

P R E S E N T

HANNIBAL

PHOTOGRAPHS

STEPHAN VANFLETEREN

WORDS

What does a photographer do? It's simple, he looks around, aims and lets light shine through a tiny hole for a moment. In a dark space that light beam lands on a sensitive surface. He tries to catch that light. Its mirror image. Through the little hole, one truth already dies in transit.

It's a dreamcatcher, not hanging above our beds but around our necks. With this metal box we wend our way through the world. Often solo, sometimes with a writer, a journalist, assistant or loved one. But we photographers decide where to aim that tiny hole, that lens. We decide how to catch the light. An exhilarating decision, a privileged position.

The photographer is present wherever he's working. That is the beauty and the challenge of our life. We are like a modern Kairos, the Greek god of opportunity, of the right moment. Photography doesn't rely on hearsay. A photographer has to be there, like the crown witness at the scene of a yet-to-be committed crime. *He is pre-sent*. The photographer as a missionary, as a scout. *Present in the present*. On location in the now, here in the moment.

A photograph is time frozen between the opening and closing of the small hole. From the start of the fall of the guillotine, to the last little spark of incoming light. A mathematical straight line with an unlimited past on the one hand and an infinite future on the other. Nothing more.

Each photographer picks their own path. Do I go left or right? Shall I stand here for a while or move on? Do I drop my gaze to the pavement, peer around the corner or look over the rooftops? At the look in someone's eyes or at the horizon? A bend or a hill in a body? A rare bird in

the bushes? A hot steaming dish, a dirty tackle, a deadly bullet, a waving curtain, a well-known face, the undulating ocean, a cold corpse or a beaming couple at the altar?

Photography is a present. It's able, it's allowed to be anything. Photography is like life, not the glow but the lava. Petrified at the edges of a conveyor belt of time. Most lava rocks are never seen. Here and there one lies on the ground, and sometimes we pick one up. This book is a jumble. That sounds irreverent, but it isn't. A jumble of rocks can be beautiful. They can be sharp, or round or cracked, they can lie heavy on your stomach, shine brightly or be goddam annoying in your shoe. They've been plucked from reality and chiselled to suit the eye of the photographer. Close to and far from the real world at the same time. The beautiful contradiction of photography. Nothing is more true than a lie.

Present is the result of more than thirty years of hunting, pondering, dancing, trudging, fighting – and luck – in the life of a now middle-aged man. The man I apparently am. The stranger you think you know because he lives in your body. Many people reside in one body. The corpus is a *hôtel du passage* of the I who is constantly in motion, not only physically but mentally. That I is no longer the I of yesterday. Nor the I of tomorrow.

This is the path I will be walking down again. In my memory and in my archive. Rifling through cardboard boxes for negatives that haven't seen the light in years. Rough digital files that were overlooked, shoots deemed forgotten, a more stringent selection of familiar work plus additions of new work.

The journey began somewhere in the dunes of my childhood home and ran through the streets of the capital, along journalistic routes of na-

tional sadness, visiting international crises and overpopulated world cities, along the pores of friends and strangers, outcasts and celebrities, on the cobbles of my home country, over a warm body with naked skin, on a freight train through the prairies, across African deserts, charting the stranded concrete mementoes of a war, past shuttered shop façades, to the exotic beaches of sea warriors and on into the soft light of my daylight studio at home. The distance between the first and last photograph is a mere six kilometres as the crow flies. Between those two points lie thirty-three years of countless kilometres over hard asphalt, turbulent waters and high heavens.

My life is a succession of moments, projects, exhibitions and photography books. A life presented as a bundle of paper. Looking back is dangerous while driving. So for the first time in my life, I'm putting on the handbrake. It feels like I'm allowed to rest on a stool in the corner of the ring, between the eighth and ninth round. The sweat is wiped from my face, my mouth is rinsed, my right eye is iced while good advice is whispered in my ear. Soon I have to get on my feet again for the last four rounds. Or will it be only two? Will I drop to the canvas in seventeen seconds after an unanticipated fatal counterpunch? No one knows. Maybe later, someone will, in the near or far future, while they're reading this introduction to these pages. Photographs like sweaty blotches on printed paper and a bright red title on the linen cover. Seven sharp letters of blood on canvas in a camouflage hue. A burning fire on a dark green meadow.

Here and now I'm seated in the corner. Not a naughty schoolchild, but a content man, still in the game. Just a few brittle bones, sore muscles and failing eyesight from the wear and tear of looking.

Present, a chopped-down forest transformed into a stack of paper, a thank you for a life lived well so far.

In my cellar, the vault of an old bank building, I will be digging into my archive in the coming months. With spectacles and loupes. Like a deep-sea diver plunging into the abyss, a refugee in a time capsule lined with black walls. With a light box in the middle and a dark carpet on the ground. Slightly smaller than a boxing ring. Small test prints will be arranged from left to right on the black walls. Clockwise and in chronological order. Chronology is predictable and hyper-classical. But classical is the new punk. A monk, these days, is more idiosyncratic than a hip webmaster, a hermit more intractable than an artist.

Will the tour de force in my archive be satisfying or a disappointment? Is my memory reliable? Have I photographed the things I think I've photographed? Will my archive serve as a truth serum or quite the opposite, a corrective dose of Rivastigmine?

I will discover first-hand the difference between history and memory. Between a fact in the past and an event in the mind's eye. The hard nature of the irrevocable will hurt at times. But consoling light will also be shed; I hope abundantly.

What a photographer does is visible. The identity of the photographer lies beneath the visible. Underexposed in silver emulsion or between the lines of the pixels. I am now leaving the tiny hole open for a little bit longer.

Probably I will run into myself somewhere. In the ropes, against the floor, and I'm sure also dancing with my hands in the air now and then.

Photography is more than shadowboxing in the backlight. It's not simple.

PRESENT IN THE PAST

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Colin Rowe, Brussels, 1988



Anonymous, Hippo van Mir, France, 1989

Cité d'Orchocote, factory, Brussels, Belgium



Anonymous, Derwent, France, 1989





Anonymous
Underground,
London, UK, 1969

A folder full of large-format negatives. By my first year at art school in the late 1980s, I had already purchased a large-format camera. It wasn't very difficult to work with, the Pentax 67 was operated purely manually. My basic version didn't even have a built-in light meter. The light was measured separately with the handheld Lunasix, a device with a white, semi-transparent plastic orb that measured the light that fell on it. On top, it displayed the full range of number combinations for all the possible correct exposures. You became a scientific accountant of light. Oddly enough, I ended up making many portraits with this slow camera. I felt safe behind this big "thing".

Also I can already see the themes that would continue to feature strongly in my work here in the archive: the sea, derelict façades, bunkers... The aluminium camera case that I carried everywhere with me comes to mind. It was awkward to carry when walking, but handy to stand on to view things from just that little bit higher up.

It's interesting to see that I was already making a big distinction between my quick street photography and slow documentary work back then. I hadn't realised that this partition was already there so early in my life. The brain adapts to the camera you are holding.

The hunter and the fisherman, the bullet and the bait. For years I've been telling myself this duality developed gradually, but obviously that's not true. That large camera casing was a thing quite early on and never went away. What's more, it has proved to be my greatest love. Those large cameras gave me a way to slow down looking at things. Only much later did this tendency blossom fully.

Of course, the camera's negatives were bigger and sharper too, but it was, above all, a different approach. You looked more slowly. Instead of running you were standing still. It was then that I started thinking in terms of series. There didn't need to be a one-off, decisive moment. Photography could now be a line of boxcars instead of a steam engine. The tripod was a novelty for me too. Although that never became a great love, not then and not later. I always feel a little awkward with it. As if I'm some Roberto Esquivel Cabrera, tripping over a third leg. With a tripod I'm like a man on crutches.

