

# Visual Narratives

## Portraits of Gerard Reve in his Study



1. E. Posthuma de Boer, *Portret van Gerard Reve, met ganzeveren pen schrijvend op een vel papier, omringd door diverse voorwerpen*, 1969, Collection Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

# What is the best way in which to portray a blasphemous homosexual Dutch novelist? Haest deconstructs the staged portraits of Gerard Reve.

Even without having read the work of Gerard Reve, one of the most famous and controversial Dutch writers of the twentieth century, a single look at his 1968 portrait by photographer Eddy Posthuma de Boer instantly reveals a myriad of stories around his person.<sup>1</sup> The writer looks at us from across his desk, two fingers meditatively at his temple, quill in hand, as he writes 'God is the Love' on a sheet of paper. Besides the many bottles and wine glasses scattered across the desk, Reve is surrounded by strange trivia such as a toy skeleton, a plastic Christmas tree, a garden gnome, a crucifix, a picture of a donkey, teddy bears, and other stuffed animals, one of them trapped in a birdcage. Besides stories, the seemingly random yet mysterious compilation of objects evokes a plenitude of questions. Who is this man? What is the collection of objects meant to tell us?

The image was taken as part of a poster series called 'personality portraits' sold by the Dutch 'king of posters' Engel Verkerke from the late 1960s onwards. The series depicted famous writers and artists in their homes

and studios. Apart from Reve's immense popularity at the time, Verkerke attributes the success of the photograph by Posthuma de Boer compared to the rest of the series to its imaginative, story-telling character.<sup>2</sup> Whereas other Dutch writers, such as Harry Mulisch and Jan Wolkers, were photographed close-up, with a focus on facial expression, Reve's portrait zooms out and shows the rich and surreal interior of his living room in the remote Dutch village of Greonterp, Friesland, where Reve lived from 1964 to 1971. The image thus combines portraiture, still life and documentary photography. The highly stylized image simultaneously houses a 'story' of staged symbolism, and a seemingly random and momentary still of the writer's daily life in his 'natural habitat'.

This inherent paradox of staged spontaneity renders the representational character of the portrait problematic. It is not mere physical likeness, nor a voyeuristic snapshot of the celebrity's daily reality that makes the portrait particularly characteristic of Reve's persona, but a carefully crafted allegory of his body of

thought. In collaboration with the photographer, Reve actively constructs the image as a writer by tirelessly staging major characteristic 'Revian' motifs such as religion, death and (homo)sexuality in the form of symbolic objects surrounding his person. Such symbolic mythmaking is most exemplary, but not unique, to the image by Posthuma de Boer; the objects reoccur in various other portraits of Reve, taken in the late 1960s by photographers such as Vincent Mentzel and Ronald Sweering.

The portraits by Posthuma de Boer and others thus allow us to think through the role of portrait photography as a form of narrative. It takes the narrative quality of the photographic portrait beyond physical likeness, facial expression, and truthful documentation of the artist in his studio. Instead, or in addition, it constitutes a constructed symbolic story, blurring the categorization of the portrait as a photographic genre distinct from documentary, still life, or genre photography. As a hybrid, it evokes significant questions with regard to the representational value of the studio portrait. Voyeuristic and mysterious as it may seem, what story can such a theatrically constructed studio portrait convey about Reve's person? What do the biographical objects in his portraits tell us about the person behind the literature?

### Between fact and fiction

Last year, the portrait by Posthuma de Boer became part of the Rijksmuseum collection, along with some 500 other portraits granted by Reve's partner Joop Schafthuizen.<sup>3</sup> Besides Posthuma de Boer's personality portrait, the collection holds similar photographs, typically made for magazine covers and interviews,

by photographers such as Steye Raviez, Ronald Sweering, Vincent Mentzel and Klaas Koppe. The collection ranges from Annelies Romein's 1947 portraits of an 'angry young man', one of which featured on the cover of Reve's first bestseller *De Avonden*, to a 2004 portrait of Reve as a demented elderly man by Rineke Dijkstra. This set of photographs thus forms a unique visual biography of some 57 years of the writer's life. They are particularly significant to an analysis of the narrative function of the studio portrait, as the collection features many portraits of the writer in his personal space over the course of his literary career.

