

**Eva
Besnyő**

**The
Liberated
Camera**

Hannibal

fotomuseum
den haag

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Eva Besnyö (1910–2003) lived and worked at a time that was defined by the photographic image. During the twentieth century, the medium underwent huge technical and stylistic developments. It was recognized as an art form in its own right and it transformed our view of the world. Against this dynamic backdrop, Besnyö found her own powerful voice.

Besnyö was born in Budapest. She received a camera from her father as a teenager, a pivotal moment that shaped the rest of her life. She studied under the renowned photographer József Pécsi, who introduced her to the latest developments in photography. In 1930, she moved to cosmopolitan Berlin to develop her photographic practice further.

Because of her Jewish heritage, Besnyö left Berlin in 1932 and moved with her partner John Fernhout to Bergen in the Netherlands. There she formed a close and enduring bond with Fernhout's mother, the painter Charley Toorop, who introduced her to the leading figures in Dutch art, design and architecture. Besnyö was forced into hiding during the Nazi occupation and her work came to a standstill. After the war, she documented a society in transition, from the rebuilding of the country to the women's liberation movement. Her photographs of the Dolle Mina feminist group are iconic images of that era.

Eva Besnyö: The Liberated Camera celebrates the recent acquisition of more than three hundred of the artist's photographs by the Kunstmuseum and Fotomuseum Den Haag, which now hold the world's largest collection of her work. It also provides an opportunity to make numerous connections to the visual art and design of her contemporaries, who are well represented in the collection of the Kunstmuseum Den Haag.

The exhibition and publication bring together Besnyö's best-known images with lesser-known and recently discovered works to present a multifaceted portrait of an artist who constantly reinvented herself. The title comes from Besnyö herself, who described the revelation of photography in *Vrij Nederland* in 1976: "It was the liberated camera. Suddenly, we could see. It was as if we were opening our eyes for the

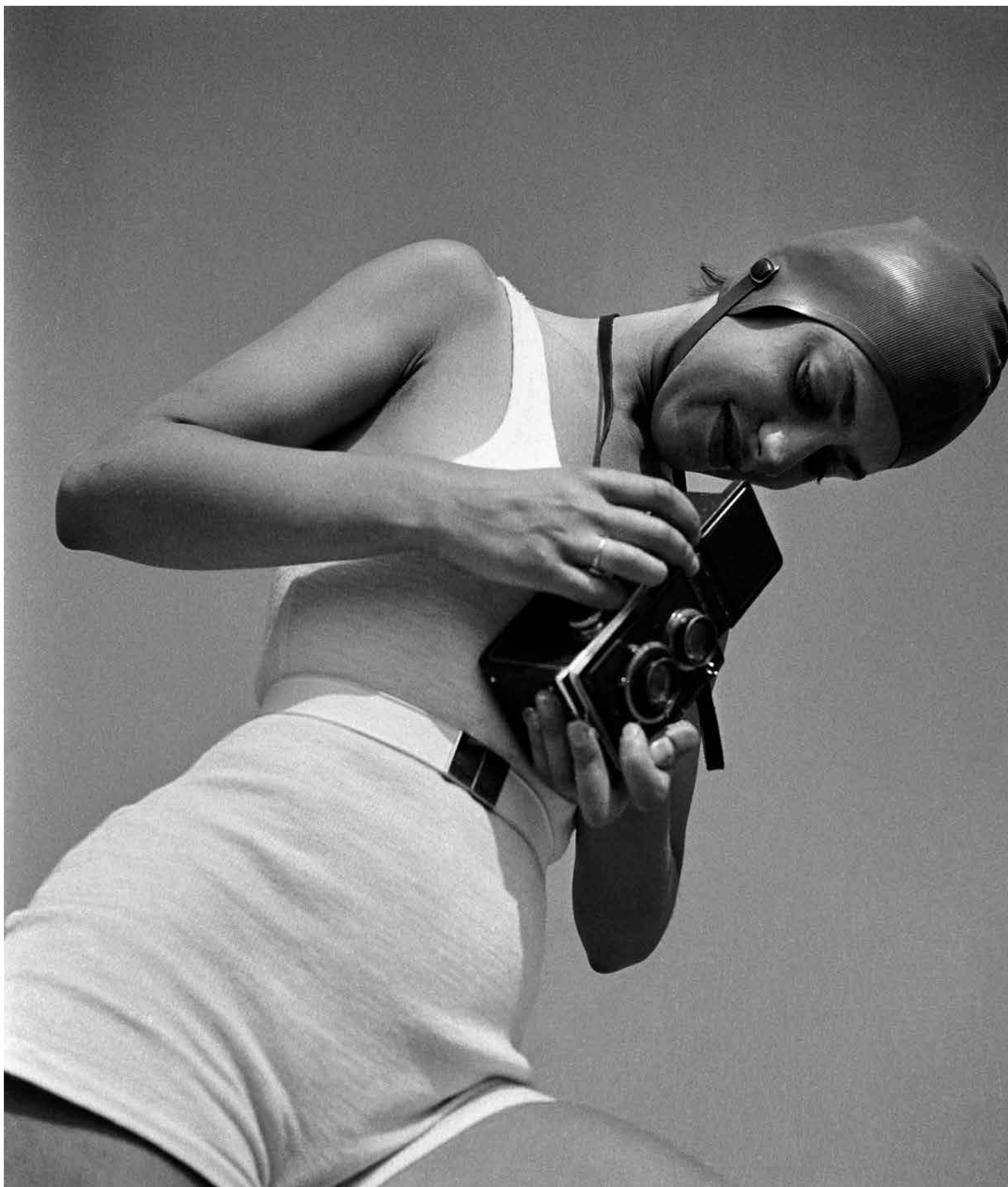
first time. We discovered photography as a documentary medium, but your personality also shone through.”