I come across a series criss-crossing the Belgian and northern French coast. A photograph of a billboard with just three words: "England from

Dunkerque". Three words, three lines, in a simple font. I try to remember the colours but the memory stays achromatic. That simple approach would work today again, in the publicly jungle of our current street scene.

And of course "La Reine Des Fritures" on a dyke somewhere in the winter. Valiant poetry serenading the North Sea, or a Belgian joke referring to the French-Belgian border? Or the shopfront emblazoned with "Chaussures" and a girl in a sailor suit skipping past. It's a different time. Look at that pavement, at that solid horizontal artwork of tiles and bricks and bluestone, drain covers and painted lines. We walk across a Kiefer or a Pollock without realising it. Show me a photograph of a pavement and I will tell you what decade it is.

I also find a hidden gem among my photographs of Saint-Omer, a forgotten northern French town. A street corner, a blind façade with closed shutters on the right and a shopfront with "Gordonnier" and closed curtains in the front left. A *ordonnerie* is a shoe repairer's shop. It's not only the faded glory of the peeling letters on the façade that tell of another time. Barely readable, but nevertheless written as a prophecy on the side wall: "Réparation Industrielle". Who still repairs shoes? Almost nobody any more. We live in a disposable world. Chain stores such as H&M, Zara and – even worse – Primark cause us to buy everything cheaply, wear it for barely a season and then throw it away. Repairing something is so last century. Like so many things: destroy instead of restore. Dumping it rather than patching it up.

Look at the two people, photographed on the street corner. Two distrustful looks from an old couple who'd just stepped out of their long-closed shop. The man with a stubby cigarette in his mouth, tucking in his checked shirt with his hands, with shiny shoes that were never in fashion and are therefore forever hip. He still has his professional bearing, even though he's retired. The woman, on the other hand, shuffles along on less elegant footwear: open slippers. The flapping apron shows the wind is blowing from the little side street. I see the street sign: Rue au Vent (Windy Street). The street's claim to its name is not empty.

Out of curiosity, I search for the street on Google Street View. The house has been restored as a private residence. The no parking traffic sign is gone and has been replaced by a parking meter on the other side. The moment the Google Street View car passed by was on the same weekday, because now, like then, the bins are out. The bakery next door still exists.

I keep scrolling my way down the street. I see the façade of the Au Sportsman café, and a still-open "Orfèvrerie" shop with a silver candlestick, bowl and knife in the shop window. I've never heard of an *orfèvrerie*. You used to have so many characteristic shops, each with their own speciality.

Not a trace any more of the two old people. Fifty metres down the road I see a mother with a double pram for twins. A bit further on, a student looks at his smartphone while walking. He's wearing black Nikes with a fluorescent logo. Shoemaking has long since been sacrificed on the altar of globalisation.

It's also funny to see the first images on each film roll: I often photographed myself because you never knew when it was actually registering your first picture. The mechanical transport was less reliable than on a digital camera today. You couldn't check anything. You couldn't see what you had photographed until after you'd developed the film in the darkroom. So you always built in that margin of error, because imagine if the first photograph was the absolutely perfect picture and only half of it was captured. That was my big fear. Especially on bigger trips, when you'd shoot a lot of film. You had to pray and hope that your camera didn't malfunction. That vacuum, that latent uncertainty, always gnawed at me when I was travelling for longer periods.

A photographer's grief is always great when a film or memory card is lost. We like to imagine that it was precisely then that we took the perfect picture. The truth is that memory often outshines reality. For example, I once lost the film that had the best pictures of a trip. Weeks later, when by a fluke the prodigal son had been found again, it turned out that the negatives were not that impressive after all.

I'm also running into many personal photographs. It's so nice to see myself again. Yes, we too were once young. The full head of hair, the flat belly, no liver spots, the firm breasts of my lover. Looking at those innocent photographs is so moving. Maybe getting older isn't all that bad. Dying young, that's bad.

My student years are gradually coming to an end. I find a 4x5 inch Polaroid print of a can of apple sauce. I can't even remotely remember photograph-

ing that. A metal can! And it wasn't a Campbell's soup can, it was a can of Coxos apple sauce. The food brand still exists, I looked it up. By the way, between June and December they are looking for motivated processors for their peas.

One of my first studio assignments appears. Assignment: photograph a round object in artificial light with a technical camera, the kind of camera with two planes and an accordion-pleated box in between. The object was a rubber blow pear to blow away dust. Even though I found the studio a bit boring, I did make an interesting discovery among all those strobe lights.

At the strict Catholic school I attended, I had been only a moderate student. Not that I was lazy, but the processor in my head processed information slower than other students. At this school they told me I wasn't smart, to avoid using the word stupid. Since they had God on their side, it was only natural to assume they were right. They suggested my parents send me to another school. It was the best thing that could have happened to me. It has, by the way, made me a fervent non-believing Catholic. The beauty of Catholic art was in my genes and the Christian hypocrisy on my retina. I was sent to an art school. While I had been so used to struggling with letters and words, I now came across something else. No more struggling with subjunctives and objectives, linking verbs and adverbial clauses. I suddenly had to deal with a new language: visual language. Esperanto for dyslexics.

I was able to capture the objects in the studio in pictures as if it was nothing. The right ratio, the ideal perspective and some shifting of the lights, a quick look at the frosted glass of the viewfinder, adjust the direction of the studio lamp a little to the left, no, a little back and... Flash! Boom, *patat!* The visual became flawless language. I could suddenly read and write with light, while others now stumbled over slanting light, back-light and bad light.

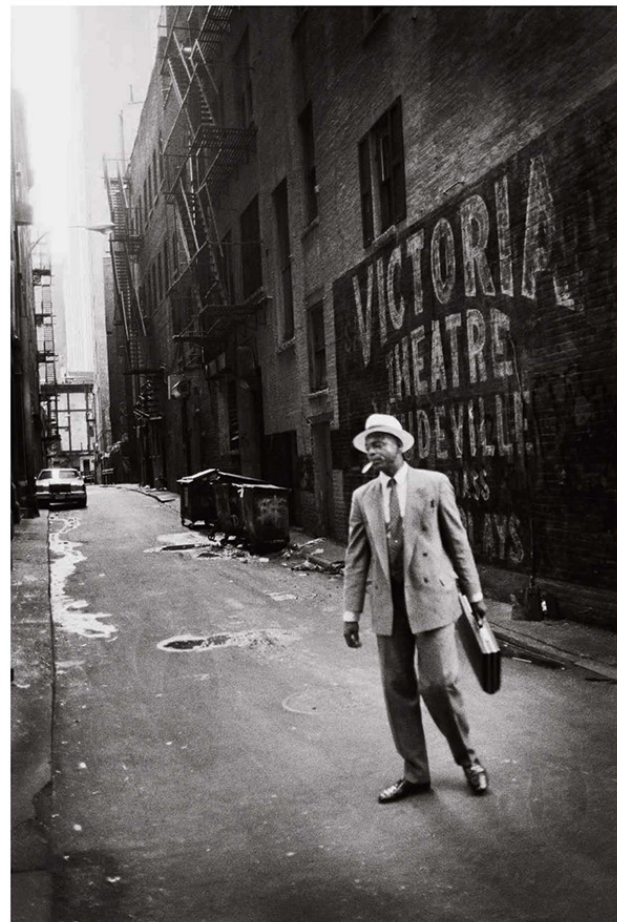
A writer recently told me: photography is literally writing with light. So simple you'd almost forget. The time when people viewed photographers as oddballs is pretty much over. We speak a different language. We make pictures of things, we do not articulate them.

