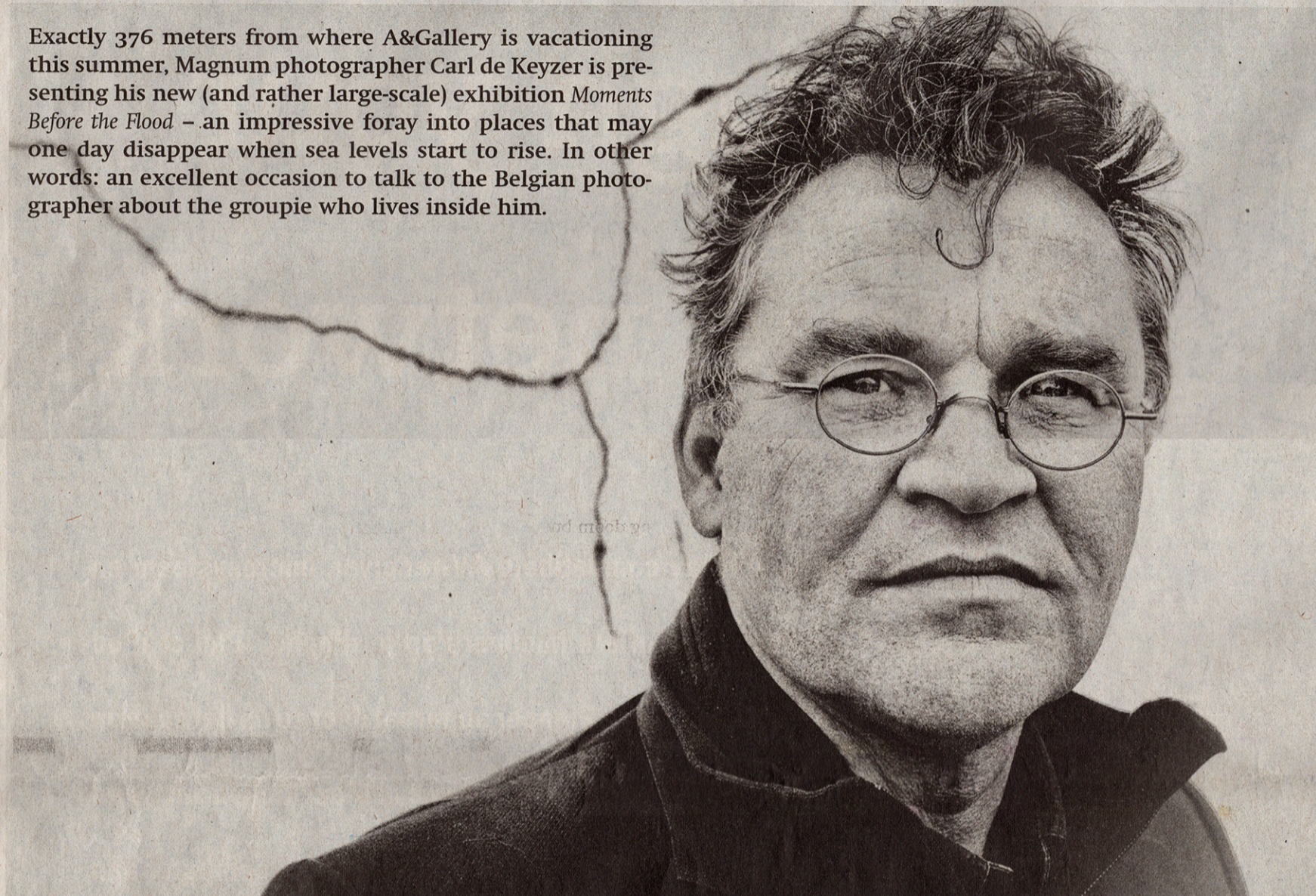


CARL DE KEYZER:

“One day I’ll make a record. Sorry about that.”

Exactly 376 meters from where A&Gallery is vacationing this summer, Magnum photographer Carl de Keyzer is presenting his new (and rather large-scale) exhibition *Moments Before the Flood* – an impressive foray into places that may one day disappear when sea levels start to rise. In other words: an excellent occasion to talk to the Belgian photographer about the groupie who lives inside him.



Words: Ben Van Alboom
Photography: Wouter Van Vaerenbergh

It was your typical Belgian Sunday morning in May when we met up with Carl de Keyzer in Ostend to talk about the artists he loves. Strong winds? Check. Rain? Of course. Frost? The jury is still out on that but quite likely. Luckily, walking into the enormous exhibition space that houses *Moments Before the Flood* and watching that massive boat wreck outside totally made up for the weather.

As a matter of fact: the exhibition is so imposing that it would be just rude not to ask where you got the idea for it?