In addition to artistic freedom, the exhibition highlights the importance of collaboration and connection in Besnyö’s life. Wherever she settled in Europe, she actively sought contact with other creative people. She believed in the power of networking and collectivity, and dedicated her life to the recognition and development of photography. She organized exhibitions, was active in committees and professional associations, and contributed to the founding of FOAM Photography Museum. Even when she was no longer active as a photographer, she remained an inspiration for new generations of practitioners. We hope that this exhibition fosters new connections and continues to inspire makers and enthusiasts alike.

Numerous people have contributed to the realisation of this exhibition and publication. We would like to extend our thanks to photography scholars Flip Bool, Willem Diepraam, Leo Erken, Maartje van den Heuvel and Anneke van Veen and to the founders of the Dolle Mina feminist group, Huub Philippens, Claudette van Trikt and Dunya Verwey. We are greatly indebted to Besnyö’s daughter Iara Brusse and her agent Maartje Wildeman for giving so generously of their time and knowledge. We are also grateful to curators Iris Sikking and Willemijn van der Zwaan of the Fotomuseum Den Haag, and to Kirsten Brus and Lili Kurcz for their support. Nienke Coers’ research into Besnyö’s networks for this publication was facilitated by the Rembrandt Association. We thank Imogen Mills for steering the editorial process with such dedication, Hans Gremmen for his beautiful design, and the publisher, Hannibal Books, for making this book a reality. Lastly, this exhibition and publication would not have been possible without the financial support of the Municipality of The Hague, the Friends Lottery, the Erik Bos Fund and the Rembrandt Association.

Margriet Schavemaker
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The Berlin Years: Liberating the Camera

daily, discussing society, politics, dance, painting, theatre and art: a broad cultural focus that would define Besnyö's time in Berlin. "If you want to be a photographer, you must go to Berlin," she recalled Kepes once telling her. In Berlin, one can be bold, he claimed: "Paris is passé, it's Romantic."⁷ In Berlin, Besnyö continued her photographic apprenticeships, working for the advertising image-maker René Ahrlé, before contributing reportage for the studio of the press photographer Peter Weller.

In 1931, Besnyö made an image that seems to capture the sense of photography at the time, and perhaps the sense of Berlin, then and now – as a place of possibility, freedom, in the creative imagination (a notion so regurgitated that it has become a cliché, even a punchline). The image shows a Berlin street corner, from above. The graphic lines and the point of the pavement cut like an arrow into the frame [p. 78]. One sees the strong influence of the Constructivist photographers: the bold "Russian diagonal". "In Hungary, diagonals were in the air, in Berlin, they ran right through me," Besnyö said of the city.⁸ Within the image are a handful of people, and their elongated shadows add to the general sense of motion and force within the image (the sophisticated and unusual attention to, and usage of, shadows, is one of Besnyö's visual signatures, most famous in her stunning 1929 image of her and her sister, *Shadow of Eva and Magda Besnyö* [p. 21], which she made shortly before leaving for Berlin). In her Berlin image, pedestrians move out from the centre, embarking on different missions, errands and routes. The image suggests action, energy: a city of options.

Indeed, Besnyö threw herself into the city: she attended classes once a week at the MASCH (Marxist Workers' School); she went to the theatre; she sought out small avant-garde cinemas in the suburbs that would play Russian films by Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Alexander Dovchenko. The city offered a cross-disciplinary education, particularly when it came to painting and visual culture. While Besnyö had grown up in an educated household, full of music, she was the only one of her parents' three daughters to reject a higher education. And so, she used her time in Berlin to begin her own, informal, self-directed schooling. Part of this came through socialising constantly. She moved in the cultured circles that included Moholy-Nagy, Otto Umbehr, Joris Ivens and Robert Capa. And through Kepes she met Paul Beck, Bernard Rosner and John Fernhout, among others ("We rarely talked about photography. Although when I think about it now, whatever we talked about it somehow always had something to do with my work," she said of that period).⁹ Her Berlin street corner image can be read as a self-portrait: a woman facing a curve in the road and a myriad of potential pathways.

