A BLURRING OF FACT AND FICTION

by Kim Knoppers

When I take the book *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote down from my bookcase, the first person I think of is Philip Seymour Hoffman. The American actor died at the start of this year. His portrayal of Truman Capote in the 2005 biographical film *Capote* is inimitable. In the film, Capote travels to Kansas to immerse himself in the facts and rumours surrounding the notorious murder of a family in Holcomb. He speaks to local residents and police officers and even strikes up a friendship with one of the murderers. Capote works on his research for years, writes articles for *The New York Times* based on his six thousand pages of notes, and finally publishes the non-fiction novel *In Cold Blood*, in which he meticulously reconstructs the case. I am familiar with photographs of the real Truman Capote, but in my memory he looks exactly like Philip Seymour Hoffman.
A few months ago, there it was. Out of the blue. A report in the paper: 'Arrest in the Brabant Killers case'. Still going on, then. After almost thirty years, countless conspiracy theories and hundreds of thousands of pages of files that will shortly fall under the statute of limitations, a suspect was arrested in May in connection with the case of the Brabant Killers, known to Dutch-speakers as the *Bende van Nijvel*. In the early 1980s the gang committed a series of extremely violent crimes, of which the robberies at Delhaize supermarkets in particular created enormous disquiet. The Brabant Killers caused twenty-eight deaths and wounded a further forty people. Rumours suggest that the gang was intent on destabilizing Belgium and in receipt of protection from people within the political and judicial establishment, but there has never been any proof.

Belgian photographer Jan Rosseel was affected from an early age by those events, which constitute one of the largest puzzles in Belgian history. When his father nipped out just before closing time on 27 September 1985 to fetch a pack of cigarettes from the Delhaize supermarket across the road, he became one of the gang's fatal casualties. 'The idea of a project focused on the Brabant Killers had been in my mind for a long time, but in the second year of my training at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague I started actually working on it after we were given an assignment with the theme "hidden places". Once I began researching I immersed myself completely in the case. I started by reading and collecting all kinds of facts from police reports, files and news items, and by getting in touch with eyewitnesses, the examining magistrates and the police. It can take a long time to get access to things.'

Drawing upon all that factual information and witness statements, Rosseel made *Belgian Autumn. A Confabulated History*, a book in which he combines archive photos with photos he staged himself, based on stories told by eye-witnesses. Their style ranges from the detached portrayal of pieces of evidence to filmic, more narrative photos. Documentary and storytelling elements are combined.

In his work Rosseel is fascinated by the reliability or otherwise of the human brain and the manipulability of memories. He has chosen a title that hints at what he is doing. 'Confabulation is a term used in the medical world to refer to the filling of gaps in the memory with new information that may or may not be invented. You see it in certain forms of Alzheimer's disease. The term is highly relevant to *Belgian Autumn* because it also applies to witness statements. You never know whether the information or the things you describe as a witness are truly correct. It's possible that the information has changed over time. If you make a fresh statement

twenty-five years later, it may be different from the first, whether because you don't recall everything with 100 per cent accuracy or because you've been influenced by the press. It doesn't mean you're lying but that you have inadvertently adjusted the information.' Not only witnesses but the press and Jan Rosseel himself confabulate. 'I like it when you have the opportunity to interpret things rather more loosely. Perhaps you could say that *Belgian Autumn* is a visual hypothesis, because I've brought all the facts together and then selected the elements that are visually interesting. I've used those to construct the story.'

Jan Rosseel seems to be the visual counterpart to New Journalism writer and inventor of the *True Crime* genre Truman Capote, who used a new style of reporting that was characterized by literary techniques and was really more like a short story. But there was of course one big difference between Capote's account and fiction: the fact that the reader knew it had all really happened. Because Rosseel uses a camera, the archetypal instrument deployed to furnish direct proof – and around which there is even now an aura of credibility – the tension between fact and fiction, truth and confabulation is even greater.

Events surrounding the Brabant Killers are among the most painful in the Belgian collective memory. Like Lebanese artist Walid Raad, whose work keeps alive the traumatic history of his country, Rosseel lays his finger on his own country's most sensitive spot in *Belgian Autumn: A Confabulated History*. In *The Atlas Group*, Raad tries to draw attention to aspects of the contemporary history of Lebanon that are painful or less well known by using archive material such as notebooks, film, video and photographs. 'I wouldn't dare to compare my work with that of Walid Raad because I find his work extremely intelligent. I think he goes a step further than me, by using a fictional doctor in his narrative, for example, Dr. Fadl Fakhouri. That immediately has an impact on the truth status of everything the doctor exposes. Raad plays with the conceptualization and credibility of certain institutional values. My work gives the viewer, by its title for example, more starting points for gaining an insight into the interplay between documentary and constructed images. That makes it more accessible, which is one of the things I'm after. With *Belgian Autumn* I want to draw attention to one of the darkest periods in recent Belgian history so that it remains part of the collective memory after the statute of limitations runs out in 2015.'

All images from the series *Belgian Autumn: A Confabulated History* © Jan Rosseel, courtesy of the artist

JAN ROSSEEL (b. 1979, Belgium) studied documentary photography at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, Netherlands and photojournalism at the Danish School of Media and Journalism in Aarhus, Denmark. He has received several awards for *Belgian Autumn* and has been shortlisted for Dutch Doc Photo Award 2014. In spring 2014 he exhibited *Belgian Autumn: A Confabulated History* at Foam 3h. For the exhibition he put together a spatial installation along with artist Mischa Daams, in a darkened room. Flash bulbs lit the space, creating an afterimage, so that the focus was on the fleeting nature of memory. Rosseel enjoys collaborating with those outside his own discipline, such as scientists, lawyers or graphic designers.

KIM KNOPPERS (b. 1976, the Netherlands) has been a curator at Foam Museum since 2011. She holds a PhD in art history from the University of Amsterdam. She was previously curator at De Beyerd, centre for contemporary art, and she has also worked as a freelance curator. She has curated group exhibitions including *FUSE* (2003), *Remind* (2003), *Exotics* (2008) *Snow is White* (2010, together with Joris Jansen) and *Re-Search* (2012), and solo exhibitions by Raphaël Dallaporta, WassinkLundgren, Taiyo Onorato & Nico Krebs, Jan Hoek, Lorenzo Vitturi, Otto Kaan, Marnix Goossens and Jan Rosseel. She lives and works in Amsterdam.