

## **MIAP FELLOWSHIP: MOVING THE MESSAGE TO A NEXT LEVEL**

**The MIAP Fellowship 2016 has been a unique opportunity for a selection of talented Dutch photographers to elaborate on their self-initiated projects. Six candidates were offered to discuss their socially concerned visual stories with experts arriving from a variety of disciplines. The pristine location made for a one-of-a-kind meeting place to bridge creative thought and artistic management.**

Six project ideas were shortlisted from over eighty applications that all had a certain quality and were thus seriously considered. The following emerging photographers from The Netherlands were eventually invited to develop and fine-tune their initial proposals:

Annette Behrens (Soy); Cynthia Boll (Sinking Cities); Jan Dirk van der Burg (Boss); Jan Hoek (New Masai II), Ananda van der Pluijm (Invisible Youth); and Nadine Stijns (National Identity of Somaliland).

The fundamental idea behind the MIAP Fellowship is to facilitate a refreshing form of education that allows for a cross-pollination of disciplines. Loenen aan de Vecht, situated less than 30 kilometres away from Amsterdam, has proven to be the perfect secluded arena for an intense 3-day in-depth and intense exchange of ideas by people who otherwise might never have encountered each other.

Cynthia Boll, one of the participating photographers: “You are often required to explain your project in a concise way. That is something that I struggle with, but the MIAP Fellowship has certainly helped me a lot in getting there eventually.”

Evelien Kunst, responsible for the programme of the MIAP Fellowship, has developed a model which functions as the ‘cement’ between the various meetings. Most significantly, the fundamental idea underneath is that the candidates are invited to move beyond the artistic aspects of their projects. This focus on the practical feasibility of the initial ideas is very much in line with what is expected of contemporary photographers nowadays.

Visual artists can’t exclusively focus on the content of their projects, as they are also expected to function as cultural entrepreneurs. This means (among other things) that socially engaged photographers have to effectively articulate their position and to motivate their actions accordingly. The fellowship therefore started with a ‘Socratic’ conversation concentrated on the philosophical problem: When Do I Have Impact? By consequently asking critical questions, moderator Gijs Reudink urges the photographers to arrive at the point in which they find themselves confronted with the expectations that come with the self-initiated projects; to mirror their ambitions. Reudink: “The ultimate result of a Socratic conversation is ‘aporia’, which literally means: to stimulate doubt. I think we succeeded in that task today.”

“Authors (including visual artists) have a certain responsibility when it comes to the promotion of their content,” says Paolo Woods. Together with Gabriele Galimberti he has worked on the photographic translation of the issue of ‘tax havens’. As Woods explains in his powerful presentation (he proves to be a very talented public speaker), their long-term project has been a road full of obstacles but eventually resulted in the publication of ‘The Heavens’. The book might not be considered inexpensive but it is so complete in its content and so convincing in its message that it is value for money. The presentation of Woods has raised the awareness among the participants of the MIAP fellowship to consider how a strategy, or perhaps even a chain of strategies, could support the articulation of their projects - even in the stage of being ‘works in progress’.

This is very much in line with what Harold Dunnink, graphic designer and co-founder of De Correspondent, mentioned earlier that day: “Entrepreneurship is absolutely required in order to guarantee a certain creative freedom.” For Dunnink, communication via online media outlets needs to be ‘full cycle’. Additionally, the message should be delivered in a convincing yet calm manner. This is also very much a matter of establishing a sustainable collaboration between an author and a graphic designer in an early stage of a project. More in general, as Dunnink states: “A mature form of cultural entrepreneurship also includes clear and mutual agreements with potential partners.”

The MIAP Fellowship is mainly a training ground to prepare a fine selection of socially engaged photographers to unfold their plans to each other and the MIAP Foundation at a later stage. For only then will be decided on the details of the financial support. Three experts in delivering commercial ‘elevator pitches’ are therefore invited on the second day of the fellowship to prepare the photographers for this important task. Martijn Baarda, a

'branding architect', and one of the 'pitch'-trainers, confronts the candidates with the following dilemma: "How can you accustom a personal passion towards the subject of investigation to a certain market value?"

The 'pitch'-training thus stresses on a clear and effective articulation of both emotional and social relevance in regards to addressing a self-initiated photographic project.

