

**Carl De Keyzer** is a Belgian photographer born in Kortrijk on 27 December 1958. Member of Magnum photo agency since 1994 and teacher at the royal academy of fine arts in Ghent, Carl De Keyzer is famous for his many award-winning projects dealing with various social, ideological, religious and environmental systems. As a documentary photographer and contemporary artist, his photographic works have captured audiences around the world. His next exhibition in Belgium takes place in Botanique from March 2017, exhibiting his latest book "Higher Ground".

## THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF PHOTOJOURNALISM AND FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY

Interview with

# CARL DE KEYZER

By Boré Kedober

**"I notice how photography in general has evolved over the years. There are many more people coming to exhibitions these days. And never have there been so many photo books published. When I started out, there was maybe one photo book per year published in Belgium. Now there are 20-25 per year published by individual Belgian photographers."**



From the book 'Europa' - Leuven, Belgium, 1998 - 'Ommegang' historic festival



From the book 'India' - Benares, India, 1985 - Ganges River

### How did you get involved with photography?

When I finished high school, I had no idea really what I wanted to do. I thought I wanted to become a doctor or veterinarian and even started veterinarian school but quickly saw that it was not for me and stopped after three months.

At that time, I had three hobbies: Football, electronic music and photography, as we had a dark room in our house. I experimented with all and felt that one of them should become the next attempt to do something with my life. Some artist friends looked at my photographs and encouraged me to join the art academy. This was quite new and unusual for our family, but I immediately noticed that it was the right thing and a complete eye opener.

I received top marks throughout and was top of my class. When I joined the army, I was sent to the army museum in Brussels to document and take pictures. Being exposed to historical events such as when Belgium was in the Congo, I was inspired to document systems of government and conflicts around the world.

Following my army service, I had a very busy period and was involved in photography, working three full time jobs. Firstly, as an independent photojournalist, secondly, as a teacher at the academy and lastly, as co-founder of the XYZ Gallery, which we opened in 1982.

XYZ was the first professional photography gallery in Ghent and the name was chosen as a joke as it was situated just next to a porn cinema called the ABC cinema. At that time, the market for photography was very small but on the other hand it was very easy to attract the big stars and world famous celebrities. Because photo galleries was all so new, they always said yes when we called, so it was a lot of fun and much appreciated in Ghent.

Personally, I was always interested in doing my own projects and in particular documentary photography, which takes a lot of research and dedication to do. So in 1989 we closed the gallery and I joined the Magnum agency as a nominee before becoming a full member.



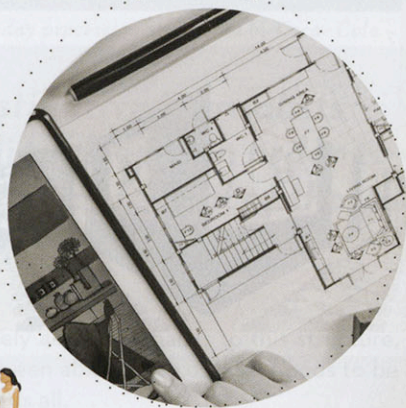
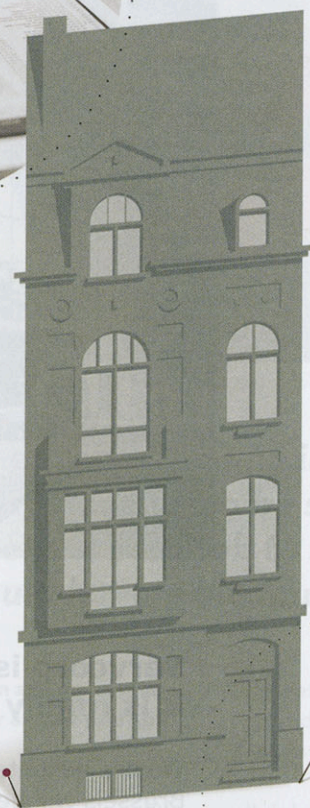
From the book 'Zona' - Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, Russia, 2000 - Camp 27

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**How did you evolve as a photographer throughout your career?**

I have evolved in becoming a documentary photographer, which means that I go quite in depth in my projects. It takes me about six months just to do the research. Before it would take longer when there was less digitalisation. Then it takes me six months to carry out the project and take the pictures. This is followed by about six months of exhibitions. So all in all, one project life cycle is about two years.

I am fascinated by systems and whether political, religious, ideological or ecological, I notice now in retrospect that my projects follow a common thread. My latest book "Higher Ground" is for example a sequel to "Moments Before the Flood." I stood on 5,000 different beaches while travelling through the coastline of Western Europe and slept in 550 hotels to do this project. It is a work of fiction about global warming in which a flood swallows up most of Western Europe. Belgium, Holland and Great Britain would all be under water in a kind of apocalyptic scenario. The new book "Higher Ground" looks at the aftermath when Europeans have moved to the mountains and start to build a new Europe.