This interest in the physical space where the famous sojourn lives and works, and the objects associated with their person, is not a new phenomenon. Already in 1855, André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, one of the pioneers of photography and patentee of the *carte-de-visite*, claimed that the photographer 'must do more than photograph, he must *biographe*'.<sup>4</sup> Disdéri's celebrity portraits, fervently collected during the 'cartomania' of the French bourgeoisie, documented the life stories of famous writers, actors, and scientists of the nineteenth-century Parisian social scene. The late nineteenth-century inclusion of photography in the printed press gave rise to publications such as the 1902 photographic series of members of the Royal Academy of Arts, published by Frederic G. Hodson in the British newspaper *The Tatler*.<sup>5</sup> Such series responded to the emerging lifestyle cult.

An early example of portraiture in which the artist is defined by his utensils is a tirelessly reproduced series of sixteenth-century prints of Erasmus holding paper and quill, stereotyping his status as a writer and thinker.<sup>6</sup> In the seventeenth century, Dutch genre

1 E. Posthuma de Boer, *Portret van Gerard Reve, met gaveveren pen schrijvend op een vel papier, omringd door diverse voorwerpen*, 1969, Collection Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, collection reference number RP-F-2011-21-40-3.

2 E. Verkerke in an interview with the author, May 30, 2012. 6 Collection reference number RPF-2011-21.

3 R.A. Sobieszek, *Ghost in the Shell. Photography and the Human Soul*, exh. cat. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Cambridge, MA/London 2000, p. 19.

4 See for example the 1902 portrait of novelist Arthur Morrison surrounded by his personal belongings in his

living room. The portrait was taken by F. G. Hodson and is now in the National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG Ax25182). Hodson's images of literary, theatrical and artistic celebrities were commissioned for *Tatler* and other periodicals.

5 See for example the 1526 Albrecht Dürer prints in the Rijksmuseum collection (RP-P-OB-1281), which inspired similar stereotypical images of Erasmus by Johann Theodor de Bry (RP-P-1906-1462) and the famous 1535 painting by Quinten Massijs (I) (SKA-166).

painting generated a large-scale tradition of studio portraiture, the ambivalent representational character of which has long been contested.<sup>7</sup> The problematic biographical status of the studio portrait is epitomised in the contested meaning of Johannes Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* (c. 1666). Also known as *The Allegory of Painting* and *The Artist's Studio*, the painting has both been considered a veritable self-portrait of the artist, and a staged allegory symbolizing the art of painting as an abstract concept.

The autobiographical nature of the Reve portraits is similarly contested. In 2001 the Letterkundig Museum, the museum of Dutch literature in The Hague, published Steye Raviez's portraits of Gerard Reve (which are also part of the Rijksmuseum collection) as part of their series *Achter het boek* [Behind the book].<sup>8</sup> After Roland Barthes declared the death of the author in 1967, dichotomising the author and his oeuvre as two separate phenomena that should be considered independently, this series aimed to revive the importance of the individual that supposedly hides behind the literature.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Reve, this distinction between art and author cannot easily be drawn. Though his prose is said to be fictional, the anecdotes in both his letters and novels are often clearly autobiographical. The categorization of fact and fiction is particularly dysfunctional in the case of Reve, who renders the personal object allegorical, and seeks divine truth in the futile and the anecdotal.<sup>10</sup> Though Reve is often considered a naturalist for his descriptive style of ordinary things, he presents himself as a baroque romantic who 'lives in mythology, religious imagery and symbols.'<sup>11</sup>

The object-based methodology of the 1960s portraits is particularly congruent with Reve's worldview and literary style of imbuing trivial daily objects, (sexual or violent) rituals and events with divine meaning. The stylized still life in the photos corresponds with a literary shift in Reve's work during the 1960s, in which he first began to express his 'Revist' worldview through the medium of semi-autobiographical letters for the magazine *Tirade*, later published as *Op weg naar het einde* [On my way to the end] (1963) and *Nader tot U*

[Nearer to Thee] (1966). Photography provided him with a self-reflexive tool to describe his struggle with death, God, and sexuality, without the constraints of plot and chronology. Through anecdotal association displayed in his letters, Reve strived for the divine through the material and the anecdotal. According to him, the need to return to futile past memories 'must house the explanation that contains the abhorrence of "this disastrous life".'<sup>12</sup> The anecdotal quality of the peculiar combination between staged genre photography, portraiture, and symbolic still life therefore seems an appropriate way to portray a man like Reve, a fervent believer of the futile detail embodying the essence of meaning.

