

Who are the Europeans?

It was Henry Kissinger who famously expressed the essence of Europe with a somewhat exasperated question: "If I want to call Europe, who do I call?" Europe is just so hard to define. Who are the Europeans? It is probably easier to say *what* they are, namely a quarrelsome bunch, who revel in disagreeing with each other. That, of course, makes it hard to deal with them - if you look at things from the perspective of someone in power in, say, Washington, DC. Not that things are much easier for the various politicians in London or Paris, in Prague or Berlin, in Warsaw or Rome.

But hidden underneath all that uncertainty about the political – and economical – Europe, there are the Europeans, the people who live in the countries that are part of Europe, many – but not all – of them part of the European Union, with many – but not all – of those sharing the common Euro currency.

As far as I can tell from my visits, Europeans themselves do not seem to be that concerned about who they are or what they are. And why would they? For the most part, they seem to be happy to be English or French or German or Dutch or whatever else, and European at the same time. They will quarrel with someone from another European country about soccer or food or money, but they will be happy to tell the non-Europeans about their continent. Of course, I am seeing all this as someone who thinks of himself as a European first, and then a German, and then as someone who has been living in the United States for over ten years.

Europe without its mirror image across the Atlantic would be a different. But take away the superficial, mostly political differences, and things start looking surprisingly similar. Europe now is a melting pot just like the United States, facing the same struggles and uncertainties over immigration, religion, jobs... Why is it that what is seen as a genuine strength of the United States – the ability to bring people together to create something bigger and better - is considered to be a problem for Europe? Or am I being too optimistic?

But shouldn't we be optimistic?

The year 2009 witnessed the 50th anniversary of the publication of Robert Frank's *The Americans*, a body of work initially rejected by critics, but now one of the 20th Century's photographic masterpieces. *The Americans* – that is a loaded and big term. How could one possibly portray the people of the United States in just one book? Frank's solution was simple. He did a series of road trips, to take photographs along the way. He explored the country, by looking at its different parts and people, and the images he got he published as *The Americans*. That's what artists do: They don't worry too much about whether what they do will satisfy everybody, they just create something and put it out there.

Reinier Gerritsen's *The Europeans* is as ambitious as Frank's *The Americans*, even though, of course, it differs in pretty much each and every detail. Yet just like the famous predecessor, it pursues an ambitious and equally impossible goal: To portray the Europeans. For Gerritsen, there is no "impossible," and the best approach to deal with the challenge is to simply go for it – the famous American can-do approach. After having worked in 15 countries, he secured funding from the Anna Cornelis Foundation; at the time of this writing he has taken photographs in 25 countries.

If there is one big difference between Americans and Europeans it is that the former are very individualistic, whereas the latter place a stronger focus on the whole. Interestingly enough, *The Europeans* mirrors this property by showing photographs of groups. This choice is the artist's. In an email to the author, Gerritsen wrote that "I am fond of looking at people, and when I have a group it's a lot of people. [...] When I have a group portrait of ten people I see ten struggles for life, ten love lives, their jobs, their fun, their disappointments. And I am satisfied with the picture if I make these things visible, when I see the diversity and the richness of us all."

Diversity, the richness of us all, again these are words Americans are very familiar with, and the artist applies them effortlessly to the melting pot that is Europe.

To produce these photographs, Gerritsen places himself at locations where he is sure to come across large numbers of people. He then waits for the right moment. “The right moment,” he explains, is “not only [given by] the composition, [...] but [...] also [by] the combination of characters, the clothing, the way and the direction they look.” It is Henri Cartier-Bresson's “decisive moment,” it is street photography meeting the more formal aspects of classical paintings of groups. And the artist decides about the final outcome. Chance encounters are turned into formal compositions.

Reinier Gerritsen is a cunning man: To be invisible, the photographer wears a fluorescent safety jacket – surely nobody expects someone standing out so clearly to take sneaky photographs. It is as if he was shouting “Look at me, I am taking photographs,” and nobody actually believed it. People mind their own business – this in a day and age when we have become suspicious of strangers taking our photographs (while not minding too much getting caught on ever more “security” and surveillance cameras – what a truly brave new world!)

For each group, in the very short time span of a second or two, Gerritsen takes a series of photographs, making sure to get images of the characters he needs, all in focus. He then digitally constructs the final result on a computer, moving beyond the simple ideas of regular street photography. The end results look effortlessly real, yet somehow also slightly unsettling. We are not used to seeing groups portrayed in this way, with sharp focus everywhere, and with no obvious relationships between many of their members.

We are also not used to, well, staring so openly at strangers in the street. Here, we can: They might look back at us from the photographs, but of course, they can't see anything. Only we, the viewers, can see.

The Europeans clearly reflects not only photographic history, but also the evolution of photography itself. Strictly speaking, the photographs in *The Europeans* are what people call “photo illustrations” - they are not real. But then, *The Europeans* shows how such terms ultimately are useless: They cling to an idea of photography that simply is not valid any longer. Even if constructed, *The Europeans* is documentary photography, or maybe we might call it post-documentary photography. Debates about whether the images in *The Europeans* are photographs or “photo illustrations” might serve a purpose, but nevertheless they miss the point: The images speak to us about the people in them, the Europeans, and they tell us about our modern, crowded lives, about the human condition. They comment on how we are being watched, usually without our explicit consent (but we never register our disapproval of our modern surveillance societies, even if crimes never are really prevented, but only maybe solved a bit more quickly, and where we are all treated as proto-criminals).

Just like *The Americans*, *The Europeans* portrays a group of people living in a specific geographic zone on this planet, Europe. You have to look at the photographs carefully to see where they were taken. Make-up or dress codes might give away a little bit about their locations, but maybe these kinds of conclusions only make sense after the fact, once we know the locations of the photographs.

Crucially, what we do see is how similar we all are, how the crowded public space transforms us all into actors, who know how to behave, what to do, how to move, where to look and where not to look given the constraints. If Europe is a big melting pot, being in a crowded public space enforces the melting even more: Our private spaces shrink to the few centimeters around our bodies, and we are all turned into a big group – the group that Reinier Gerritsen loves looking at so much.

With *The Europeans*, he has turned what we could call his voyeurism into ours – and into a form of art, that teaches us about who we are – as individuals and as members of the various groups we belong to.