One-on-one meetings between the photographers and people that have a specific expertise in the field of their interest is another important aspect of the MIAP Fellowship. It allows the candidates to move outside their common realm and to really discuss in detail the issues that they struggle with concerning the execution of their project. The 3-day fellowship allows for a two-way benefit, as the experts can be forceful in their convincement to think 'outside of the box' and meanwhile give effective support in doing so due to their specialized know-how. This often leads to surprising angles on the matter at stake and also to very practical feedback.

Jan Hoek, visual artist, on his learning experience in the MIAP Fellowship: "Pitching your ideas for financial support is still often considered a dirty job by many visual artists. But this fellowship has made me aware of the absolute necessity to implement a business model within a project proposal and it comforts me to realize that it doesn't have to affect your artistic integrity."

Most of the participating photographers – ranging from visual artists to photojournalists – were not familiar with each other's work until they participated in this fellowship. More in general, MIAP has introduced them to people that they might not acquaint with in their everyday practice, and to social aspects that they would otherwise not be so much involved with. Ananda van der Pluijm: "I seem to struggle with thinking in large and abstract concepts, certainly in the stage in which my project is in, as I haven't yet found the ultimate form of presentation. Getting feedback on these aspects has been really helpful, if only to realize there is still a lot to consider."

These considerations might also apply to the search for alternative means in order to stage socially engaged visual stories. "Instagram is the perfect platform to make people gather around a niche subject," says Molly Benn, who gave a presentation during the MIAP Fellowship on behalf of Instagram. After hearing about the kind of projects these photographers are currently working on she got even more convinced of the mutual benefit. Molly Benn: "Instagram could be an apt tool of communicating your project, as any micro-interest will have its audience."

The candidates also get to meet professionals in the field of marketing, specialized in the potential to communicate the same story to several kinds of audiences. This strategy requires multiple approaches to the same theme. Mark Woerde: "The ideal to make the world a better place is one thing, and marketing strategies could be a very helpful in doing so, but you also have to take into account that reality is extremely ephemeral. Creating awareness is one thing but the ultimate challenge is to come up with an effective campaign that actually leads to solving the problem that you want to advertise."

Thomas Vroege (VEX), specialized in multi-platform presentations: "The role of a visual artist today has to be in delivering creative ideas that move beyond a more mainstream knowledge or conception that we already have of the issue at stake. The MIAP Fellowship seems to be the perfect 'playground' to test such an approach."

Overall, the intense three day gathering, in pleasantly tranquil circumstances and with plenty opportunity for informal meetings has proven to be the best possible approach to the set goals of the MIAP Foundation. This is confirmed when the candidates present their projects to a 'live' audience of 45 guests with various expertises and arriving from all kinds of professional realms. This is important, as there is plenty of potential - mutual interest that deserves further investigation.

The MIAP Fellowship is an effective platform that helps to bridge often too divided worlds. It has stimulated fruitful encounters between professional visual storytellers and people with an expertise in the topics that they wish to tackle, but also with know-how on how to develop effective strategies to eventually arrive at successful end results. This approach to the visualization of projects with a socially engaged angle will be all the more relevant in the near future as cultural entrepreneurship is a key element in the career of contemporary photographers.

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### **A selection of quotes from participating photographers:**

Jan Hoek: "I have had lots of great responses to my initial portrait series that I established in partnership with the so called 'new Massai' who live a typical urban life. But I have also gained enough negative feedback along the way. This made me realize that I needed to continue this project from another angle and I'm really happy to now collaborate with three very talented photographers from East Africa: Mohammed Atoum from Sudan, Sarah Waiswa from Kenya, and Joel Lukovi, also from Kenya. Together, we wish to overcome the stereotypical visualization of the Massai as seen in pretty much every guide book on Kenya."

Cynthia Boll: "My interest in sinking cities started in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia. Along the way, I learned that the issue of land subsidence applies to various other metropolitan areas in the world, be it that they all have their own unique problems."

Cynthia Boll: "I always schedule meetings with potential partners to seek a ground for mutual benefit. It is important, in such cases, to exactly know who sits in front of you and what their position is. This requires some research on beforehand."

Cynthia Boll: "Ideally, when what I initiated is being picked up by others who might be in a better position to eventually solve the problems which are being addressed. That is the kind of responsibility towards my subject that I would feel most comfortable with."

Jan Dirk van der Burg: "In my projects I always try to find a surprising and unconventional angle on a larger and more complicated issue."

