celebrated and feted like the prodigal son, finally come home.



THE LONG HOLIDAY

Photographer, Filmmaker, Artist, Auteur?

So what kind of film director was Van der Keuken? Although it may seem as if the still photographer and the filmmaker were forever competing with each other, he knew how to catch the instant (the gift of the photographer), while making us feel how this instant belonged in a continuum, a movement, a process. Consider a still that he took on holiday in Spain (Sierra Terade, Andalusia 2000), and which he captioned for his monthly picture column (*From the Life of a Small Self-Employed*), a task he fulfilled for nearly thirty years for the film magazine *Skrien*. It shows a bend in the road, cut into rocks and is taken from the slope of a mountain. The caption reads: "The spirit of Hitchcock has just passed and disappeared around the corner. But in his absence he still commands the scene." Homage to a master of montage from another master of montage, Van der Keuken sees the

Work-life balance is the lack of opposition between work and other life roles. It is the state of equilibrium in which demands of personal life, professional life, and family life are equal. Work-life balance consists of, but it is not limited to, flexible work arrangements that allow employees to carry out other life programs and practices. The term 'work-life balance' is recent in origin, as it was first used in UK and US in the late 1970s and 1980s, respectively. Work-life balance is a term