### Gerard Reve's Biographical Objects

Posthuma de Boer's portrait inspired the paperback covers of *Op weg naar het einde* and *Nader tot U*, where Reve is portrayed holding a cat, paper, and quill, surrounded by various (kitsch) objects. 'Brief uit Greonterp' [Letter from Greonterp] (1964), published in *Nader tot U*, narrates the objects in his study. A seemingly random sequence of anecdotes about the origin and current use of the objects embody Reve's explorations into God, Death, and Love. Apart from the elaborate religious symbolism in the form of crucifixes, a golden lamb, and statues of the Virgin Mary, the images also feature less obvious citations of pivotal themes in Reve's oeuvre. For example, in *Nader tot U* Reve describes how he fetched forgotten objects in a cardboard box from Wim Schuhmacher's attic after their relationship ended. Among the objects we recognise in his portraits is the skull 'Frederique' that his former partner 'Wimie' once removed from a chapel in Paris. It appears and reappears in various *vanitas*-like portraits of Reve in 1968-9, simultaneously symbolizing a universal *memento mori*, as well as a personal, somewhat macabre, holiday souvenir, and the painful remnant of a lost love.

Besides this relatively classical reference to Death and religious iconography, the portraits feature more unintelligible symbolic objects that become significant when placed in context of the current affairs of the time.<sup>13</sup> Though to the layman they look like kitsch

decorations, many of the objects embody references to highly controversial themes and events in Reve's work and life during the late 1960s. Pictures and toy donkeys refer to the 'donkey trial' of 1966, in which Reve was accused of heresy for presenting God as a 'one-year old, mouse-grey donkey' whom he 'possesses' in *Nader tot U*. The heresy trial took place in the same year Reve converted to Catholicism, leading many to believe he was mocking the Church he swore to genuinely adhere.

It is therefore significant that a copy of *Nader tot U* features as an object in the photo, sitting on the desk where Reve is writing 'God is de Liefde' [God is the Love] while directly confronting us with his gaze. In its presence, the stuffed donkey on the piano and the postcard of a donkey on the wall, many of which were sent to Reve by means of fan- or hate mail, no longer seem childish or nostalgic. The controversial sexual connotation of the donkey imbues the religious iconography in the image with new meaning. In his '*Vier Pleidooien*' [Appeal to the court] (1967), Reve explained his understanding of God, which equals love defined by mutual submission to one another. God, so he says, is lonely, too, and the ultimate way to unite with Him is sexually.<sup>14</sup>

*Op weg naar het einde* also reveals the origin of each of the other stuffed animals featured over and over again in his portraits; the bear wearing Reve's children's shoes, the

koala, the panda, and the fox represent him and his lovers.<sup>15</sup> In his novels, real- and stuffed animals are often mutilated into submission; arguably referring to Reve's religiously inspired sexual preferences revolving around penance and unconditional surrender. The caged teddy bear features in *Op weg naar het einde* as one of Reve's sexual fantasies, in which Wimie's new partner is a caged panda subject to Reve's will and mercy. A mild expression of animal mutilation first occurs in his seminal novel *De avonden (The Evenings)* (1947), in which the main character projects his emotions of despair and love on a stuffed rabbit, lavishly represented in the Reve portrait series.<sup>16</sup>

Such a seemingly banal personal object as a stuffed animal becomes the embodiment of a bigger search for meaning around which Reve's oeuvre revolves, in which masochism, sexuality, suffering and submission are all intrinsically linked to the search for love, death and the divine. The still lifes in the images of the artist's studio are of an almost allegorical significance. Yet in the light of the events of the 1960s, the objects are highly particular and personal to the sitter. As such, the representational character of the images hovers between universal symbolism and biographical documentation.

### Staging the Self

'When things are "staged" and "put in the picture", whether in photos, literature or

7 E. De Jongh, *Tot Lering en Vermaak. Betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw*, exh. cat. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam 1956.

8 S. Raviez, *Raviez' Reve: 1968-1987*, from the series 'Achter het boek', no. 37, Den Haag 2001.

9 R. Barthes, 'Death of the Author', in: *Aspen*, (1967) 5-6. For a concise history of *Aspen*, a loose-leafed magazine in box form, see 'The Box as Meeting Place: Artistic Encounters in *Aspen Magazine* (1965-1971)' by Maarten van Gageldonk in this issue of *Kunstlicht* (pp. 129-137).