My other projects have dealt with communism, the role of religion and post colonialism: all systems in society. You notice the missing pieces and what needs to be told, and you also find a meaning in your reportages.

I notice how photography in general has evolved from my early days after graduating from art school. There are many more people coming to exhibitions these days. Never have there been so many photo books published. When I started with my photography projects, there was maybe one photo book per year that was published in Belgium. Now there are 20-25 photo books published per year by individual Belgian photographers. It has also become cheaper to travel and to buy equipment. My work has evolved to become something between documentary photography and contemporary art.



From the book 'East of Eden' - Brasov, Romania, 1994



From the book 'Homo Sovieticus' - Moscow, Russia (USSR), 1988 - Kremlin, Red Square. 7 November celebration. Day of the Revolution.



From the book 'God, Inc.' - New Orleans, Louisiana, USA, 1990 - Singing of the national anthem during the blessing of the Mississippi river by a catholic bishop



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**You have travelled all over the world for your work. Which project has been the most interesting for you?**

I've been fortunate to have travelled to over 100 countries. I remember my first trip was to India and how I immediately fell in love with the country. I've been back there 14 times. There is so much happening there. You see people in less fortunate situations who are still smiling and are happy. It toughens you up and makes you appreciate what you have.

Having travelled as a Belgian photographer all over the world, one cannot escape the "Belgian colonial" epithet. I've travelled in Congo, Rwanda and Uganda and many other African countries. Obviously I would never know the country I visit as well as the locals. I come with an outsider's point of view, imposing

**"I don't like pictures that are just about aesthetics and beauty. The picture also needs to have an impact. I use aesthetics to attract people to come and look closer at the picture because they find it beautiful. Once they have approached it, they see what it's about."**

my lens on them. I represent a continent, with its prejudice and bias. In fact, that has been a topic in itself in several of my exhibitions: the colonial way of photographing and documenting "developing countries." It's a self-critical look at myself, my country and my continent. Now going to Congo and other African countries that I visited, there are more and more local photographers who take their own pictures and document.

There are always two or three different ways to look at a subject. If you are a local, you have your own perspective. The locals may know a lot of course, but they may also live in a kind of bubble or cocoon. I'd love to have an African photographer showing Belgians what their country looks like - to come to a Flemish community and showcase what he or she sees.

It's more interesting to have an outsider's point of view and it will always be a bit shocking to the locals. It's already happening that African and Asian photographers come to Europe to take pictures and prepare exhibitions, and say what they think of us in their home countries, similarly to what we in Europe have done when travelling to their countries.

**How has the photography profession changed over the course of your career until today?**

Well, there have been two big revolutions. Firstly, the rise of the Internet, and secondly, the commercialisation of digital cameras.

Before the 90s and before Internet, media would

employ plenty of photojournalists. There were lots of photojournalist agencies back then. In the 90s, Corbis, which was part of Microsoft, and Getty images came and bought them all up. They basically took over the whole market worldwide. Before that, a photojournalist would receive about 100 dollars for a picture. They slashed the prices to 15 dollars and sell the picture to several magazines, while the photographer would only receive 20 dollars per picture. Magnum photo agency on the other hand, was a cooperative and refused to be bought up.

Next, the digital camera revolution has allowed everyone today to have a camera via their smart phone for example. So it's not even 20 dollar per picture anymore, but they are more or less free and taken by anyone on the street. Of course the quality of the pictures have gone down tremendously.

