



Carl De Keyzer, Ghent, 2002

I'm a photographer dealing with reality. I try to find a new subject every two or three years that will eventually become a book and an exhibition. But beyond the immediate subject that I am focused on in each project, what I'm dealing with in my work is my particular relationship with time and with the history of art. I try to take elements used in art history and project these through photography in the current time.

I always look for subjects that are rooted in a particular period of time, and each project is a play with time. For instance, *God Inc.* (1992), the work I did on Christians in America, was an attempt to convey an idea of religion in the 1960s. It was inspired by the photography in American magazines of the 1960s – such as *Time* and *Life* – and the kind of atmosphere those photographs conjure up. I imitated the style of the period and looked for images that had a staged, theatrical feel about them. Even buying a motor home and driving around the country was an idea inspired by the 1960s American dream. I visited

churches looking for images that fitted the 1960s template.

In a way my work is more fictional than it is a description of reality. Certainly *God Inc.* was heavily criticized for not being realistic – but the idea was to make images that were unrealistic. I'm exploring ideas about reality, but I'm not looking for reality. I'm looking for situations that I recognize and that conform to the idea I am trying to project. With each body of work, I start out with a few images in my head, and then I go out to find bits of reality that fit them, and I keep repeating that until I have enough good images to make the book.

I realize this puts me philosophically at odds with most of the photographers in Magnum. Their approach is different. They are really interested in using photography as a way of exploring events or situations and the way they make pictures is often intuitive, whereas I have the template of the images I want in my head before I set out. Although the template in the case of *God Inc.* was photography from another period, most of the time it comes from a genre of painting – usually from paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For example, my *Europa* project (2000) was intended to be a statement about painting. The subject was Charles V. It started out as an assignment from the Charles V committee for his 500 year commemoration in Belgium. The idea of following Charles V's itinerary around his Empire appealed to me and in each town – Tarragona, Madrid, Florence, Siena – I would go to the museum to see what historical paintings they had of the locality. I didn't always find the ones I imagined, but they were in my head anyway. Then I went out into the streets to try to find situations that



A group of religious motorcyclists called 'The Sons of God' celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Bike Week on Daytona Beach, Florida, 1990

looked like them. The photographs ended up looking more like contemporary documentary photography, but that was how the idea started. Once I have worked out the template, it's a case of filling in the details. Most of the time people don't realize this is what I'm doing, but that doesn't matter.

This fascination with combining photojournalism and painting also applies to *Tableaux d'Histoire*, or the *History Paintings* series, which I started in 1991 and worked on for 11 years. I went to events that featured in the news all over the world, producing one or two large-scale tableaux from each event, combining the approach of history painters like David with that of early war photographers like Brady and Fenton. It started as a reaction to the constant stream of information and images that we experience, on CNN for instance. A lot of the time I didn't focus on the central news event itself, but picked out something from its margins. I wanted to force the viewer to take a more detached view of the scene – to take time to look at it and question it.

All this began at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent, where I spent two years studying photography and two years studying cinema. All the work I did there was staged with models, and I did no reportage or documentary photography whatsoever. I set up everything, borrowing ideas from old movies, especially those of Hollywood from the 1930s and 1940s. I worked that way for a while, but I wasn't happy with the resulting images. I was happy with the *ideas* about the kind of images I wanted to make, but they relied heavily on staged events and a tool kit of lighting and effects. Also I got bored with the limits of my imagination. I decided to

Story: Zona

Location/Date: Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, Russia, 2000–2

Synopsis: Siberia's prison camps were vividly brought to the world's attention by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, himself a prisoner for five years at 'Krasnoyarsk-26', in his book *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973–5). Known as the 'Atomic Gulag' after the nuclear power plants staffed by prison labour, Krasnoyarsk still supports a prison population of about 140,000. Overall Russia's prisons hold almost one million prisoners, down from 1.5 million after Vladimir Putin's millennium amnesty in 2000. Under a unique military-run regime, prisoners and prison workers continue to live in the camp buildings built by Stalin in the 1930s and continue to labour in the region's nuclear power plants. Carl De Keyzer photographed Krasnoyarsk's camps over

a period of two years to produce a series titled *Zona* after the local slang for 'prison'.

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buy a Leica and a 50 mm lens as an exercise in limiting my equipment to the absolute minimum, and I travelled around Europe making photographs in the style of reportage photography – a combination of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Elliott Erwitt and Robert Frank. It was more or less a failure.

So I decided to return to my previous methods – instead of waiting for the right light, adding light to the scenery, thereby giving me more control over the picture and allowing me to make series that were more homogeneous. I started using a 6 x 7 camera because, unlike with a Leica, I could give foreground and background subjects equal weight – like in Renaissance paintings. Also television is more or less that format. I also started using a panoramic camera for my *Homo Sovieticus* project (1993) after being inspired by the social realist art of the Soviet Union of the 1930s. The format was very important to the Communist Party, who wanted to show workers marching, or to show huge factories, or generally to give a panoramic and monumental scale to Soviet achievements. Every format has a certain impact on the work, and on the people looking at it.

I'm never original. All my imagery is borrowed from somewhere. Like all artists – whether Picasso or Jeff Wall – my images are heavily appropriated from what has been done before. For me it has proved easier to borrow from the past than to jump on the newest style. But I do adapt. My pictures remain more or less the same but I also know what's going on in contemporary photography which I follow much more seriously than journalism. But I still think dealing with reality is the most interesting thing to do. That's why I quit becoming a cinema director – because conceiving new images is still much more difficult, or less rewarding, than working with existing images that are just there to find.