Jan Dirk van der Burg: "In the case of my current project 'Boss', concerning the most famous plastic bag of Ukraine, I already – figuratively speaking - baked the 'crunchy layer' that helps to interest a potentially large audience but I'm still in search of the visual translation of its inner core."

Anette Behrens: "A change of attitude is obvious, but a deviation in someone's way of thinking is more difficult to measure. Yet the latter can be valuable too."

Ananda van der Pluijm: "If I can somehow push the issue of invisible youth higher up on the agenda, both of politicians and the public, I think I've already arrived at gaining a certain kind of impact that I aimed for when initiating my project. This exposure would then give significant value to what I try to establish as a photographer."

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Some quotes from the invited experts:

#### **Gijs Reudink, philosopher**

Gijs Reudink: "The extra value of what you initiate is, perhaps first and foremost, very much in the positive vibe that it brings you."

Gijs Reudink: "We are in search of stories, mainly because we have a human need for social commitment."

#### **Harald Dunnink, De Correspondent**

Harald Dunnink: "Really good stories come with a prize. They simply cost money and consequently, someone needs to pay for them to be told."

Harald Dunnink: "Those who have the ambition to tell stories also have a certain responsibility to promote them."

Harald Dunnink: "The loyalty of an audience needs to be cherished and rewarded, somehow."

Harald Dunnink: "It can be rewarding to translate your online platform to 'live' events."

### **Pitch-trainers: Edward van der Marel – Geert van Engelen – Martijn Baarda**

Edward van der Marel: “You need to make meetings with potential partners personal and also interesting for them. To find out the others' interests, that is what is required in order to pull them in.”

Geert van Engelen: “When you are at a fair, ask the person in front of you some questions in regards to their interest in you. Make the occasion of meeting the artist special for them and never forget to ask for their business card too. You need to know who you've been in conversation with and to be in the position to follow up on that, always.”

Martijn Baarda: “You need to find partners that naturally fit you and they will meanwhile try to figure out how naturally you fit to your own project. That's what authenticity comes down to, essentially.”

Martijn Baarda: “You are not expected to be an absolute know-it-all in the field of your interest, for that explains why you seek support. But you can certainly build credit by showing to have already prepared yourself, by having done some initial research on the field of expertise of the person you ask for help.”

Martijn Baarda: “A good pitch is a story that sticks to once mind and that somehow stays preserved when forwarded by the one that it was initially presented to. Indeed, as an anecdote.”

### **Mark Woerde (LEMZ)**

Mark Woerde: “The aim should always be to leave an impression that is sustainable, so that it will remain. You might make a serious impression on someone when you unfold your plan, but how to prevent that this is easily forgotten?”

Mark Woerde: “When trying to convince another person of the importance of your ideas, you are asking for attention within the fierce competition of the everyday experience. This is unavoidably so, unfortunately, in regards to the impact you wish to create on the people you try to reach with your message.”

Mark Woerde: “The ideal to make the world a better place is one thing, and marketing strategies could be a very helpful in doing so, but you also have to take into account that reality is extremely ephemeral. Creating awareness is one thing but the ultimate challenge is to come up with an effective campaign that actually leads to solving the problem that you want to advertise. ”

Mark van Woerde: “The more ambitious a proposal for a project, the more likely it is that you will not manage to carry it out all by yourself. You simply need to find others to partner with, ranging from sponsors to people from all possible disciplines who can help you to arrive at the ultimate result of your campaign.”

### **Molly Benn (Instagram)**

Molly Benn: “Instagram is like the rabbit hole in the story of Alice in Wonderland. Once you're in, you're hooked and you can't stop divining deeper into it.”

Molly Benn: “There are many communities on Instagram and they all use the tool in their own way. You just need to ask yourself this question: which community do I wish to address? Once you figured that out, study their Instagram-behaviour and perhaps then organize an event which can function as an actual meeting place.”

Molly Benn: “The total amount of followers is not so interesting. It's also not that difficult to have high numbers of visitors to your account. What matters more is to create loyalty among your audience so that they will genuinely share your passion on the particular topic of interest.”

Molly Benn: “The ultimate that you can achieve is to stimulate FOMO: Fear Of Missing Out.”

Molly Benn: “Instagram can also function as a fundraising tool, as the acclaimed photojournalist Robin Hammond has proven with his campaign @whereloveisillegal, concerning attention for LGBT's living on the African continent.”