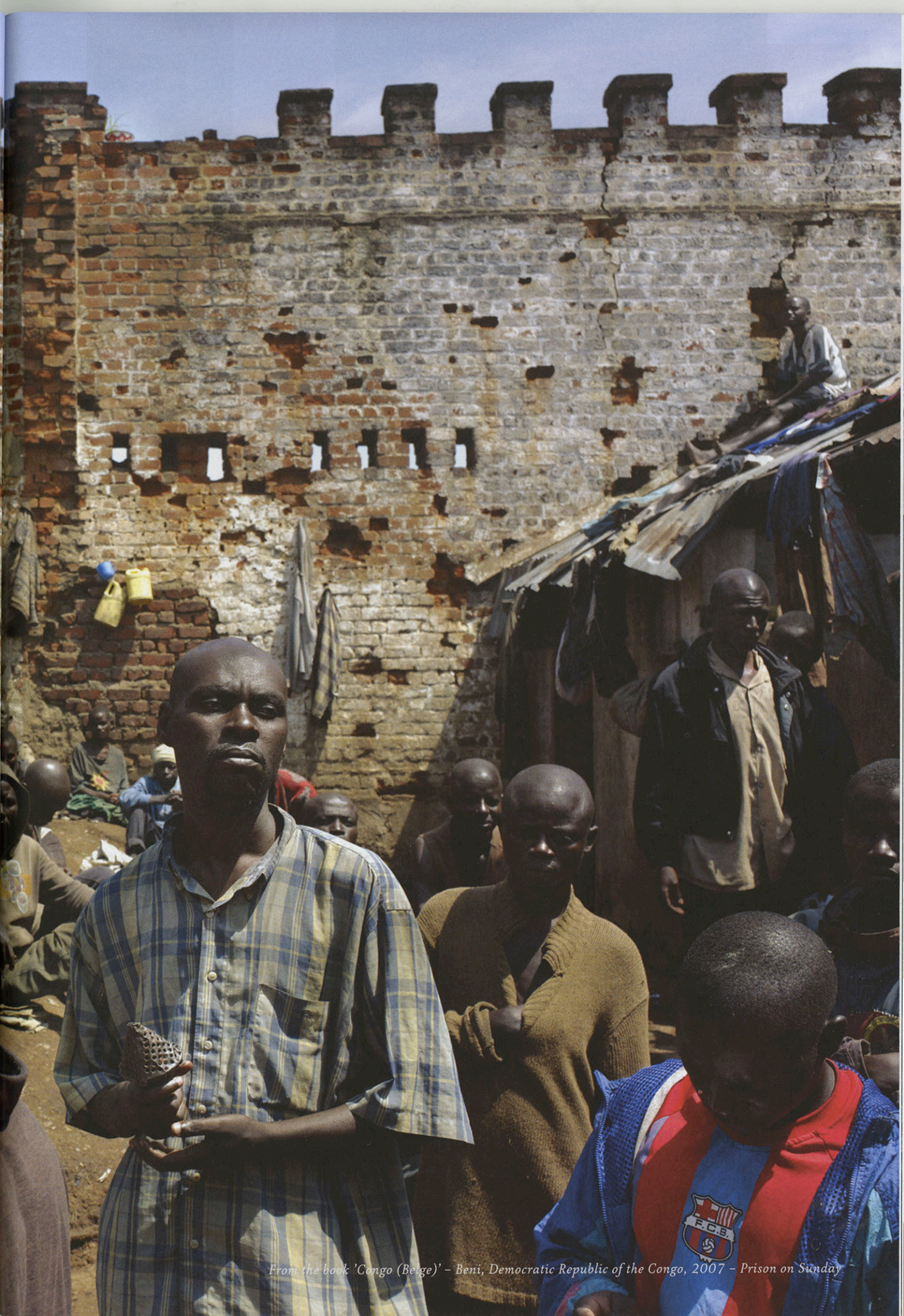
It's difficult to be a really good photographer. We at Magnum thought that the magazines would just be flooded with bad pictures and that they would come back to us to pay for quality photos but it didn't happen so Magnum adapted itself as well, and we work now more and more on documentaries and in the art world rather than magazines.

**Where do you draw your inspiration for your work?**

At first, I just completed one project after another without thinking too much about it. But later I realised that there was a common thread between them. It was about systems. I lived during communism,

From the book 'Moment before the flood'





*From the book 'Congo (Belge)' - Beni, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2007 - Prison on Sunday*



From the book 'Cuba La Lucha'

colonialism and the religious influence on society. Before 1958, the year I was born, most of our schoolteachers were very religious. Many had a theological background.

I witnessed all these systems breaking down. It's when you do all these projects that you notice the missing bits that have not been documented. For example, the project "God, Inc." was inspired following an article I had read about religious theme parks in the US. The "Homo Sovieticus" book was inspired following my frequent stop-overs in Moscow when I travelled to India. Because I wanted to save on money at the time, I always flew with Aeroflot, the Soviet airline company.

So I guess sometimes the projects came by accident and sometimes they were well planned or inspired by a news article. When I stumble on articles, I often think that the topic could become a whole book. Unfortunately there aren't many investigative journalists today and many topics deserve to be studied deeper in order to learn more about them. It's my job to see the potential of those ideas, which could have a big impact on the viewers.

**What is the link between photojournalism and art? Is it supposed to just be factual or to also look good? How much is and should photojournalism be influenced by aesthetics?**

For me aesthetics is very important. However I never stage a picture. When you take a picture, you have to frame the reality, but obviously not

everything can be included. What you leave out of the picture is of tremendous importance just as in regular journalism. But in visual photographs, there is always an element of aesthetics that is put into play when you choose what to leave out.

However, I don't like pictures that are just about aesthetics and beauty. The picture also needs to have an impact. I use aesthetics to attract people to come and look closer at the picture because they find it beautiful. Once they have approached it, they see what it's about. Like in my apocalyptic book on floods, that it's in fact about the end of the world. It's like a flower that attracts the beast. It looks pretty, but once you come closer, it may not smell so nice. So in short, a picture for me also has to be critical. My pictures come both sweet and sour.

**What is the future of photojournalism?**

There are surprisingly many good photographers today. I think that photojournalism is going to come back. Before, photojournalists went to cover wars and were the big heroes. Today's young photographers kind of have to reinvent themselves, to start from scratch and find their stories to tell.

From what I see, these young photographer stories are different and wonderful. In today's world, there is so much that happens, so many stories to tell and compared to 15-20 years ago, so many more global disputes and conflicts. That is why there is much to document and photograph.



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