And through these layers the Night Watch appears Nicole Montagne

After any major event – a natural disaster, a plane crash or the murder of a well-known person – journalists ask their readers, viewers or listeners a number of clear-cut questions. ‘Where were you?’ ‘What were you doing?’ ‘How did you react?’ The questions are phrased slightly differently each time, but they always come down to the same thing: how did these current events pull you away from your daily routine? Can you describe this? Were you in contact with other people? How shocked were you by the events? The focus is unmistakably on the addressee – on the personal experience of the average television viewer or internet user. Their daily routine (I was in a traffic jam, I was brushing my teeth, I was walking through town and the sun was shining, I was deeply shocked, I phoned my sister) apparently adds something to the event in question. This inevitable questioning does in fact have a function: it determines how an event is perceived, at which moment it entered our lives and how we dealt with it. Precisely because of this questioning we construct a story and make these events our own. That story defines how we eventually remember the event.

What is most striking, however, is how we talk about the event as though we witnessed it ourselves. This is misleading – because we weren’t there. We were in the bathroom or the garden. We were sat in the car or at work. The television crew was there, the camera was there, and judging from the social media the mobile phones of hundreds of others were there. But not us. We made it our own through a screen. And so we remember it through a screen.

Let’s turn to another major event, one that’s somewhat less dramatic. For this we’ll direct our attention to the Rijksmuseum, to the Night Watch by Rembrandt van Rijn. Incorporated into the canon of art history, this phenomenal painting is recognised as a definitive work, a revered masterpiece. Works of a similar stature – whether it be a book, a building or an image – are events. They mark something. There’s often talk of a new beginning, although you could just as rightly say they mark the end of an era. Four centuries later, the story of this event is still resounding. Visitors viewing the Night Watch are well aware of this. President Barack Obama even chose the Night Watch as the backdrop for a short press conference in the spring of 2014. Naturally, some thought went into this: a speech presented in front of one of the world’s most famous paintings, a canvas with virtuoso chiaroscuro effects and an extremely dramatic staging. ‘Of all the press conferences I’ve done, this is easily the most impressive background that I’ve had’ he stated with pleasure at the end of his speech. I can imagine! Rembrandt is a myth and the Night Watch represents an important cultural narrative. Moreover, a myth simply forms an extraordinarily meaningful context. Nevertheless, a myth can have its shortfalls. Once it has been established how something should be viewed, there’s a chance that you fail to spot other aspects in the work. After all, aside from simply experiencing something (the beauty, for example), looking also involves an amount of accepting and rejecting. You can either go along with the story around the painting or not. But to make this choice, you first need to look. Only, do the visitors standing before the Night Watch actually do this? Or do they tend to go along with the fact that it’s a Very Famous Painting? Do they perhaps focus on what they know they ought to see? These are precisely the questions the photographers Olivier van Breugel en Simone Mudde posed themselves; questions which, as odd as it may sound, they have photographed. Can you photograph a question? Can you work as abstractly as that? Yes, you can.

Van Breugel and Mudde are questioning ‘the constant compulsion to capture everything’ for which they decided to ‘visit the natural habitat of the photographer: tourist attractions’. This led them to the Rijkmuseum and eventually the Night Watch. And what did they come across? Hundreds of visitors viewing the Night Watch through a screen, in other words, through a camera, an iPad, or a mobile phone. The event (the experience of the painting) was already captured before it had been seen. In the images by Van Breugel and Mudde we see the Night Watch through a screen; hundreds of different screens in fact, but all in all they form one large, homogeneous display screen. The visitors don’t look, they take photographs. They do what they’ve been taught, what they’ve learnt: they record how they’ve ‘witnessed’ an event. Subsequently they will each be able to answer the wellknown questions: ‘Where were you?’ ‘What did you do?’ ‘How did you react?’ Through the photographs of Van Breugel and Mudde we see the visitors’ actions. We read the information on all of the different screens: we can read which shutter speed or automatic function was used, we see the small square focusing on the man in the middle of the painting, we see the lens zoom in and out. We read their screens. We don’t see Van Breugel and Mudde, who spent days wandering through this space. They were using a similar piece of equipment, although perhaps something a little more sophisticated and tailored to their needs, all the same they worked very differently. Van Breugel and Mudde don’t use their camera to make a copy of something or to duplicate a ‘reality’; no, they use the device in a way that hardly seems possible: to ask questions. They show us that we are witnessing something, and that this ‘witnessing something’ essentially doesn’t mean very much.

In the essay ‘Playing against the apparatus’ * I discuss several ideas about photography derived from the Czech-born philosopher Vilém Flusser (1921–1991). He claims that where technical images dominate, illiteracy assumes a new role. According to Flusser, in the past the illiterate were excluded from the codes immersed in the culture of writing. However, without giving it a second thought the new illiterate partake in today’s visual culture, which is similarly formed by codes, despite not being able to decode it. Van Breugel and Mudde drew inspiration for this project from the aforementioned essay, putting particular emphasis on the following passage that discusses the compulsion to document everything:

‘Can memory function without imagination? No, this isn’t possible. Because, in the same way that our world history is formed, our personal memories are not only formed by facts, but by our memories of those facts. This forms the prelude to a story about our lives and who we are, and also forms the prelude for ‘creativity’. Documenting everything is fatal for the memory; it turns us into robots, idle robots in fact, that can reproduce everything perfectly, but given this material have nothing more to add. Robots that simply see a photograph or a video as a representation of reality, and though they might be very proficient in applying the latest techniques they have little idea about what they are actually dealing with. In this way, a technological advancement ultimately means a regression for many of its users. They are subservient to the capacity of the device instead of applying their own intellectual capacities.’

With this notion in mind, when you look at the work of Van Breugel and Mudde you can see they have visualised the issue in an effective manner. The museum visitors themselves are not portrayed in the images. Van Breugel and Mudde have created a pars pro toto so to speak: only the hands holding the device have been photographed. Their face and eyes have been pushed to the background. The lens has become the eye, a mechanical eye,

clasped by hands both young and old, and in a range of skin tones. It is held elegantly or grasped slightly desperately between the fingers. It is directed hesitantly or very deliberately towards the Night Watch. We see carefully painted nails, a ring on a finger, a bracelet or the cord of the camera. There's no further information, we can only go on what is indicated by the poised hands and the fully automated eye. And through these layers the Night Watch appears, time after time, as a story from the past, as an event of old. Only the event has shifted: the event has become the photographing itself, which in essence is no longer an event.

The (amateur) photographer, to refer again to Flusser, simply documents where his camera has been and how the camera was operated there. The photographs of Van Breugel and Mudde reveal this mechanism with dead-on accuracy. They question photographs with photographs, and as such the essence of imagery and perception. We were there. But where were we when we stood in front of the Night Watch? Can we retell the tale? Have we witnessed something, made something our own? Have we in fact remembered anything at all?

Imagine if we were to turn off the light. We are in the museum standing in front of the Night Watch and for a moment we can't see anything. We just listen. What would we hear? The shuffling of shoes, people talking with one another, someone laughing, someone whispering, and on top of this, above all this, the incessant clicking of devices. Imagine what kind of effect such a sound without image would have. Imagine what we would be missing. But also ask yourself: while the light was on, would we have seen that much more?

* Nicole Montagne Een makelaar in Pruisen (A real estate agent in Prussia), Vantilt 2014