LA REINE DES FRITURES





Chrysler Building New York, US, 1930



Anonymous Manhattan, New York, US, 1930



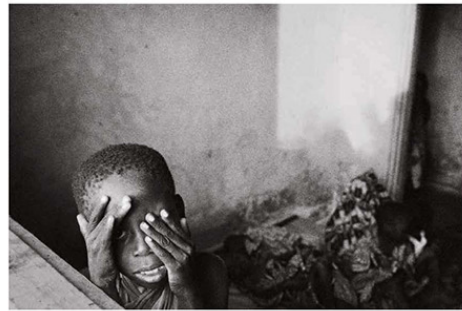
Dand Indika Kivul, DRC, 1994



Funeral procession Gombe, DRC, 1994



Dand Indika Kivul, DRC, 1994



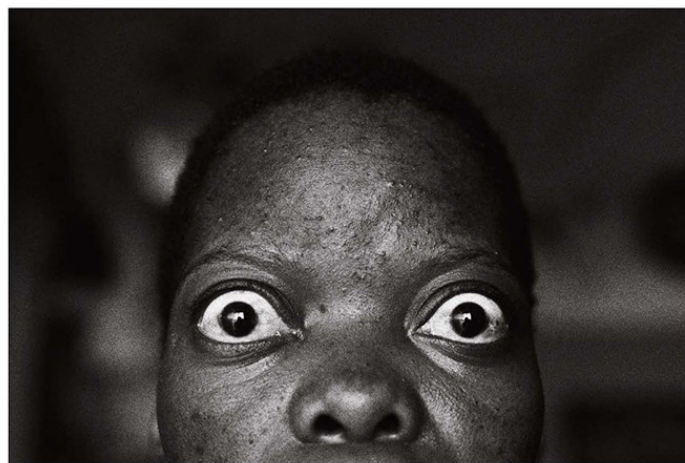
Oryplus Kivul, DRC, 1994



Street child Nairobi, Kenya, 1996



Street child Nairobi, Kenya, 1996



AIDS patient Botswana, 1999



Sewer Kids Bucharest, Romania, 2001

Sewer Kids Bucharest, Romania, 2001



Sewer Kids Bucharest, Romania, 2001



Sewer Kids Bucharest, Romania, 2001





Sewer Kid
Dobson, 2001
Presenta, 2001



Pine forest Cascade Mountains, Washington, US, 1996

Self-portrait with lake Tillamook, Oregon, US, 1996



Tad Alan Bayme, California, US, 1996



Hobo Klamath Falls, Oregon, US, 1996



Harold Eugene, Oregon, US, 1996

Hobo Eugene, Oregon, US, 1996



Κουνοοι κηφίγοι Εκόη, Αλβανία, 1999



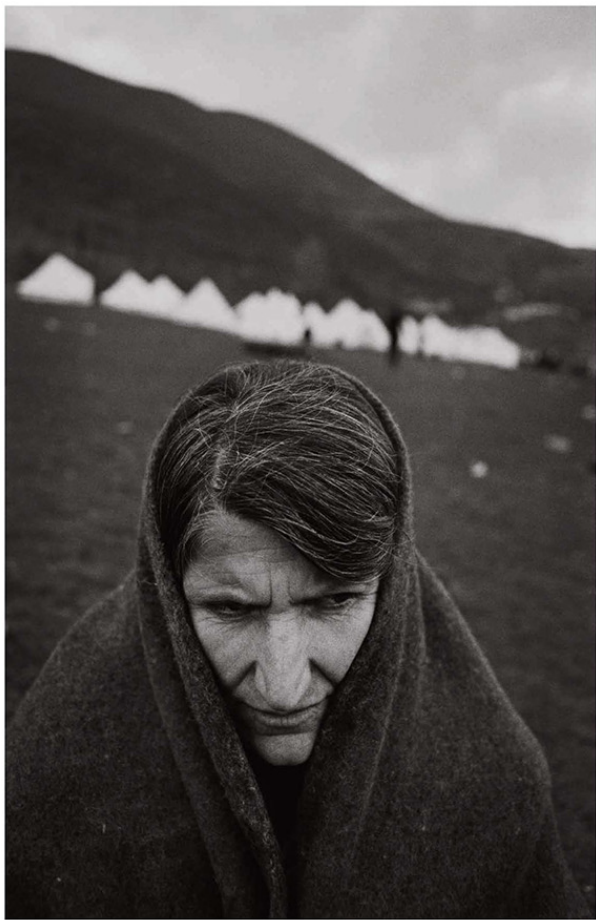
Κουνοοι κηφίγοι Αλβανία, 1999



Κουνοοι κηφίγοι Εκόη, Αλβανία, 1999



Κουνοοι κηφίγοι Εκόη, Αλβανία, 1999



Kosovo refugees
Morizel, Albania,
1999



Kosovo refugees Kosovo, Albania border, 1999



Kosovo refugees Morizel, Kosovo, Albania border, 1999

I had been playing with the idea of travelling across the States as an Elvis Presley for a while. It would absolutely have to be done before I turned thirty, because if I did it any later I wouldn't be able to write it off as a youthful prank. I just couldn't find the right approach. Getting someone else to be a kind of Elvis model didn't seem to have enough interest. I thought, I was convinced that I had to take on the man's mantle myself. Embarking on this adventure on my own promised to be awkward, but who could I drag along with me? At a World Press Photo masterclass for young photographers, I met my partner in crime Robert Huber from Zurich. Robert photographed only in colour, in a rather observant way: the opposite of my working method. And that's exactly what seemed perfect. I presented my secret plan to him, and even before we got drunk that evening the decision was made.

And so, one fine spring day we came to be in New York City. Robert from Buenos Aires, me from Brussels. Since we are of exactly the same build, I had two identical costumes made in a specialist store. Only one difference: the inscriptions on the cape. Robert's says Elvis, mine says Presley. The twins Elvis & Presley are born. Interesting to note that Elvis was actually one half of a set of identical twins. Fate decided that Jesse Garon came into the world stillborn, before the surviving Elvis Amon.

We meet in the lobby of the Carter Hotel on Times Square, which I remembered from my first New York trip. That's eight years ago by now and the hotel is still just as shabby. There I am with the costumes, packed into two black guitar cases. This is our luggage for the coming weeks. Our long hair is shaved off, and the first photographs are taken. My smooth-shaven head feels very strange, but not for long. We put on our Elvis wigs and glue the sideburns to our jaws. Let the adventure begin.

The first day we avoid the large crowds on the street – still a bit nervous to cross that threshold. On top of the 23rd floor of our hotel, right across from the New York Times building, we take our position at night, in the red light of the neon letters of the Carter Hotel.

"I knew he was alive." "Elvis has left the building." "Elvis, I love you." It's our first time on the street. Everyone has something to say to us. We're not able to sing or dance. "We are the worst imitators of the impersonators."

We soon understand why celebrities like to hide behind large sunglasses. We ourselves are grateful that we can hide our insecurity behind mirrored glass.

The contrast with the city that is not part of the Elvis story is interesting. "Hey, Elvis, wrong state!" – a correct analysis tossed our way by a passerby. But it's also precisely why we're not in a rush to leave New York. Sometimes it's even provocative in its way. In general, people respond to us in humorous ways, but there are also less pleasant responses now and then. It's a good thing there's two of us, and we give each other the necessary pep talk to keep going on this adventure. Because, don't underestimate it. It is not just a carnival procession down the street. We wear the costume non-stop and we quickly get tired of always being the centre of attention. For a short while we get to feel what it must be like to be famous.

We leave New York for Nashville. We fill our guitar cases with camera film and clean underwear. "Thank you for driving, Greyhound. And thank you for driving with us, Elvis. God bless you," is how the bus driver greets us. We continue on to Cincinnati, Ohio, Fort Knox, Kentucky. Sitting in a bus for twenty hours, with an itchy wig and glued sideburns ain't no fun.

We can't stand any more of it and we get off in Cave City, Kentucky, where we take everything off and sleep naked at the Wigsam Village Hotel.