Carl: “Some six years ago, the performing arts centre Concertgebouw in Bruges asked me to shoot some images for its upcoming season’s catalogue. They also set forward two restrictions: stick to the theme – ‘water’ – and don’t picture people. I ended up traveling up and down the Belgian coast right around the same time those reports started to surface about how sea levels would unavoidably rise and consume large parts of the world. Then it just hit me – standing on a beach in Blankenberge – how that would make for a great series. In the end, over the course of sixteen months, I photographed thousands of beaches, castles, fire towers and rocks all over Europe – imagining I would be the very last person to stand there and see them; right before the flood would erase them from memory.”

Which explains the menacing unruliness of the pictures. Is that a characteristic which is also present in the work of your all-time favorite photographer?

Carl: “Hardly. My all-time favorite photographer is Garry Winogrand. For me, as a young photographer, he was the first who was able to convey exactly what he was thinking in his work – and yes, I like photography that puts the photographer’s emotions and thoughts across. I want to see how a photographer feels about a certain person or situation. Does he like someone or really hate him? I want to get a sense of that through his work. Maybe that sounds easy but trust me: it isn’t. Especially not in the case of Winogrand, who had a knack for complex situations. He often created order from chaos *without* turning real-life situations into abstract case studies. With Winogrand, you always knew what a picture was about and how he felt about it. I definitely learned a lot from him.”

Any living photographer who inspires you?

Carl: “Quite a few actually. Take Alec Soth: there’s a certain minimalism to his work for which I truly admire him – the art of making the most powerful image with the least possible information. Compared to Alec, I’m much more like a painter: always adding drama to a situation.”

Is either Winogrand or Soth the author of your favorite photo book?

Carl: “No. That would be William Klein, whose brilliant photo book

Moscow I don’t own myself – unfortunately. (first edition prints of the book easily sell for over €1,000 on eBay; go fetch!) I’ve always been a huge admirer of the way Klein was able to immerse him in the crowd and, amidst the chaos, take a picture at the exact right moment. He wasn’t like Henri Cartier-Bresson or other famous Magnum photographers who might have waited an hour to avoid the chaos so they could be certain to take the perfect picture. He just went for it – fully aware of the fact that it would be impossible for him to control every single aspect of the photo he was about to take. Also, I’ve lived in Russia for three years and must have visited Moscow about twenty-five times in my life. So as far as the subject matter of the book is concerned, I’m a little biased.”

Let’s talk cinema!

Carl: “Yes, please! I’m a big movie buff. I used to live next to Studio Skoop in Ghent, and there were times in my life you could find me there every single night. Nowadays I only visit cinemas when they’re playing something *I have* to see on the big screen. All other movies I just watch on Blu-ray in my home cinema theatre – up in the attic. Although I must admit to checking out Tim Burton’s *Dark Shadows* on the big screen recently. Can’t say I was very impressed though: lame story, weak performances, just a terrible movie.”

Which director has yet to disappoint you?

Carl: “I used to be really into Fellini,

Visconti, Pasolini, ... These days I’d have to say David Lynch – probably not the most original answer but I just find his surreal realism truly fascinating.”

Talking about surrealism: any chance there’s a Storm Thorgerson album cover in your record collection?

Carl: “Of course! I’m a huge music lover and vinyl collector so obviously I own quite a few of his designs. I started working in my dad’s record store when I was eight and Beatlemania was in full swing. Then I switched to hard rock – listening to Black Sabbath and Deep Purple – before becoming addicted to Pink Floyd. Yes, Todd Rundgren and other prog rock artists. Later on as an art student I only listened to jazz – obviously. I had this thing for ECM (*legendary German jazz label*) and bought pretty much everything they put out. Only trouble was they had some six hundred releases per year. (*laughs*) I still have about a thousand ECM records so that actually turned out to be quite a good investment.”

What about classical music?

Carl: “That came up next – alongside opera. I even listened to nothing but classical music and opera for a couple of years, before being saved by my iPod’s shuffle function. Today I’m mostly into electronica: Amon Tobin, Aphex Twin, Apparat. I also have my own music studio – including some fifty synthesizers; almost as many as Soulwax. One of the things on my bucket list is to make an album be-



fore I’m 65. I’m pretty sure it’ll be really bad, although I like to think I’m still evolving. Every time there’s a kid in my studio twisting knobs, I’m picking things up. So let’s just wait what happens: maybe it won’t be a complete disaster after all.”

Definitely not a complete disaster was the photo gallery you and Dirk Braeckman used to run in Ghent: the legendary XYZ.

Carl: “No, but to be brutally honest: it wasn’t a big hit either. Yes, we exhibited the work of Garry Winogrand, Ed Van der Elsken, Martin Parr, Larry Clark, but I think we sold about five pictures in seven years time – at dumping prices! You could get a Larry Clark print from us for one hundred euro and nobody wanted it! True, that was a lot of money in the eighties but you would be able to get \$30,000 for it today. But it was just too soon. It was only around 1990 that art collectors started to show genuine interest in photography. We shut XYZ down in 1989. (*laughs*) Fortunately, we never did it for the money. It was basically the only way to see the work of all these great photographers in Belgium. There were no photo museums; you had maybe one or two other photo galleries in the rest of the country. Bottom line: if we didn’t do it, nobody did.”

For the record: glad you did!