

# Eef Hilgers about FROM THAT MOMENT ON, EVERYTHING CHANGED

## “A bunch of weirdly fascinating details”

It is no coincidence that Dutch filmmaker Eef Hilgers was asked to represent the creative voice of the documentary sector during the recent REALITIES panel. In her new film FROM THAT MOMENT ON, EVERYTHING CHANGED she chooses a form that is as original as it is effective, to let children talk about how their parents told them about an impending divorce. In a clinical, laboratory-like setting, she tries in all kinds of ways to recreate that profound moment. The result is heartbreaking, but also incredibly powerful.

**One of the kids in your film wishes he could go back in time to convince his younger self that sooner or later, everything would be fine. What would you tell yourself if you could speak to the younger Eef about the film she was planning to make?**

Eef Hilgers: I would say, keep on fighting to make this film the way you want. The process wasn't easy. The broadcaster insisted on focusing on just one child; they couldn't let go of the concept. But to depict a shared

experience through a bunch of weirdly fascinating details, I needed at least eight children. The next thing was convincing them about the studio set-up. I fought really hard for this idea.

**I'm happy you did - it is a brilliant idea!**

Hilgers: Too often I've gotten lost in other people's advice. Everyone else has a vision of how exactly things should be done. If you give too much importance to it, it might take over your own ideas. I knew very well how I wanted to make this film. I even did most of the editing myself. That's why the result makes me so proud.

**On the other hand, the idea of the studio setup might sound a bit out of whack at first.**

Hilgers: When ordering a series of short films about divorce from different directors, the broadcaster asked what my approach would be. I didn't know - my parents are still together - but many friends appeared to have very precise memories of the moment when they heard the news, which they



remembered in specific visual details. This impactful moment I wanted to recreate. In my research, I collected with children the impressions that I could visualise within my studio set-up.

**How did you come up with that idea?**

Hilgers: In the documentary THE RAFT (by Markus Lindeen) it really worked. We built the studio as a house where kids could re-enact the story. So many films try to take you back in time through nothing but a talking head, but I needed a stage to visualise the scenery. The studio is an invitation

to enter another world based on children's specific memories, of which the colour is accentuated by the plain white surroundings. When thinking back to something, you seldom see the full picture but mostly some small details.

**Very particular details indeed.**

Hilgers: The crushed pastries, the scratches on the table... all these elements originate from their stories. Children cannot answer questions such as 'how do you feel?', 'what are you angry about?'. But if you ask about how it sounded, how it smelled,



they'll describe for you a complete sensory experience. Many details in their stories referred to sounds. "I heard the dog's toes tapping on the floor." Many makers don't know what to ask - asking the right questions is the essence of a children's documentary.

### How much did you speak with the children before you started filming?

Hilgers: A researcher collected stories with several kids, from which I picked the ones that intrigued me most - I was searching for a variety of feelings and emotions. From there on, I constructed a general narrative, which I explained to the parents, asking for their permission. I met each of the children in their own bedroom habitat, in an online meeting. Prior to the shooting we had another call, in which I took them along in the story I wanted to tell. When they finally came for the shooting, one by one, we did the job in only two days!

### We only hear one version of the story, namely the children's version. One child tells how her parents were pushing and pulling her.

Hilgers: That girl was very young, and her story was the most precarious of all, so the case was thoroughly discussed with her mother. Probably



it was more of a feeling that the kid transformed into a concrete memory, but since she remembers the situation like this, we decided to respect it. Her mother is very grateful for the film. I gave her all my footage, in order to look back at it with her daughter in a later phase of her life. After all, this girl was the only one in her class with divorced parents; her mum hoped that the film could help her to connect with companions.

### Was it a cathartic experience for all participants?

Hilgers: At the premiere they all met for the first time and spoke about the experience. For most of the kids, telling their story very precisely in front of the camera felt like a relief. That was part of their individual process. But only then, when meeting each other, they realised they were not alone. After screenings, kids in the audience often want to tell us about their own experiences; as soon as one child starts, others usually follow.

### What comes first, the protagonist or the topic?

Hilgers: The topic is like the canvas on which children can paint. When writing funding applications, never a child in particular was mentioned; it's all about the form. For my film BULLYING STORY I had this idea about a girl being cyber bullied, who goes looking online for teenage companions among this community of victims, sharing their stories on YouTube. All I needed was a child that would take me along into that community. Only afterwards I started looking for the right child. I provided a canvas for her to tell the story about how the online world can be a monster, but also a place where you can find like-minded people, experiencing the same problems as you do. I put the girl in front of a laptop with a wide angle webcam. I was lying on her bed for days, not giving a single direction instruction. The conversations were real, just like in FROM THAT MOMENT ON, EVERYTHING CHANGED. I prepared the canvas but couldn't predict anything of what happened afterwards.

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Gert Hermans