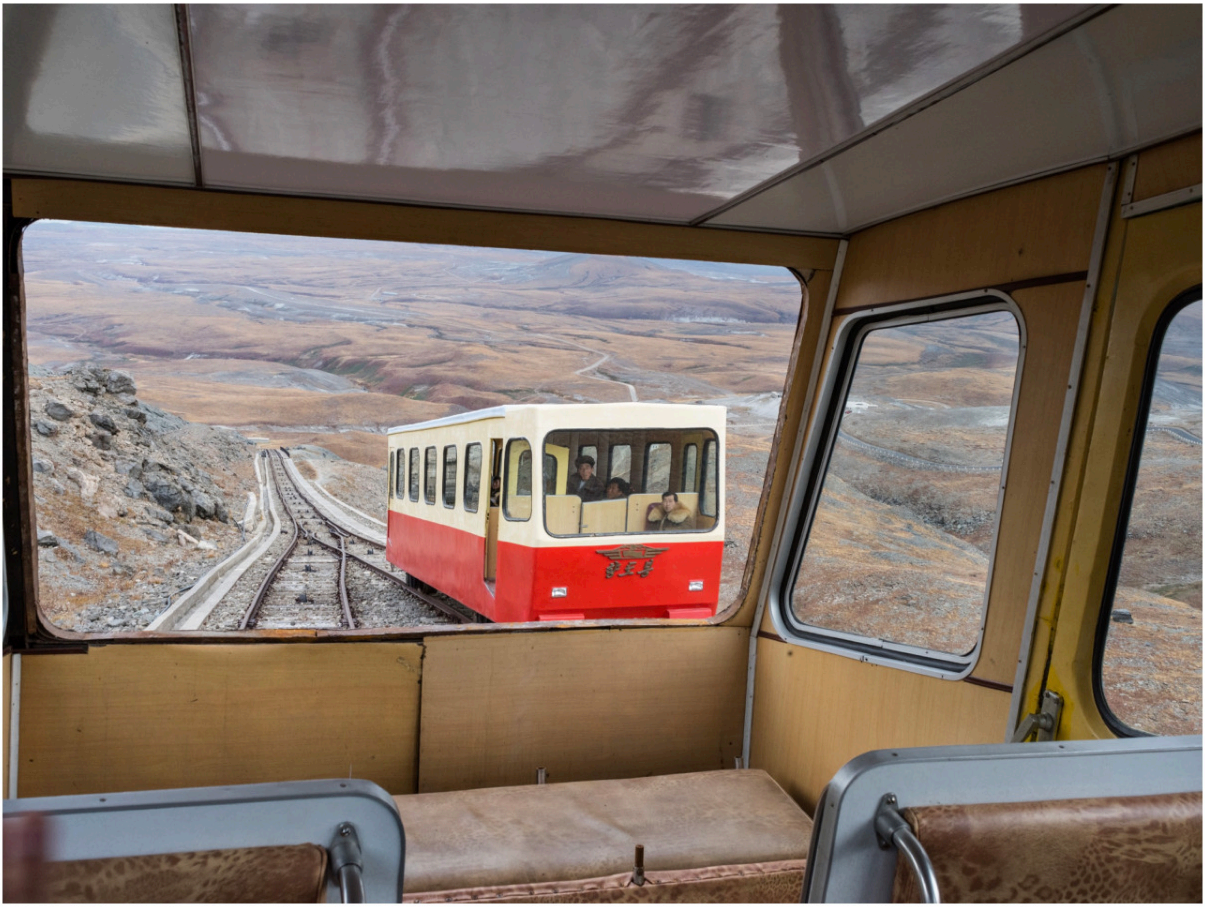
TRAVEL

North Korea: The Grand Tour

Photographs of ordinary and yet extraordinary life in the last communist state

Carl De Keyzer



Carl De Keyzer Taking the Hyangdobong funicular train to the top of Mt. Paekdu, Ryanggang Province. In the DPRK, many companies and brands are named after Korean geographic place names — in this particular case t (...)