In the end, Besnyö was to remain in Berlin for just two years, before fleeing antisemitism, and political circumstance – as she had done on leaving Hungary – during the rise of the Nazis. She arrived in Amsterdam in autumn 1932. And yet the impact of this short stay in Germany on her practice cannot be overstated, something she herself acknowledged. “In Berlin the doors opened and the light flooded in. Light in the darkness,” she said. “I became a new person. Berlin was where the Eva Besnyö that I am today was born.” The city had been wild, sordid, she admitted, but her social support, and attention to her work, kept her driven and focused: “Although I would never admit it, my father was right. Berlin was a den of iniquity. There were a thousand ways of going off the rails, but through my love for Kepes and through his friends I was safe from the start...I was oblivious to it all. I had no idea. I was so green it didn’t affect me.”¹⁰

The sense of collaboration that defined her life and work during the Berlin years can be seen as a framework with which to understand her wider practice, which is defined by a sense of community, a sense of dialogue or connection. This is, of course, particularly noticeable in her famous work connected to the feminist activities and organising of the Dolle Mina (Mad Mina) group, but it also underpins countless other images within this book.

Writing in *Eyewitness: Hungarian Photography in the Twentieth Century*, Colin Ford makes the case that creativity, and with it a sense of being bonded – albeit sometimes in solitude or difficulty – with one’s peers or network, comes instinctively to Hungarian image-makers. The book and corresponding exhibition (Royal Academy, London, 2011) spotlight the overrepresentation of Hungarian image-makers during this period at the vanguard of photography: discussing and dissecting what about the country breeds a particular aptitude for the medium. Ford argues, “The Hungarian language has very little in common with any other language except, perhaps, Finnish. Cornell Capa said he was partly ‘driven towards photography’ by the fact that he was ‘born in Hungary, a small country where a language is spoken that no one else in the world understands’.”¹¹ Ford cites the words of the author Arthur Koestler: “Hungarians are the only people in Europe without racial or linguistic relatives in Europe, therefore they are the loneliest on this continent. This... perhaps explains the peculiar intensity of their existence... Hopeless solitude feeds their creativity.”¹²

Solitude, Ford claims, also pushed Hungarians together, to find others who shared their sensibility and backstories, especially as they navigated new homes and changes, as was the case for so many (Besnyö and Kepes were among many others who migrated during this period, with Nora Dumas, Ergy Landau, Brassai and André Kertész heading to Paris, and Martin Munkácsi and Capa ending up in Berlin). “I arrived in Berlin and ran straight into someone I knew from Budapest,” said Besnyö. “Within half an hour I had

















1910–2003

Life and Work

1910

- ◆ Eva Marianna Besnyő is born on 29 April in Budapest. She grows up in a liberal Jewish family with her elder sister Panna and younger sister Magda.

1925

- ◆ Receives a Kodak Brownie, the affordable and easy-to-use camera that made photography widely accessible for the first time.

1928–1930

- ◆ Works in the studio of photographer Jozsef Pécsi, where she meets artist and photographer György Kepes.
- ◆ In 1929, on Pécsi's advice, Besnyő's father gives her one of the first Rolleiflex camera models, which she will use until 1969.
- ◆ In 1930, moves to Berlin and becomes part of the circle of artists around Kepes.

1930–1932

- ◆ Works for advertising artist René Ahrlé and press photographer Peter Weller, and later independently from a studio on Nachodstraße.
- ◆ Through Kepes, meets the Dutch filmmaker and photographer John Fernhout, with whom she begins a relationship.
- ◆ Among the photos she takes during regular trips back to Hungary for family holidays are her famous image of a boy with a cello at Lake Balaton.

1932

- ◆ To escape the rise of fascism and antisemitism in Germany, moves with Fernhout to the Netherlands. Becomes part of the circle around Fernhout's mother, the artist Charley Toorop, with whom she develops a special life-long bond.

1933

- ◆ First solo show at Kunstzaal Van Lier in Amsterdam. Her exhibition later that year in Utrecht is opened by Gerrit Rietveld.
- ◆ Marries John Fernhout.

c. 1933–1939

- ◆ Joins the Association of Worker-Photographers.
- ◆ Photographs architecture and portraits and undertakes commissions for the AVRO Studio and the SS *Nieuw Amsterdam*. Work published in magazines such as *De 8* en *Opbouw*.
- ◆ In 1936, participates in the exhibition *The Olympics Under Dictatorship* and plays a key role in organising *Foto '37* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.
- ◆ With photographer Carel Blazer and architect Alexander Bodon, rents a six-storey house at Keizersgracht 522 in Amsterdam, which becomes a meeting place for photographers and artists.

This publication is released on the occasion of the exhibition *Eva Besnyö: The Liberated Camera* at Fotomuseum Den Haag, from 5 September 2026 to 31 January 2027.

The exhibition will also be on view during the *Rencontres de la Photographie* in Arles, from 6 July to 4 October 2027.

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Front cover

Self-portrait with Rolleiflex
Camera, Berlin – 1931

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114, 115 (fig. 5), 116 (figs. 9–11),
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(fig. 3).

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