10 Reve's work is pursued with random yet significant objects, reminding of the *Nouveau Roman*; a novel revolving around objects, 'subordinating plot and character to the details of the world rather than enlisting the world in their service'. M. Jakob, 'On the Poetics of Things in Modernity', in: T. Seelig and U. Stahel, *The Extasy of Things*, exh. cat. Fotomuseum Winterthur, Göttingen 2004, p. 45.

11 Reve in an interview with W.L. Brugsma, broadcasted by NOS, March 17, 1974. See: W.L. Brugsma, 'Nederland op weg naar het einde?', in: G. Reve, *In gesprek*.

*Interviews*, Baarn 1983, pp. 158-167.

12 G. Reve, *Nader tot U*, Amsterdam 1966, pp. 9-10. Author's translation.

13 The portraits accompanied a surge in Reve's popularity at the end of the 1960s, triggered by the release of bestsellers *Op Weg naar het Einde* [On My Way To the End] (1963) and *Nader tot U* [Nearer to Thee] (1966). *Op Weg naar het Einde* was the first book in his oeuvre to explicitly feature homosexuality, outing Reve as one of the first openly homosexual Dutch celebrities. In 1969 Reve received the prestigious P.C. Hooftprijs from minister Marga Klompé, whom he famously kissed upon receiving the prize, an act that was considered very inappropriate.

14 G. Reve, 'Vier Pleidooien', in: *Verzameld Werk 2*, Amsterdam 1999.

15 Reve, op. cit. (note 12), pp. 42-43.

16 Rabbits feature in the photographs from the 1960s to the 1990s. The original rabbit that inspired the book was a present to his ex-wife Hanny Michaelis, and is now a valuable relic in the Letterkundig Museum.

films, or, for example, in the arrangement of furniture and accessories, this is often aimed at conscious or unconscious self-stylization and representation of the subject (or owner)<sup>17</sup>. Actively constructing his image as a writer through the attributes accompanying him, Reve was one of the first celebrities to exploit the new media to such an unprecedented extent. Ronald Sweering and his ex-partner Willem van Albada were among the many who portrayed Reve as a general, in respectively an army suit (1967) and a colonial costume (1969). These costumes can be argued to refer to his sexual preference for uniforms and submission, but are also part of Reve's life performance. Claiming to have served as a lieutenant in India, or to be a descendant of a Norwegian maritime officer who died in combat, or to be an engraver named Frans Pannekoek (who in fact was a friend of his), was all part of a life-long parody, which also kept his business going. By creating a myth surrounding his background and his beliefs, he remained the topic of discussion, which invariably stranded at the classic Reve-question: 'was he being serious?'

Having famously argued 'the writer runs a business', Reve indeed had quite explicit views about the importance of image building. From the early 1960s onwards he was publicly represented in many interviews, letters, books, radio- and TV shows. Coming of age during the Second World War, Reve had a deeply rooted fear of poverty, resulting in his characteristic thrift and hoarding behaviour.<sup>18</sup> In the portrait by Posthuma de Boer, the text on the bear cage reads 'Vrees voor tekort aan kasgeld' [Beware of a lack of cash], allowing for a broader interpretation of the object besides its sexual reference. The need to earn a living by means of his books and public appearances is regularly described in his correspondences, often quoting exact transaction details.

A famous image by Steye Raviez mirrors Posthuma de Boer's photograph showing Reve, once again armed with a quill, this time writing 'Lang leve het Kapitalisme' [Long live Capitalism] on a sheet of paper. Writing in the 1960s, and originating from a communist nest, this was a highly controversial statement, and therefore an instant hit. However,

according to the photographer this was not merely a provocative publicity stunt; the picture embodied a fundamental belief on which Reve positioned himself as a 'citizen-writer' and a craftsman making a living from his trade. Through his banal kitsch and his bourgeois ethic, he aimed to distance himself from the image of the artist-genius.

Gerard Reve thus actively employed portraiture in his quest for controversy and publicity. A professional provocateur, Reve knew how to exploit the controversial appeal of the combination of homo(eroticism) and religious symbolism in his writing, public appearances, and portraits. The peculiar combination of kitsch and religious iconography, and controversial objects such as the caged bear and the donkey, can thus be argued to simultaneously constitute a reference to the characteristic spiritual symbolism in Reve's literary oeuvre, an outright challenge of the norms and values of the 1960s, and a successful publicity stunt.