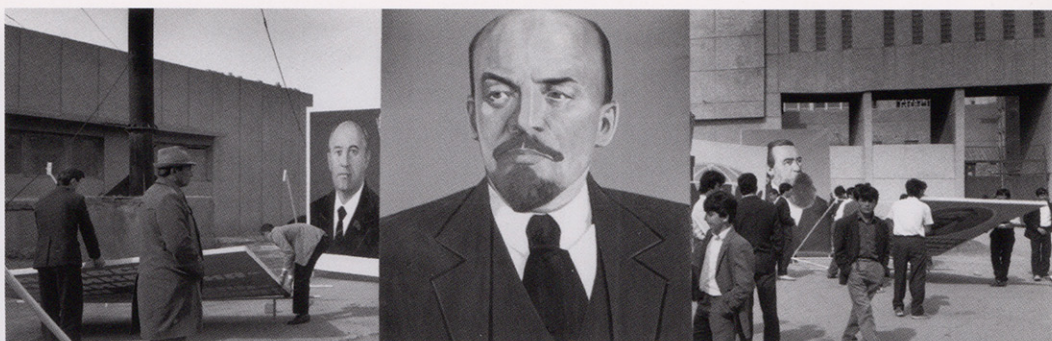
In my work there's always been a duality between sticking to reality and trying to stage things. When I was working on *India* (1987) and again with *Homo Sovieticus*, I travelled to take pictures during the summer while I made staged photography in my studio during the winter. I hesitated for a long time about which side to take. Finally



President Clinton's inauguration day, Washington, DC, USA, 1993. From De Keyzer's *Tableaux d'Histoire* series

DE KEYZER

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Preparation for Labour Day march, Urgench, Uzbekistan, USSR, 1 May 1989. From De Keyzer's *Homo Sovieticus* series

I gave up staged photography, partly because *Homo Sovieticus* had a degree of success. But all the time I still have in the back of my mind the idea of staging reality. It's something that never goes away. If I ever find my imagination is strong enough to stage images that can compete with the documentary photographs I make, I might choose the other direction again. I'm investing heavily in computers and digital tools just in case.

I start my work with a background that I like or recognize, or that I want to use as a stage, where there are a number of elements or people that can fill it. I don't see a situation with three or four people in it, and then move around to get the perfect picture. Rather what I do is more two-dimensional, and flatter – although I get criticized for it, it is exactly what I am looking for. I like as many elements as possible – but not too many, because then it becomes less interesting. I need at least two elements that are interesting, as well as the setting. There's an optimum point where too many or too few and the picture loses tension. Sometimes I find a situation with some elements that I am happy with, but I want something to happen that fills the stage, so I might wait five or ten minutes. I rarely wait for longer than that.

Sometimes my presence ruins the situation, sometimes it improves it. I've learned to use my presence, my body, to actually change a situation, and to make a potentially interesting situation more interesting. The position I take as a photographer in a situation is very important because you can anticipate when you approach people how they will react. It's like chaos theory – people are going to move away from you or come towards you depending on what you do. Although I use my body to influence the staging, I never move an object in the frame, or ask a person to move. What I'm doing is playing with the elements – the stage, people, my presence – seeing whether I can make it look a certain way. Art-directing the scene would make the whole exercise meaningless.

I definitely do not try to be a storyteller. Although there is often anecdotal information in my photographs, I sometimes regret that. I wish I could make images that are more abstract and less obvious, but having chosen an approach that involves real

detail, anecdotes are inevitable. I don't mind that my pictures are used with text, and used as illustrations, but I've never considered myself as somebody explaining a situation to the public. I just do the work for myself. Whether it's regarded as reportage, or documentary, or fiction, I don't mind. However, I do want the public to appreciate my aesthetic point of view – but I'm comfortable about not being understood.

Zona (2003) is the closest I've come to really straight documentary photography. Here I tried to eliminate a lot of the equipment, such as the use of direct flash or even different flashes combined, that I used in my other series. Because of that, the pictures look less artificial. People think they are more real. As with other projects, the idea was to play with time. People see prison camps in Siberia and they think of black and white pictures, Solzhenitsyn; they think of really difficult situations – people being tortured, the Russian system. But the images are really very colourful, bright, beautiful. The series is like a fantasy world, with prisoners looking happy, and quite unlike the images people have in their minds when they think of prison camps. It's a mind game in a way, to play with images in this way. I want to play with the redefining of images that you carry in your memory. There's always this double layer in my work: what you see is real but at the same time it's not real.

Like many other things in life, the game involves exerting a kind of control over a situation. When it works best, it's like you're inventing something, or you've seen a situation that nobody else has seen, and that makes you feel unique for a moment. And it's a game you can use all your skills to play. Whatever you have in terms of imagination, intelligence and background knowledge you use to look for those images. Of course you have the camera and the camera has its limitations and there are obstacles – getting places, finding things. But sometimes you're in a situation and things are happening around you and you are in a state of perfect happiness. The rest is just putting a frame around it.



Lunch consists of one cube of bread and a bowl of fish, Krasnoyarsk, 2000



Лангитина, Красноярск, 2000



Hospital ward, Sosnovoborsk, 2001



Prisoners sleep outside while dormitories are repainted, Krasnoyarsk, 2001



Prisoner demonstrates his resistance to temperatures of -50°C by taking a shower, Novobirusinsk, 2002



A prisoner works on an ice sculpture for the inter-camp competition, Krasnoyarsk, 2002