

Interview with Carl de Keyser

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.

You joined the prestigious Magnum agency in **1990**. What impact did that have on your career and how does one become a member?

The impact was huge. It's like winning an Oscar. Of course it's not as if you become famous overnight but it really opens up a lot of opportunities. All of a sudden you sit at the same table with your heroes, working for Rolling Stone magazine, Le Figaro newspaper or The New York Times. It can be a bit overwhelming. For one of my first assignments, I was sent to cover the US elections in 1992, when Bill Clinton was running, shortly after I was in Russia right after that the Soviet Union collapsed.

Personally I preferred stepping down from the freelance jobs at the various magazines and newspapers in order to focus on my own projects. Now I'm ready to publish my 18th book. The way it works is that once I finish a project, I send it on to Magnum, which helps me to promote it. Overall, working with Magnum is very idealistic and beautiful work. We have no single boss, but there are still 60 bosses, namely all of us. Thanks to this structure, nobody has been able to buy us, as it needs to be approved by us all.

It takes 4-8 years to become a full member at Magnum, a bit like a law-firm, but once you are in, it opens a lot of doors. The agency is a so-called co-operative and owned by all its

members, who all have equal shares. But it's very selective and hard to become a member. In total, we have 60 full time members, and we sit down once a year to look at portfolios of photographers from all over the world who apply to join the agency.

We receive almost 1,000 portfolios every year, and they are then filtered down to 25 for this annual meeting. There we usually select 1 to 3 new candidates to join as nominees. I'm proud to say that there are five Belgian members out of the 60, which says a lot about the state of art, culture and quality of our art schools. The agency also opens up possibilities to fund long-term projects, books, and documentaries, and to cover conflicts worldwide.

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.

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 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 also, 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, 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.