The next morning we hold a piece of cardboard with "Memphis" written on it in black letters. We hitch-hike, or rather, we try to hitch-hike, but three hours later we're still stuck in the same place, sitting on our guitar cases in the sun. It is the first but not the last time that we get to experience the sensation of a boiling-hot scalp under that black wig. In combination with the looks we get from passing cars, it's no tea party. One time a couple of rednecks almost drive us off the road on purpose. Eventually we're picked up by a white Cadillac, driven by a life insurance salesman who loves country music.

We're not very welcome in "Music City": Nashville, Tennessee. Music is nothing to laugh at here. The next day we already move on to Memphis. We end up in an obscure motel where prostitutes hang out. Several times we're offered a blowjob for half-price.

We travel on, first hitch-hiking and on Greyhound buses, but after a while we rent a removal van with a large dinosaur painted on it. Our guitar cases can be stashed away in the back. Via various detours we end up in a bar in Tucumcari, New Mexico. Our unexpected appearance triggers a wild night. We dance our way through the jukebox until we end up outside in the parking lot with just a few remaining drums and a transsexual hanging around our necks.

Our costumes are starting to look really bad and we haven't smelled very fresh for a while now. Our spirits are sagging a little. The constant attention paid to that miserable outfit is starting to weigh on us. In a Frontier Café somewhere in Arizona we are seduced quite forcefully by two native Indian women: #metoo Apache style.

In the real Las Vegas we spend the night in a dingy hotel with mirrors on the ceiling and porn on the TV. Apart from the prostitutes who keep knocking on our door, the entrenched squalor isn't really conducive to a good night's sleep either. After two days in Vegas, we feel that we're on our last legs, and we decide to terminate our adventure in Death Valley. We sleep under the clear starry sky on the roof of our removal van and try to decide exactly what kind of adventure it is that we've just experienced.

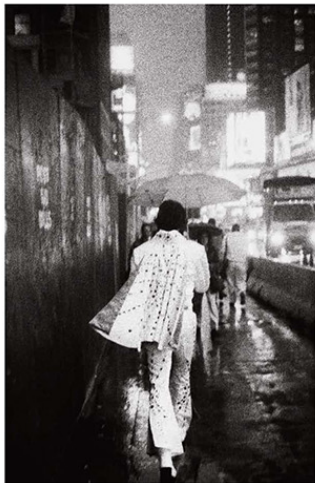
Elvis & Presley wasn't about the real Elvis, and it wasn't about Elvis imitators. It was only partly about us, the photographers, that's why our names only featured in the colophon of the resulting book. It was a road trip through the United States, in the spirit of and bearing the mantle of an ultimately tragic icon from the Land of the Stars and Stripes. A journey through regions still in thrall to "The King", intertwined with and loving the landscape, connected to its residents, slightly provocative, searching for bewildered glances, tempting warm embraces, gulping down weak coffee and staying in cheap motels. What we didn't know at the time was that we were roguish extras in a short history of modern existence, a certain time frame when smartphones, fleeting vanity and a tsunami of selfies didn't yet exist.

Our last vestiges of energy are whisked away by the hot winds of the desert plain. We take our very last picture in the early morning light. After three weeks, we lay down the two costumes, the boots and, most gratifying of all, the wigs, on the cracked salt plain of a dead valley.

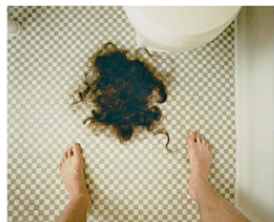
Back at the airport in Vegas, heading home in freshly laundered civilian clothes, it feels strange that nobody is staring at us. Nobody is calling out: "Elvis, I love you!"



Elvis Manhattan, New York, US, 2000



Elvis Times Square, Manhattan, New York, US, 2000



Robtroom Carter Hotel, Manhattan, New York, US, 2000

Prinzly & Leuda Memphis, Tennessee, US, 2000



Prinzly Manhattan, New York, US, 2000



Elvis Greyhound station, Cleveland, Ohio, US, 2000





Street scene Herat, Afghanistan, 2000

Street scene Bala Murghab District, Afghanistan, 2000



Refugee camp Herat, Afghanistan, 2000

Refugee camp Herat, Afghanistan, 2000





Zede Fisherman, Noordzeest, Belgium, 2003



Abert Fisherman, Oostduinkerke, Belgium, 2003



Shack Bredene, Belgium, 2006



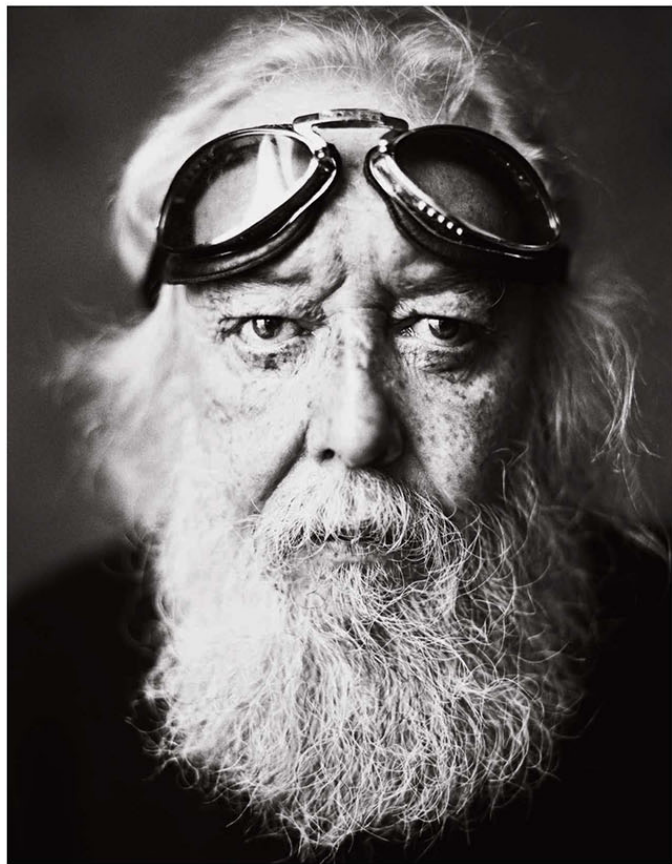
Anonymous Central Station, Brussels, Belgium, 2004