### **The Schizophrenic Portrait**

By fictionalizing himself as a character in his work and public appearances, Reve blurred the line between autobiography and fiction. His regular presence in the media and photographic portraits have not clarified the ambiguity between his fictional- and autobiographical work. Plural and contradictory narratives spun around his persona helped create and sustain his contested image and blurred the art-author dichotomy. Such visually and literarily stylized portrayal of plural selves renders both forms of narrative schizophrenic.

Diane Arbus describes the photographic subject as only one version of a self that is unknowable, writing: [it appears] like metaphors somewhere further out than we do, beckoned, not driven, invented by belief, author and hero of a real dream by which our own courage and cunning are tested and tried; so that we may wonder all over again what is veritable and inevitable and possible and what it is to become whoever we may be.<sup>19</sup> She thus presents the photographic subject as an inherently constructed persona. The subject is both metaphor and author of a real dream, a fiction created by means of depicting reality. The truthfulness of this invented persona is

not relevant, as we are all still learning 'what it is to become whoever we may be'.

Reve's speech during an honorary ceremony in the Allerheiligste Hartkerk (Amsterdam) in 1969 underscores the genuine nature of his ambiguous identity.

Maybe those who say he is an actor, a charlatan, a comedian, he is a clown (whether they are enemies I do not know), could think differently of me. And to those people I would like to say: yes it is true, I am an actor, a comedian, a charlatan, and a clown. But the crazy thing is, that this role I play, is me, and that tonight (and I earnestly believe this), I have said nothing I did not mean.<sup>120</sup>

In other words, Reve claims all versions of himself presented in his work and in the media are veritable representations of the man he is.

In this light, Reve's charades should not be dismissed as mere publicity stunts. His literary anecdotes, his public appearances, and his portraits, should all be characterized as a struggle to express as well as actively construct plural and contradictory sides of his person. When asked whether he was crazy, the writer answered: 'Maybe, but if I am, there is a system to it.'<sup>121</sup> In his systemic schizophrenia, all Reve's contradictory, semi-fictional literary passages revolve around themes to be explored and truths to be discovered, but not explained. In his public lectures at Leiden University in 1985, Reve argues that the mission of both art and religion is the 'interpretation of reality, without representing, explaining

or demystifying this reality.'<sup>122</sup> As such, both Reve's portrait series and his literary anecdotes should be seen as approximations of a truth; his visual and verbal autobiographical narratives as varying fictions around his person which might not be fact, but may well be true. ●

### Personalia

Hinde Haest obtained an MA in Anthropology of Material and Visual Culture from University College London. This article is a prelude to her research for the Rijksmuseum book series *Studies in Photography*. Her study on the Reve portraits will be published early 2013, and is made possible by the Manfred & Hanna Heiting Fund.

17 G. Ecker, S. Scholz, 'Found Objects, Staging, Effects. Reflections on Object Photography', in: T. Seelig and U. Stahel, *The Ecstasy of Things*, exh. cat. Fotomuseum Winterthur, s.l. 2004, p. 175.

18 Many of the objects in Posthuma de Boer's portraits can already be identified in earlier images in the Rijksmuseum collection. In a 1963 image by Artica Press (RP-F-2011-21-15-9), Reve is seen moving all his kitsch (the vase with plastic roses, a plastic Christmas tree, a plastic head and a Buddha) with him when moving house.

19 D. Arbus quoted in: R.A. Sobieszek, op. cit. (note 4), p. 30.

20 Reve, op. cit. (note 14). Author's translation. 'Dat misschien mensen anders zouden over mij kunnen denken, die altijd zeggen, of het vijanden zijn weet ik niet, hij

is een acteur, een charlatan, een komediant, hij is een clown, en tegen die mensen zou ik willen zeggen: ja dat is waar. Ik ben een acteur, ik ben een komediant, ik ben een charlatan, en een clown. Maar het krankzinnige is, dat de rol die ik speel, dat ik dat ben, en dat ik vanavond, dat geloof ik in diepe Ernst, eigenlijk niets gezegd heb wat ik niet heb gemeend.'

21 Andere Tijden, 'Het Raadsel van Reve' broadcasted by VPRO and NPS in 2003.

22 The four lectures were published as *Zelf Schrijver Worden* (Amsterdam) in 2011. Author's translation. 'De opdracht van [beide] is de duiding van de werkelijkheid, zonder dat zij die werkelijkheid weergeeft, verklaart of ontraadselt.'