

Esko Männikkö:

# Seeing Things as They Are

*By Maaretta Jaukkuri*

A few years ago, Esko Männikkö's framed photographs were shown in an exhibition hanging at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki. The selection of works was chosen specifically to invite viewers to react by writing their own texts. When looking through these texts recently, I came across a small slip of paper on which it was simply stated that the people in these photos look secure. It was an interesting comment, since by all 'normal' standards these people living close to nature and in materially constrained conditions are not thought of as being particularly safe or secure.

Esko Männikkö photographs these northern Finnish people in their home milieus, which in itself can also been seen as an act of transgression into their private worlds. Some signs of discomfort could have been expected to be detectable in their postures or in their expressions — the kind we often see in close-up photographs, in which people tend to look vulnerable and slightly defensive, unless they take refuge in posing and thus live up to the roles they have created for themselves.

The background to the ease of the situation could lie in the shared understanding of the choices these people have

made or been forced to make in preferring to live close to nature and to their own roots. When photographing these people, Männikkö also relies on minimum re-arrangement of their domestic scenes. Instead, he uses his own observation to select the situations to be photographed. The angles of view, the positions and manners of looking are determined in that careful, direct mode of observation peculiar to his way of working.

\* \* \*

In a recent interview, Esko Männikkö wondered aloud why it seems that people often only see a thing, and this thing can be as close as their own backyards, once they have seen a picture of it. According to him, the reality aspect of an object is confirmed by the picture. Undoubtedly, a strange statement in an age of manipulated images, and one that reaffirms the status of photography as document. It also seems to refer to the kinds of standards that exist in our picture of the world, but not necessarily in reality.

Today, the mediated image seems to have more truth value than reality as such. The media's role as the public

forum of our time may be echoed in this thinking, as it seems to be easier to close one's eyes to reality than to documentary pictures of it. Interestingly, it appears that manipulated images do not seem to have affected this experience. They seem to be understood as belonging to another category of images that refers more to the world of fantasies and fiction. On the other hand, the statement also refers to one of art's traditional tasks, i.e. that of making unseen things visible.

Visibilities in contemporary art are often discovered on the boundaries between the visible and the invisible. In this discussion, photography has a special role and function. It is the ambivalence between photography's inability to render what the eye actually sees, while being able to record and reveal information that the eye discards or is unable to grasp at the moment of seeing. These instances can be reflected on within the concept of "Lebenswelt" (lifeworld) as adopted from phenomenology, or using the term "optical unconscious" as launched by **Walter Benjamin**.

Both terms talk about pre-scientific knowledge and the 'now' experience — the recording of a specific moment in time. Pre-scientific knowledge can easily be changed into pre-artistic knowledge. The recorded 'now' experience of a documented image lingers on in the viewing experience of the picture, which in a cultural context also offers an opportunity to alienate it and turn it into a distant idea of 'there and then'. Both of these possibilities for perceiving time and place are contained in photographic documents.

\* \* \*

6 When Männikkö first showed his images of northern Finnish people, the response sometimes referred to the images

as being too local and exotic even for a wider Finnish public, and surely even more difficult in other contexts. This prediction, however, turned out not to be true. Its incorrectness was based on the primacy of the idiomatic aspect of the images, which were thought to be incapable of communicating themselves in other situations. Here we are confronted with a curious aspect of the definition of the exotic.

It seems that when something unfamiliar is associated with one's own surroundings or with one's own cultural milieu, but is not seen as belonging to one's own socio-cultural situation, it is more easily negated, and is distanced with even greater vehemence than when the unfamiliar belongs to another geography or culture. It seems that here we are confronted with definitions of social identity as well as with ways of dealing with the unknown. This confrontation takes place in areas where attitudes to the world outside of one's own sphere of identification are defined, and these close-but-distant worlds seem to threaten one's own self-understanding.

The falsity of the presupposition of the strictly local relevance of these images has been further confirmed by Männikkö's extending his motifs to encompass people in Texas, as well as milieus in Central Europe, and more recently also in Brazil. It has by now become clear that the issue is not so much — or not only — a matter of the milieus depicted, but more a specific way of seeing these milieus and of framing them into pictures. A quality intrinsic to these pictures is specifically the way the images actually transcend cultural or local idiosyncrasies, and reach the level of shared human experience, or even that of the collective unconsciousness, where global human and environmental concerns are identical throughout the world. This experience is further strengthened by the recognition of beauty

in these images. This seems to be the moment that carries us beyond the experience of confrontation with the — superficially — unknown.

This level of experience is related to the above-mentioned standards of culture or to the reservoirs of pictures with which we compare the picture of our backyard. But here the references are directed to art's culture and to the traditions created in the seeing and experiencing of beauty, irrespective of the motif or of its cultural/geographical origin. The beauty is encountered, recognized and experienced in the presentation of objects and situations, and understood by the viewer in both an aesthetic and an ethical framework. In the words of that anonymous viewer: the people in these images seem secure.

\* \* \*

The new pictures from Texas, along with the panoramas taken in Finland, Germany, the US and Brazil, clearly tell us that, rather than its recognizable subject matter, the subject of Männikkö's art is an attitude, a manner of seeing things and life around us clearly. Even though the two go so organically together that when separated they can be discussed only using the temporal logic peculiar to a text, in which the images can be treated as constructions and rendered into issues, themes, aspects, rhythms, compositions. A text cannot re-create the presence, the unity of the experience of actually looking at the image, which offers all this information as a coherent entity, while also basically evading analysis, since the visual simultaneity of the image is beyond the reach of a text.