Shack Bredene, Belgium, 2006



Aeroplane Central Station, Brussels, Belgium, 2004



Fred Berwaerts Belgian visual artist, Antwerp, Belgium, 2006

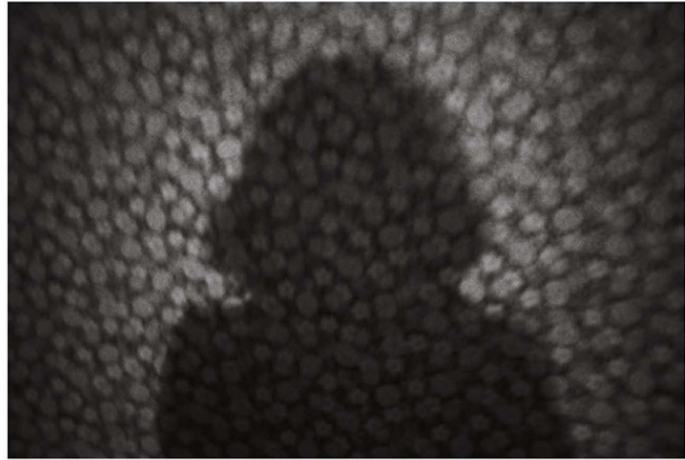


Koen Vanmechelen Belgian visual artist, Hasselt, Belgium, 2008

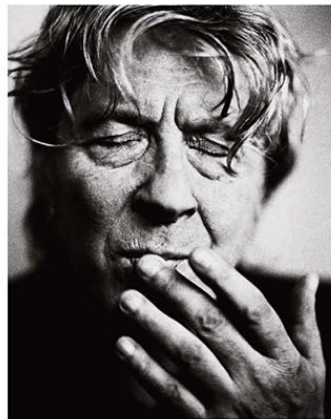
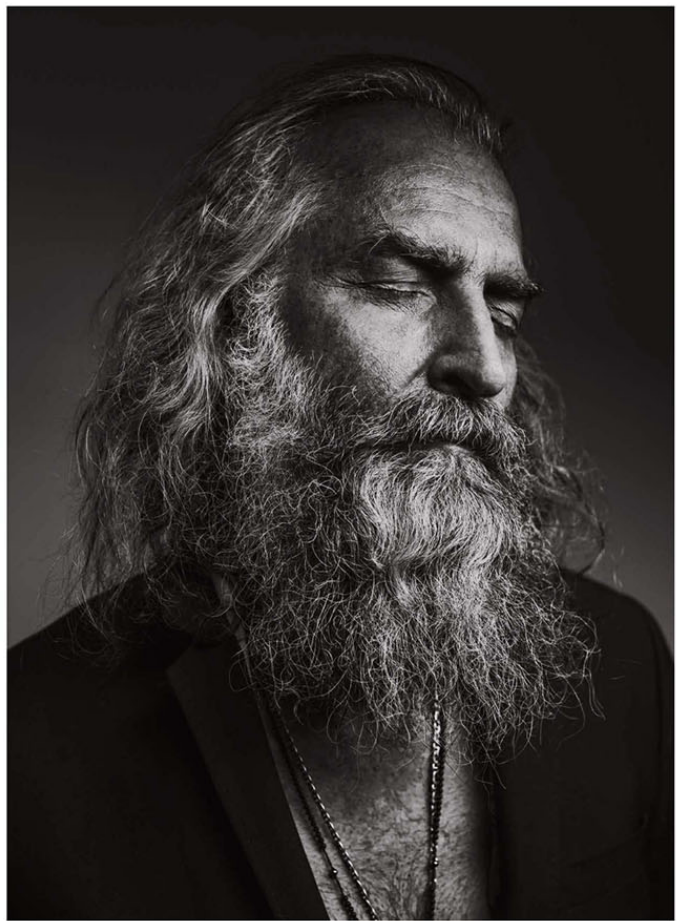


Renzo Campert Dutch writer, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2007

Self portrait Scotland, 1988



Self portrait Wisant, France, 1988

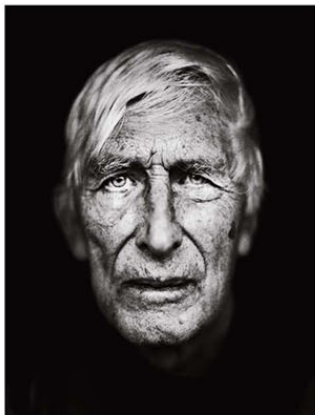


Arno Bédgas músico, Brusel, Bélgica, 2005

Warren Ellis Astrólogo músico, París, Francia, 2019

Catrin van Meeuw Dutch actress, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2015





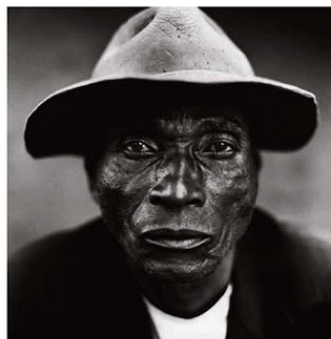
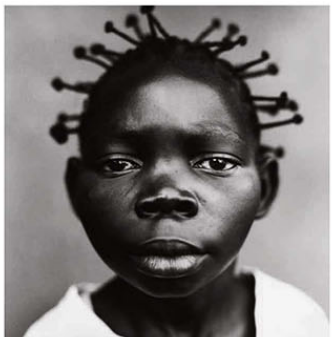
Toni Unger Irish bluesman, Cork, Ireland, 2005



Ari Kandi Dutch photographer, Bergen aan Zee, Netherlands, 2007

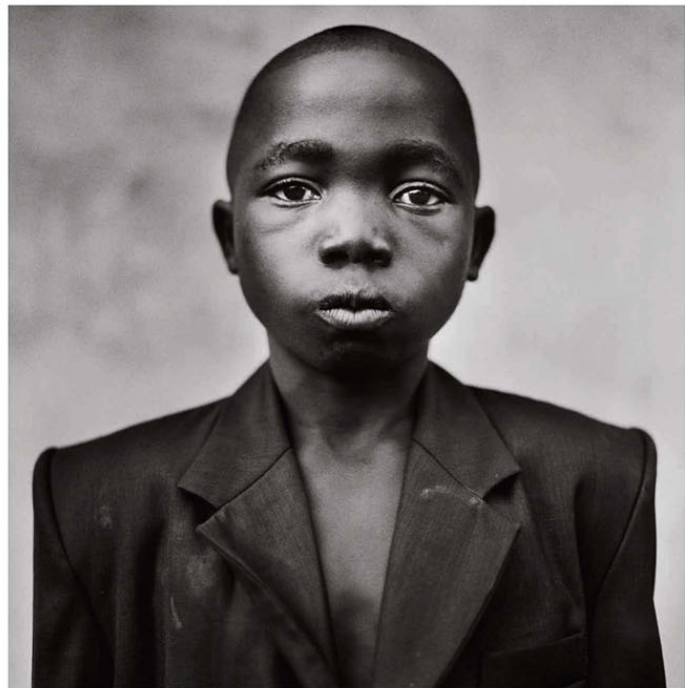


Stevens Belgian musician, Brumfiel, Belgium, 2013



Daniel Kérékou, DRC, 2009
Jean-Pierre Kibuka, DRC, 2009

Orylia Kibuka, DRC, 2009
Sébastien Kibuka, DRC, 2009



Alpha Kibuka, DRC, 2009



Albert Flinckx, DGC, 2009

DEPARTING WITH A DRUMROLL

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In 2011, when I moved from Brussels to West Flanders, close to the sea and almost flush with France, many thought this would put me to sleep. Parking in the polders. The number of times I'm asked what it's like to live deep in the province... "Aren't they narrow-minded, or backwards?" Sometimes they are. But no more so than in the big city. A wise farmer is an even match for a city intellectual, you can swap out a village idiot for an urban fundamentalist.

While some parts of Bachten de Kupe may be below sea level, with the sea at my back I'm seeing better than ever before. Views and insights. My daily morning walk on the beach or through the dunes is not only a moment of peace but also of reflection. If you have the sea, you look further than your own garden, acreage or province. On the beach, I'm neighbours with a Rotterdamer, a New Yorker, the residents of Dakar, Osaka or Rio de Janeiro. Only separated by a horizon. Provincial and world citizen wash up together at the tide line.

There was no more need to live smack in the middle of the country – which had enabled me, as a news photographer, to move so swiftly in all directions. Our lives changed considerably, but it solidified the choice I made to continue my photography life with a greater focus on my own projects. Not that I mind working for a boss, but perhaps another editor-in-chief after all the others was making too long a run of it. It was time to strike out on my own and leave the boulevard to talented young dogs.

Another important difference was that I saw my children more often and could be closer to my wife, who now joined me in my work. The switch from fine dust particles to healthy sea air, from the hustle and bustle of the big city to the tranquillity of a provincial town, also came just in time. We got a dog and a new car was purchased. A total reset. Some do that by getting a new wife, I did it by getting a new place to live.

It was an upheaval. At the same time, the complete transition from analogue to digital was taking place. My black & white film lab in Brussels actually went out of business. I was their only major remaining customer, and once they'd shut I was forced to make the leap to digital. No more throwing my film rolls in the lab postbox at night and picking up the negatives the following afternoon.

I hadn't developed rolls of film myself in a long time. It's chemistry and physics. I hate both subjects. You can't put any personality into it, unlike the printing of photographs. I did think I would miss making my own prints in the darkroom. The darkroom at home was the one room where nobody else ever came. Even the cleaning lady was not allowed in. It was my off-limits kingdom. A room that had once been the stockroom for nuns' habits, in the former monastery where we lived.