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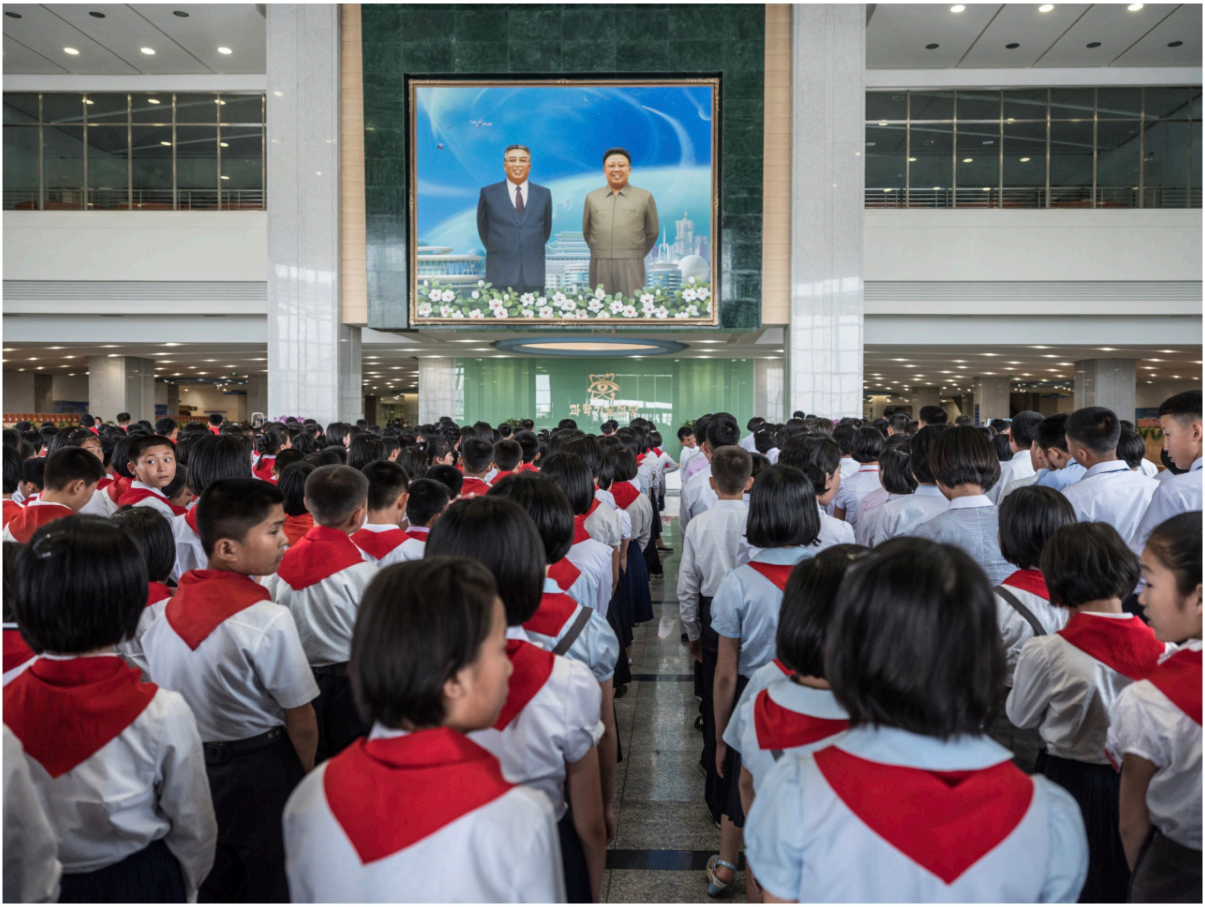
North Korea may be the most enigmatic country in the world. With access for foreign media and tourists limited very restricted, glimpses of life in the last communist state in the world are rare and highly controlled. Nevertheless, Carl De Keyzer managed to spend 60 days during 4 trips in 2015 and 2017 crossing the breadth of the country, known officially as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Given almost unprecedented access, the Magnum photographer documented over 200 locations which his travel agent Koryo Tours took him to as their photographer. He captured the orderly architecture of tourist landmarks, state monuments, social spaces, and schools, the intimacies of private homes, and the stunning natural landscapes of the country, many of which had never been captured on camera before. Upon the publication of his book *D.P.R. Korea Grand Tour* (which contains 256 images of North Korea), we speak to De Keyzer about what it was like to make the work in one of the most mysterious countries in the world.