This simultaneity is further accentuated in Männikkö's photographs of rural and urban milieus. In these, he often

reveals sights that could be defined as belonging to the level of our suppressed milieu consciousness. We do not wish to know about these places; the ways our actions and habits of consuming affect the built-up as well as the natural environments all around the world. The panoramic presentation of these images further enhances the documentary character of the work, since we are made to confront the scene in all its 360 degrees of presence — nothing can be hidden behind our backs.

In the genre of pictures of places/sites, there seem to be two rough categories of images: those that are presentable — e.g. tourist postcards — and those that are not — in their most striking form, the latter occupy the class of the scandal-creating documentaries. Männikkö's way of looking around him does not recognize such dichotomies or hierarchies, and he seems to have discovered an intermediate zone between these groups.

These scenes are visible to all of us in our own lives, but they are felt to be unpresentable as images: the Lapland landscape with the littered courtyard, the backyards of Berlin and New York. These are scenes that we are used to not seeing while looking at them. They are taken to be unpleasant facts of life about which nothing can be done. This is the kind of open-eyed blindness to the realities around us that the artist was referring to in his interview. Still, Männikkö reminds us that they are the consequences of our lifestyles based on consumption.

The panorama also offers a visual experience that eludes the traditional Western perspectival mode of viewing imbued with its clear definition of the position of the seeing eye. Here, the scenes behind our backs are made visible, while the photographer, image by image, posits himself outside the sequence of pictures. The central viewing point

is retained, but drawn out into a circular scene. The traditions of image framing are focused as the artist unveils the all-around situation, and the viewer is made to turn around on his/her own heels, thus following the movements of the photographer in the actual situation. An interesting parallel may be seen in Chinese art, where the view to the rear is also depicted, and the seeing eye is not defined as the central focal point of the scene.

\* \* \*

The encounter with Texas was Männikkö's first with an alien setting. The photographs from northern Russia, the scenes as they were left behind by the Soviet power, which he took with Pekka Turunen, his companion of many years on joint photographic expeditions, still belong to the experiences of the northern latitudes, even though different from their own country. One could say that the northern nature and man's position in it were still familiar to him, while the Texan scenes represent an entirely different natural and cultural environment.

The difference becomes clear when we view Männikkö's pictures of northern Finnish interiors, where it seems that the people he is photographing are almost totally unconcerned about the presence of the camera. The Texas pictures, on the other hand, more often seem to reveal a fleeting encounter between the photographer and the person(s) photographed, resulting in situations where, at times, one can detect an awareness of the photographer's presence, sometimes leading to at least rudimentary degrees of posing.

Texas offered him visual plenitude and colourful mixtures of cultural traditions, as well as an encounter with

the survival strategies that the Mexican population have created around themselves. In San Antonio and its surroundings, he met with a multitude of practices aimed at overcoming the tensions and boredom of daily toil and routine, with ingenious ways of creating possibilities for escaping into other worlds where things would look brighter, more colourful and more joyful. The private universes that we all in different ways create around us are a source of endless wonder and admiration in Männikkö's art. The energy used to create these private 'paradises' seems to be inexhaustible, while also telling us that the search for beauty, harmony and inspiration are an integral part of the human condition.

The interesting similarities between the frontier lands of Texas and North Finland are seen in the acceptance of environmental conditions as a given, as well as in the way that they become existential conditions that define private strategies of survival. Northern nature is vulnerable and scanty because of the cold and dark of the winter, while nature in Texas suffers from too much heat and drought.

Texas is geographically big and northern Finland small, but both are sparsely inhabited and somehow separate from the worlds surrounding them. The vastness of an area is also a relative concept. In northern Finland if you want to go somewhere, to spend an evening dancing in a restaurant, you may have to drive for two hours to get to a place where this is possible. And it becomes a matter of course to visit these places despite the distances. My limited knowledge of Texas tells me there are somewhat similar attitudes when it comes to perceiving distances.

But Texas is also urban, and it seems that the urban scenes of Texas offered Männikkö new subject matter. The pictures taken in Texan cities focus on the private and the

individual living amid it all. In them, he concentrates on the people, on portraits of the people, minimizing the presence of the environment. It is as if he were trying to show that the human being as such is the ultimate private sphere and castle of dreams and desires, as well as of sorrows and disappointments.

The paradox that seems to emerge from this is that, the bigger the place, the less there seems to be room to live out your dreams and fantasies. The space for projecting your inner life onto your surroundings is minimized. You, your bodily being and its appearance, become the one possible site for these projections, since beyond this there are too many rules controlling, regulating and categorizing the surrounding space. The result of this seems to be the kind of negative thinking in which, instead of a desire to make the milieu look nice, we do not care about it, and freely throw things into this no-man's land.

\* \* \*

The unblinking clarity of Esko Männikkö's images perforates complex social, cultural and individual life situations. Irrespective of geography and social systems, a kind of pat-

tern of imbalance seems to emerge and repeat itself on the surface of these images. These imbalances seem to exist both in the scenes depicted and in the ways these scenes are looked at in other contexts. They are present both within the world of the images and in the worlds surrounding them when they are seen as artworks. Seen from a little bit closer, the very same imbalances seem to become a source of creativity and of new ways of looking about us.

The beauty in life and the striving for the good seem to be possible in the ways we try to create harmonies within these complex, conflicting situations. The condition for this is, however, the ability to see them as they are. In this seeing, we are helped by the artist's ability to depict these scenes with beauty, without closing his eyes.

MAARETTA JAUKKURI

Curator, Helsinki