I spent hours, days and years there. I went through hectolitres of chemicals and you could see the traces on the floorboards. I walked miles there, in the cancer fumes of Neutrol. Silver cleaved to my fingertips before I got the common sense to finally work with those tweezers. I did lose contact with the paper that way, although I have to admit that

the old, tactile Record Rapid and Brovira Speed photograph papers had become unavailable long before that; replaced by sterile, cold substitutes.

It was blissful to sit with my work under the pale red-yellow light bulb, which thanks to some miracle of the colour spectrum doesn't affect the light-sensitive paper. The way a picture would slowly, steadily and magically appear in the liquid continued to fascinate me until the very last. First, some very pale marks appeared, then the image became deeper and richer in contrast. Something you had photographed arrived in the left-hand basin, to then be moved to a rinse tray in the middle, finally ending up in the fixer on the right. Then and only then could you turn on the light. The fixer bath made sure that the image was preserved. How many times did I lack the patience to wait for a good look at the photograph? I would turn the light on too soon and hazy blotches would cloud my floating photograph.

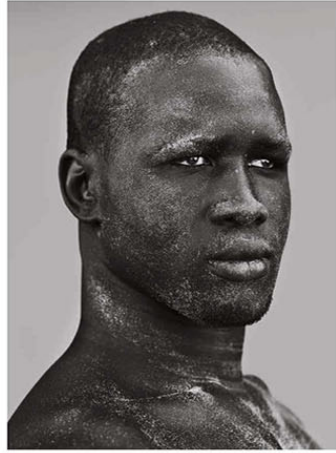
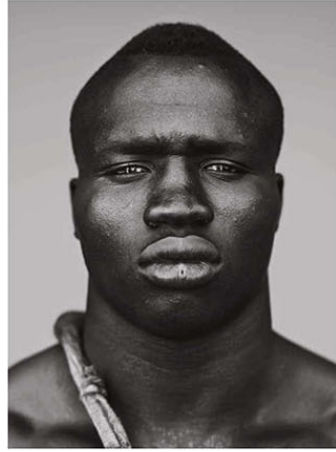
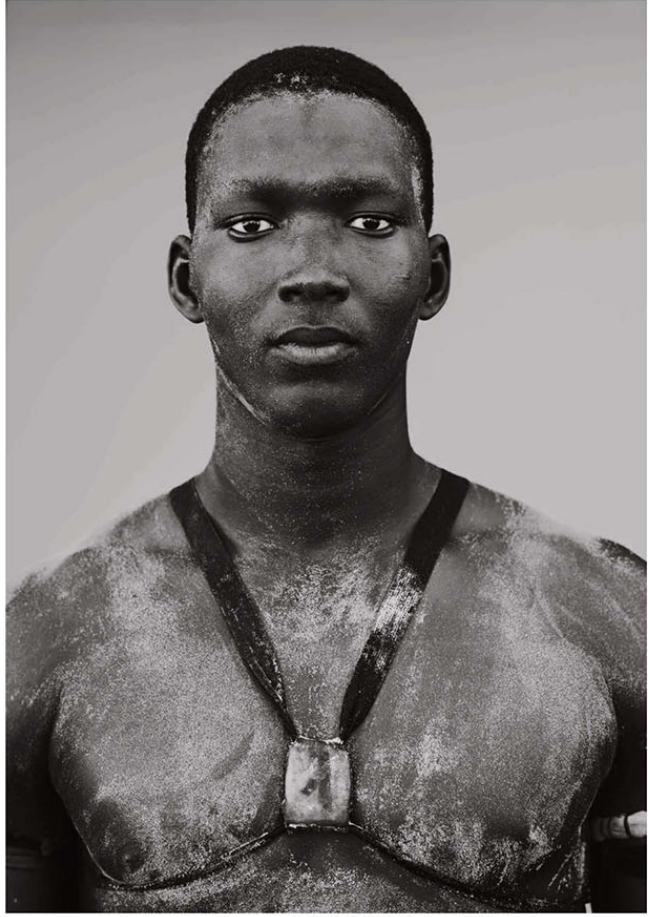
But there's a season for everything, and everything passes. The switch from the darkroom to computer screen was inevitable, although I did build a *chambre noire* in the basement of my new house. Adding it all up, I've spent one hour in it. I no longer felt welcome there. It was over. The construction of the darkroom was just the fear of cutting the analogue umbilical cord. Back upstairs I knew for sure: now I'm going to order that digital Hasselblad. I don't want to be a victim of the analogue blues.

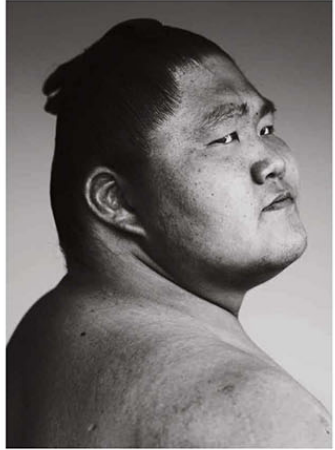
The transition was actually easy. The logic of contrast and density is still the same, only a computer can add tremendous refinements and all the adjustments don't need to happen in those twenty-five seconds of exposure. Now you can use your telephone, drink coffee, pee or empty the dishwasher during post-production. The monk sitting in the dark of yesteryear has disappeared, now he's going for a walk with his dog in the dune forest with the falling trees.

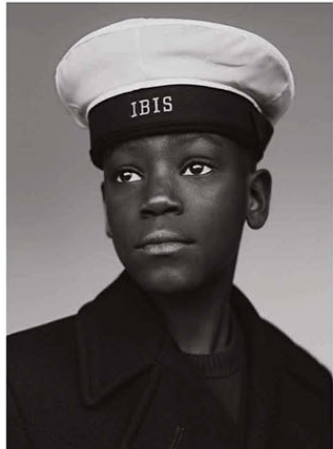
The digital equipment was finally up to standard. The only thing I do miss is the large array of devices, to fit different moods or assignments. Yes, I sometimes miss the old Rolleiflex or Pentax 67.

Those different kinds of out-of-focus effects, *bokeh* as the techies call it, were different with each lens. The tolerant blurriness of analogue photography was very forgiving if you got your distance focus slightly wrong. Now those digital things are razor-sharp, but if your sharpness is not in the right place, the material is simply unusable.

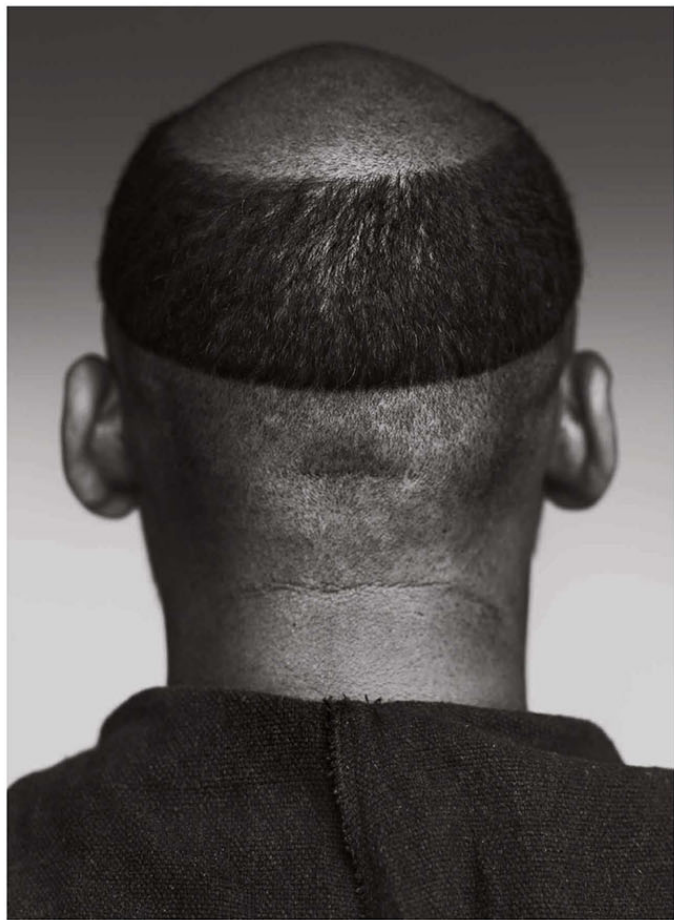
I don't miss the bag containing sensitive rolls of film that I always had to drag along on my trips at all. Those films shouldn't pass through X-ray devices in airports too many times. Especially after 9/11, the stricter security rules were a nightmare for the analogue photographer. Countless negotiations with security officers. Especially with young officers working on the X-ray, who were no longer familiar with the phenomenon of film coming on rolls. "What do you mean – you're a professional photographer aren't you? Surely you use a digital camera?" It ended up making me hate airports. A transfer flight was hell. In the end, the choice of the airline company no longer had anything to do with the price, but with the number of stops, a long enough stopover to be able to negotiate any