Carl De Keyzer Students pay their respects to a portrait of President Kim Il Sung and General Kim Jong Il; Science and Technology Complex. Pyongyang, DPR Korea. © *Carl De Keyzer | Magnum Photos*

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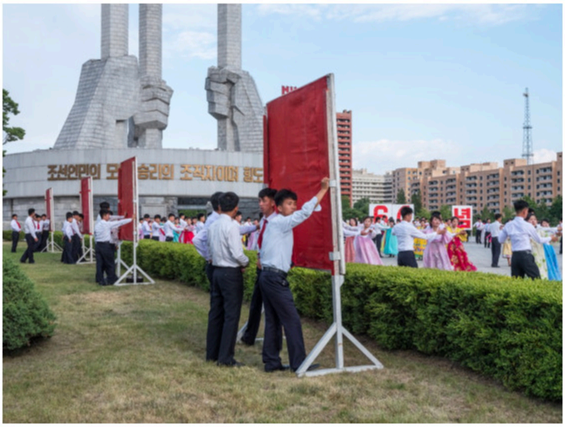

Carl De Keyzer Student mass dance at the Monument to Party Foundation, Pyongyang. The Kimilsungist-Kim Jongilist Youth League help organize the dance. Pyongyang, DPR Korea. © *Carl De Keyzer | Magnum Photos*

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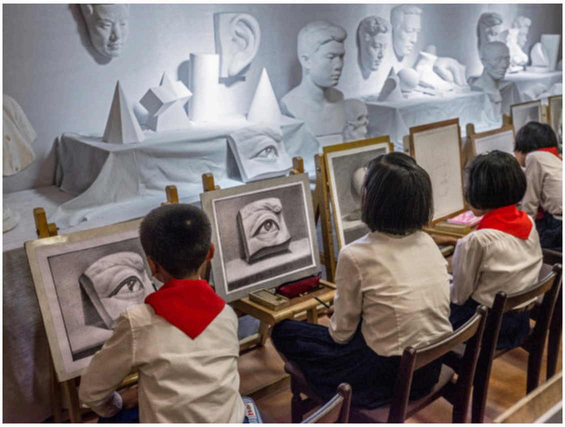

Carl De Keyzer Drawing class at the recently renovated Manggyondae Schoolchildren's Palace. Pyongyang, DPR Korea. © *Carl De Keyzer | Magnum Photos*

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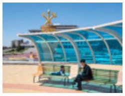

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Carl De Keyzer's Korean Grand Tour

