

2nd prize**Wytske van Keulen**

'Andzelika'

How does one photograph the influence of the new Europe on one's own country?

In the Netherlands, Europe is associated with legislation, trade, capital flows and open borders. The growing influence of the EU on national politics and economics has not had a large impact on daily life here. The consequences of the new Europe are instead largely invisible: no matter how influential, they take place behind the scenes. It is no simple task to make a photographic statement about agricultural subsidies or legislative harmonisation.

A number of countries have recently joined the EU – countries that just two decades ago had a completely different political regime. The effects of the new Europe are very visible there, if only through their blazing transition to a new politico-economic system. A rewarding subject for a photographer – but you will have to travel to record it.

The superlative of Europeanisation is globalisation. This process has major consequences as well, not least immigration and multiculturalism. These remain topical issues and they have changed the Dutch landscape permanently. They are still the only globalisation issues that have visibly changed the Dutch landscape – its other, equally influential, components remain just as invisible, as mentioned before. This new society is also a rewarding subject for the photographer, but

its everyday visibility only applies when looking at relationships with faraway countries, far outside the EU.

Is this invisibility the reason – the multicultural society being the exception – that so little good social documentary photography is being produced in our own country? Quite possibly. But still, it's a pity that good Dutch documentary photographers prefer to do their work in remote places, and keep their cameras tucked away when at home. And it's all the more reason to encourage a young photographer to take up this challenge.

Wytske van Keulen is interested in the microcosm, in how people lead their lives in a big world. She finds people who allow her to share their lives for an extended period of time. This is no easy task. It requires a lot of dedication to win the trust of those whose personal world is about to be made public.

Van Keulen has only just finished her education at the Academy St. Joost in Breda. She started out her studies as an illustrator, but soon switched to photography, a medium that could take her to other places, where she could tell stories about life, honesty and reality being her raw material. Her graduation project is closely related to the later Andzelika series: out of personal interest she followed a Dutch family that emigrated to France a generation ago. She had already met this family as a ten-year-old girl and they made a big impression on the future photographer. She received three awards for this first big project.

She continued with post-academic education at the Academy St. Joost, and created the Andzelika series during this period. Once again, a family is the central theme, on this occasion a Polish family that is about to start a new life in the Netherlands. Van Keulen especially focuses on the teenage daughter, who now has to choose for herself in which country her future lies.

Because of new European legislation, employees from different countries can work without restrictions in the Netherlands. Poland in particular has seen a large exodus. The 'Polish builder' has by now become a cliché in the Netherlands. But for the public it is a one-sided image: people tend to think of Polish men working in the construction industry to make some quick money, at the expense of local builders. In Wytske van Keulen's series this stereotype is nuanced, and the personal impact of labour migration on the lives of these people is made tangible.

The family's grandmother was the first to move to the Netherlands. A year and a half ago Andzelika's mother, Ada, followed her there because of large-scale unemployment and low wages at home. Then her father arrived, after losing his job in Poland. They are about to settle in the Netherlands for good. Building a new future in a different country seemed to be the best solution to provide their children with a better future. Their daughter Andzelika has remained in Poland and makes short visits to the Netherlands now and again. It was during one of these visits that van Keulen met her.

Her situation fascinated van Keulen: "On the one hand, I saw a beautiful, but sometimes unhappy, teenager who seemed to dream of a life in the Netherlands, on the other hand in Poland I saw a carefree adolescent who wants to stay with her Polish friends". The photographer decided to follow Andzelika in her life between the two countries. In the series, personal portraits of Andzelika and her social environments are mixed with domestic situations and associated interiors and landscapes. "I feel that all these facets should be part of it. That means also the surroundings and the interior of a home. These convey just as much about someone as a portrait." The different visual languages that the photographer uses flow effortlessly together, forming an intimate story about the life of Andzelika and the dilemma that she is confronted with.

In Andzelika's own words:

"I have been connected with Poland since the day I was born, 17 years ago. (...) In my childhood I did not know that a different world existed. Only when my grandmother left for the Netherlands did I hear about it. Later one summer I came to visit my grandmother in the Netherlands and since then I have been coming here every year.

Slowly I began to discover this new world. After a while, it became less strange and mysterious. Finally, the new world has also taken my mother. Mother went to the Netherlands searching for a better life for herself and especially for her family. That is the main reason why so many Polish people leave their country. Many young people, just graduated, cannot find jobs. Unemployment is very high.

I am torn. Torn between two worlds. Poland is and will always remain my home country, and the Netherlands has enchanted me. I know I have to find the courage to make a decision about where I want to live. My future in Poland does not seem to be as good as the one here. I am trying to delay this decision as long as possible and am having a very hard time with it. (...) Only here can I meet my family, which I miss so much. Only here can we be together, because in Poland I am left almost alone."

(Text based on photographer's documentation and an interview by Jaques Hendriks.)

Wim Melis