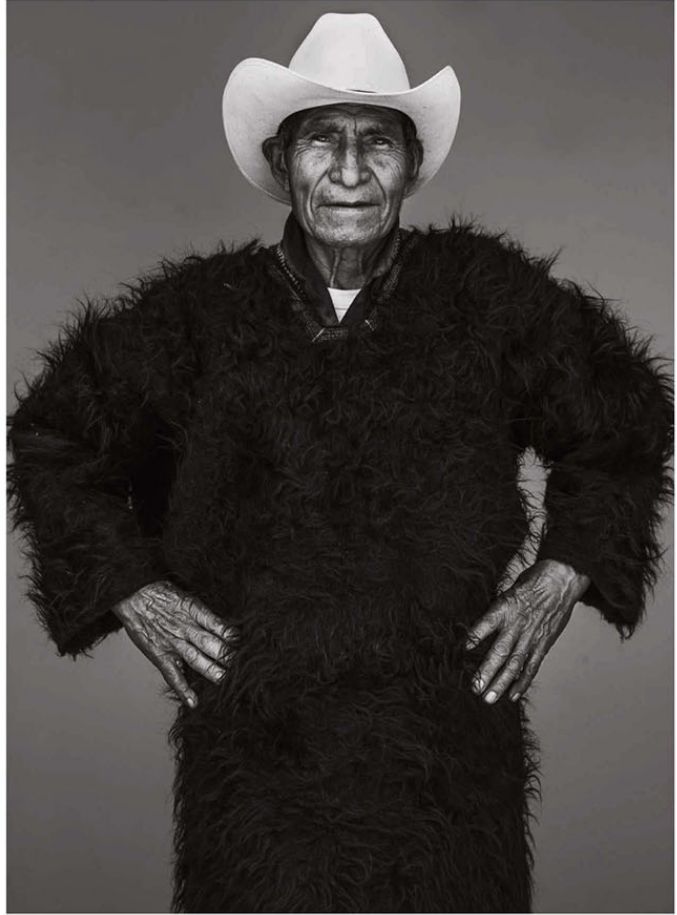


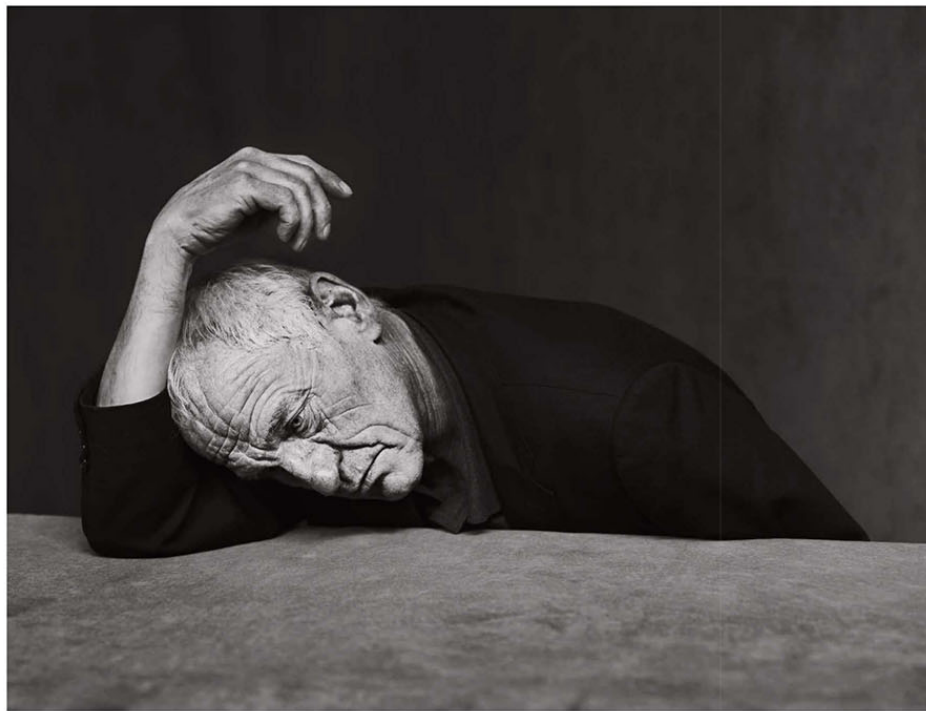




Domingo Cuella Chanda, México, 2015

Germeio São Paulo, Brasil, 2012





John Lemaire Belgian actor, Veerse, Belgium, 2012

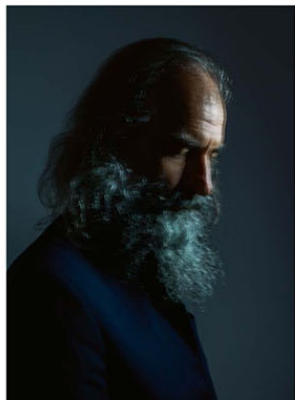
Matthias Schoenaerts Belgian actor, Veerse, Belgium, 2012