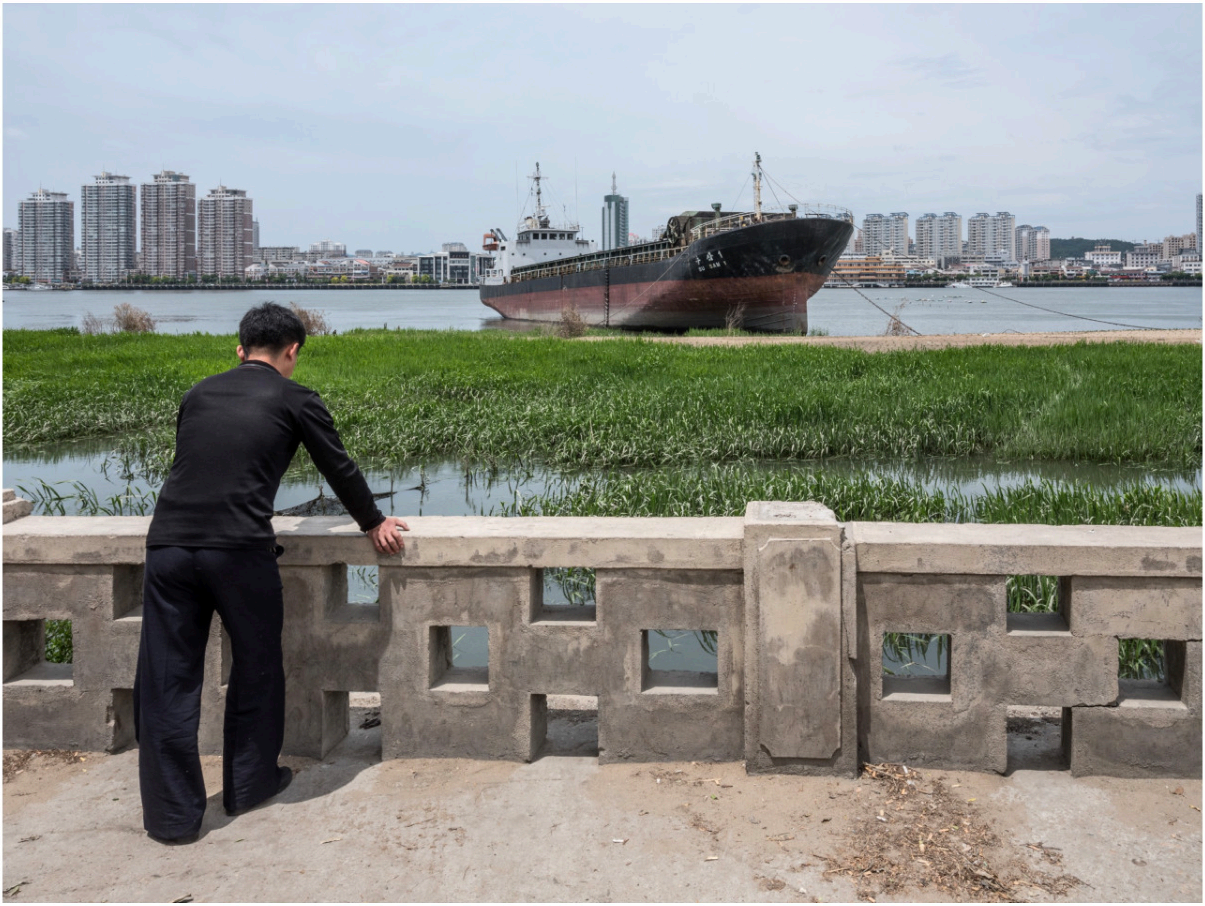
Carl De Keyzer

UNTIL APR 2

What is the North Korea tour like?

Grand Tour is just an idea. Like a fictitious travel guide. There was no 'tour'. Koryo told me there were about 250 places a foreigner was allowed to visit. Of course nobody ever did. I asked to visit all 250 places, even the most uninteresting ones or the most remote. Finally, I visited about 220 because some visits were cancelled at the last minute. On my last trip some were added, such as the 3 churches in Pyongyang.

> "I was not allowed to take even one step on my own"
>
> - Carl De Keyzer



Carl De Keyzer Korean freighter moored on the Amnok (Yalu) River at Sinuiju, North Pyong'an Province. Across the river is the Chinese city of Dandong, Liaoning Province. Sinuiju, DPR Korea. © *Carl De Keyzer | Magnum Photos*

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Carl De Keyzer Farm children transplant rice seedlings into a paddy field in the spring; Chonsam-ri Cooperative Farm, Kangwon Province. Rice transplanting is a major annual task and city dwellers are called upon (...)

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Carl De Keyzer Preparing for a barbeque in a stream bed; Mt. Myohyang, South Pyong'an Province. When traveling domestically and abroad, it is common for Koreans to travel with their work units, although travel wi (...)

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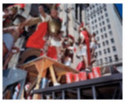

ARTS & CULTURE

Carl de Keyzer's Trinity

Carl De Keyzer

How controlled where the situations?

I was brought from A to B by two guides, mostly young women, in a minivan with a driver. When we arrived there was usually a speech by a local guide, to be translated, and after all that there was very little time to take pictures. A lot of places were 'no photography' as well, even the most propagandistic ones like the Army museum in Pyongyang.

I was not allowed to take even one step on my own. Never to leave the hotel. I tried to make as many images as I could, even the ones that were not allowed. The guides knew that at the end I had to submit all images anyway.

> "A lot of places were 'no photography' "
>
> - Carl De Keyzer

To my great surprise of the 400 images submitted only three were refused. Even the ones with soldiers, buildings with scaffolding, people without permission, the countryside, which were all nos from the beginning. I tried to use every single opportunity I got without upsetting the guides too much. After all I wanted to finish my 'tour'.

Carl De Keyzer A 3D photo exhibition on the DPRK by a

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Carl De Keyzer Worshipers pray at Bongsu Protestant

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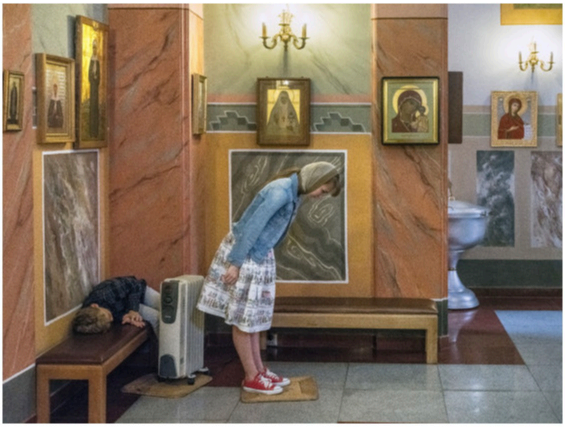
foreign photographer, with refreshments; Pyongyang Cultural Exhibition Center, Pyongyang. Pyongyang, DPR Korea. © *Carl De Keyzer | Magnum Photos*

Church, Pyongyang. European, American, and Canadian missionaries introduced Protestant Christianity to Korea in the 19th century, where it took root, especially (...)