Stromae Belgian musician, Yverme, Belgium, 2017

Pje Leonard Dybbig Dutch writer and poet, Gronin, July, 2017



Harve Elia Australian musician, Perth, Perce, 2019



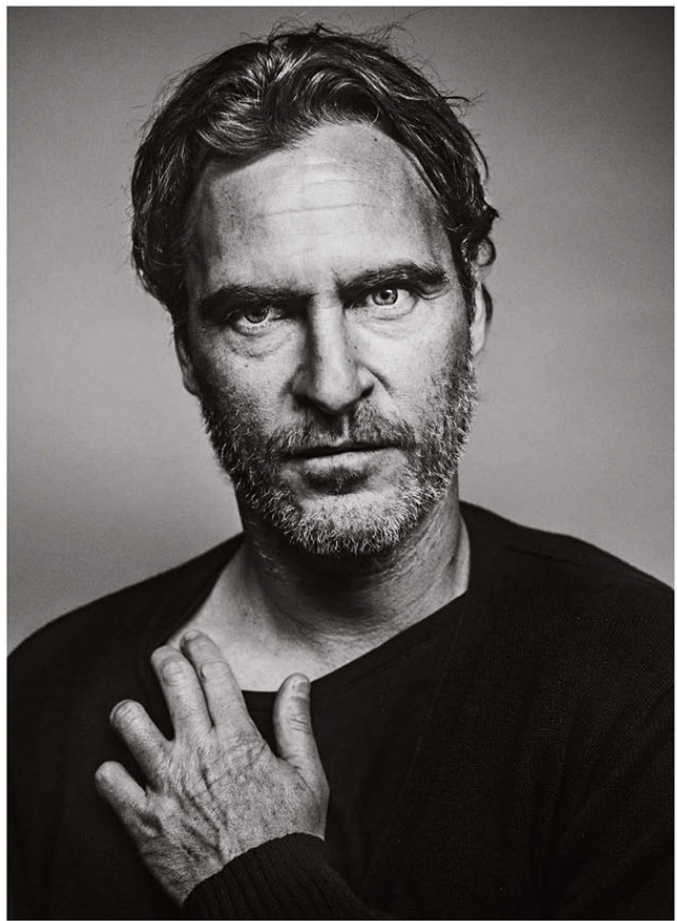


William Chafetz, F4gum, 2015

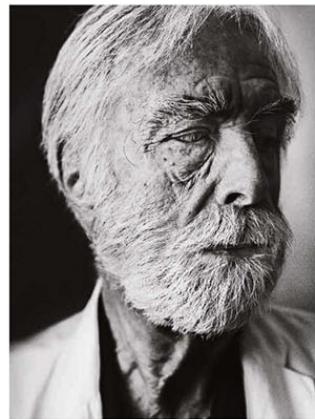
Nico Chafetz, Belgium, 2015



Danyony Chafetz, F4gum, 2015

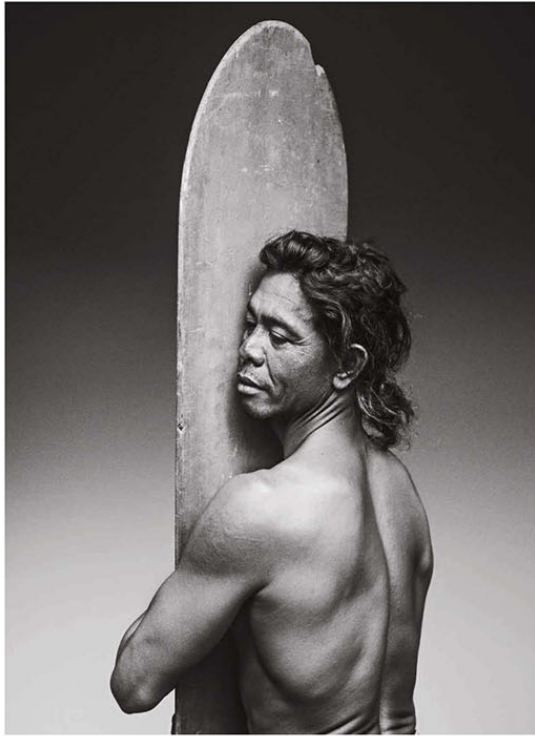


Joaquin Phoenix American actor, Cannes, France, 2017



Michael Haneke Austrian film director, Cannes, France, 2018

Made Surflegend und fisherman, Koto, Bali, Indonesia, 2017



Günar Young surfer, Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro and Príncipe, 2018

One of the nicest things about our profession is the variety. Photography contains multitudes, like life. Within any given circumstances you can try to choose where you want to go, what you want to do, and what you don't want to do. Freedom is a complex concept. It doesn't really exist. Nobody is truly free. But if you think you are free, that's already achieving a lot. The best definition I ever heard comes from the father of Jacky Ickx: "Freedom is being allowed the choice to jeopardise your own life." He wasn't only referring to his talented son's career in motor racing.

You can use freedom in photography in various ingenious ways. I try to play with different angles in my work as much as I can. The signature and themes are the constants, but the subject or setting can be completely different. This is what keeps you going.

After the portraits of *Stief Tribe* and my last year in Cannes, I go to Zeeland for an assignment for Gemeentemuseum Den Haag. This is where Piet Mondrian and his cohorts went on holiday to paint the outdoors. It's where Mondrian's first exploration of abstraction took place, from which his clearly defined lines and bright blocks of colour later emerged. My assignment was to look for contemporary echoes of this process.

It was a true pleasure to be in this landscape that rubs shoulders with the sea. Zeeland – sea land – has truly earned its name. The westerly wind is unencumbered. It was wonderful to feel the breeze on my cock when peeing outdoors. Driving, walking, waiting, walking again, searching, sleeping in the back seat of the car to catch the last light and also the first light of day. Booking a hotel didn't make any sense on those short nights. I saw things like Mondrian did a hundred years before. Sometimes it seemed like I was standing in front of the same gnarly tree, the same dune, the same receding sea.

I had carried out a similar assignment for Museum Oud Amelisweerd a few years earlier. The museum building, once lived in by Napoleon's brother and his mistress, Madame du Coudray, is located in the middle of the woods in the heart of the Netherlands. It houses exhibitions of antique, historical wallpaper and the work of the artist Armando. I was invited to make new work in this location. Views of the castle and its natural surroundings. The forest was intriguing. I saw the beauty of the veins in leaves, the colours and patterns of the bark on plane and beech trees. I saw a couple of kingfishers, lots of woodpeckers, dewdrops in the grass

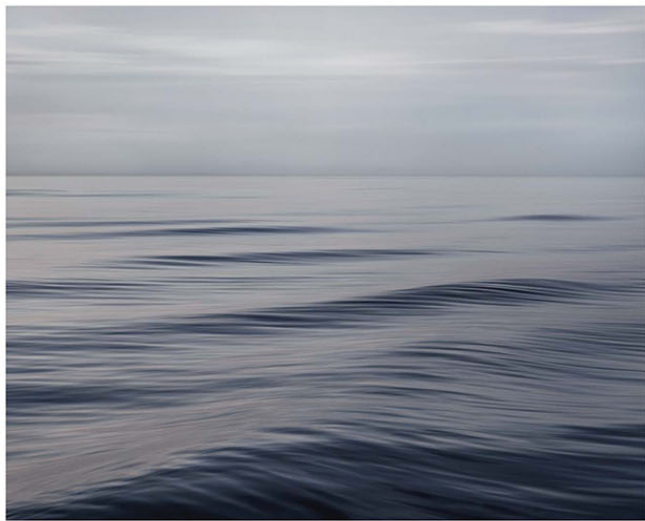
and hindling reflections in the dead-end river inlets. But the best moment of all was the morning of the falling acorns. I don't know what it was, it wasn't the wind, but the acorns were whizzing through the air like torpedoes. As if the trees had collectively agreed to drop all their nuts at the same time. At the top there was the slight murmur of tired leaves, a little lower you could hear the tree trunks creaking, and then on the ground the crashing and popping as the projectiles impacted. The forest was playing jazz.

I wasn't the only one drawn to this forest. In addition to the usual joggers and cyclists, I often saw people walking with their therapists. Just before I arrived, a serial rapist who had been operating here had been arrested. The story of a woman who committed suicide here made the biggest impression on me. When I started looking for the specific tree where she had liberated herself from her life with a very decisive knot, I came across the word *vivre* carved into a tree's bark. How strange was that? Judging by the bark, the word had been carved years earlier. The French word for "live" had not prevented the woman from carrying out her plan. Was her desire to commit this act of desperation greater than the power of these letters? Or had she not seen the letters on the tree? Maybe she couldn't read French? We don't know. The forest is indifferent and complicit. A contradiction in terms. A little birdy heard the fall, the thrashing and her last sigh.

Stress, the concrete jungle, the internet, a chaotic world. Only here and there, islands of silence. Or is it, rather, emptiness? Our society is doing a *salto mortale*. It is always a landscape that brings that wisdom home to me. As soon as the horizon is out of sight, you forget it again. The city makes people superior. Nature does the opposite. Sometimes I feel sorry for people who never get out of the city, even if only for a day. They never feel so keenly the relationship between themselves and the world.

But we have to admit: a city can give people tremendous self-confidence. You see the ingenuity and innovation of human brains and human hands all around you. A car that drives between skyscrapers, a metal escalator receding into the depths of the metro, a transparent shop window. We are used to all those things and no longer stop to consider these manifold achievements of the ambitious primate.

After all, humans are only animals. A creature that, unfortunately, feels superior to animals but would like to forget that it is, itself, an animal too.



David Zeeland, Netherlands, 2018



Two Zafind, Netherlands, 2018

COLOPHON

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