Carl De Keyzer Foreign worshiper at the Church of the Life-Giving Trinity, Eastern Orthodox Church, Pyongyang. While the church is for foreigners living in Pyongyang, the priest is North Korean and studied at Mos (...)

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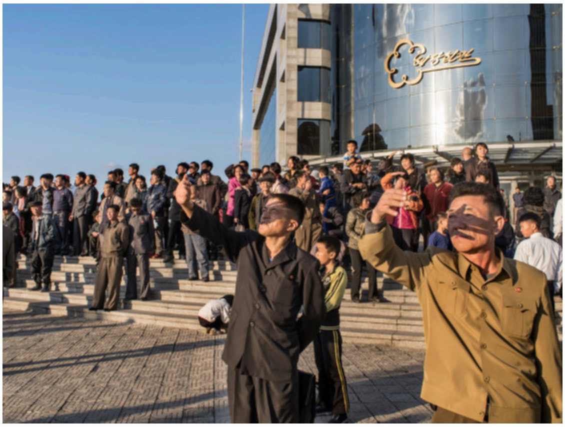

Carl De Keyzer Air force planes fly by, locals wait by the side of the street in Pyongyang to see the forces involved in a military parade. The sleek building in the background is a luxury restaurant and recreat (...)

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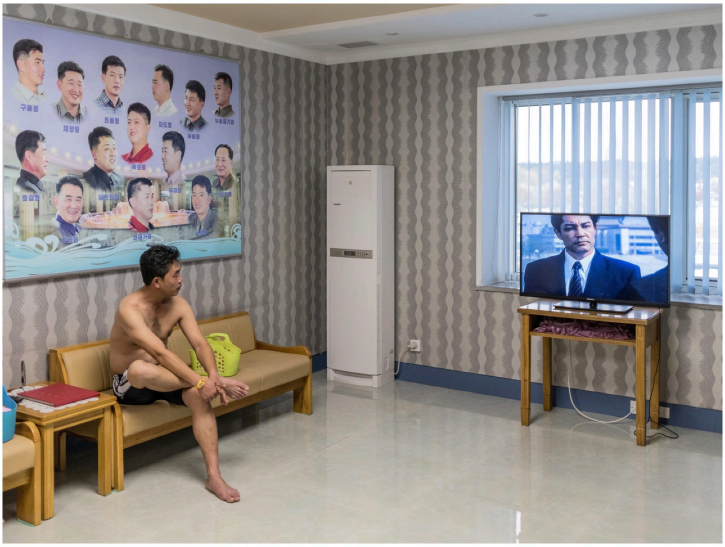
> "It looked very much like the life in the Soviet Union during the eighties"
>
> - Carl De Keyzer



Carl De Keyzer A swimmer watches a Korean movie on the screen; Munsu Waterpark, Pyongyang. The poster shows examples of men's haircuts. Pyongyang, DPR Korea. © *Carl De Keyzer | Magnum Photos*

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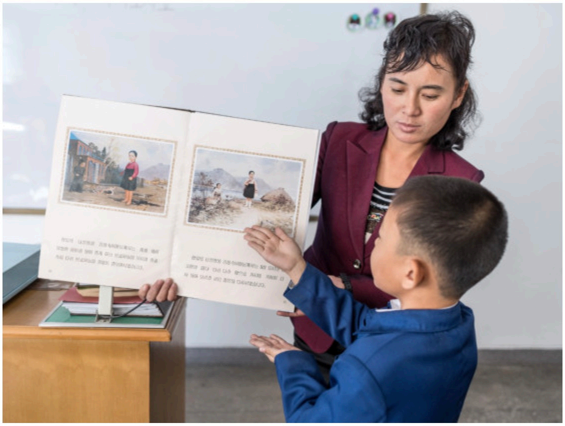
What impression did you get of what it might be like to live in North Korea?

It looked very much like the life in the Soviet Union during the eighties when I was there for my *Homo Sovieticus* book. Other than that I can't tell.



Carl De Keyzer A student reads stories from the revolutionary life of Mother Kim Jong Suk, wife of President Kim Il Sung and mother to General Kim Jong Il; Doksong Primary School, Pyongsong, South Pyong'an Provin (...)

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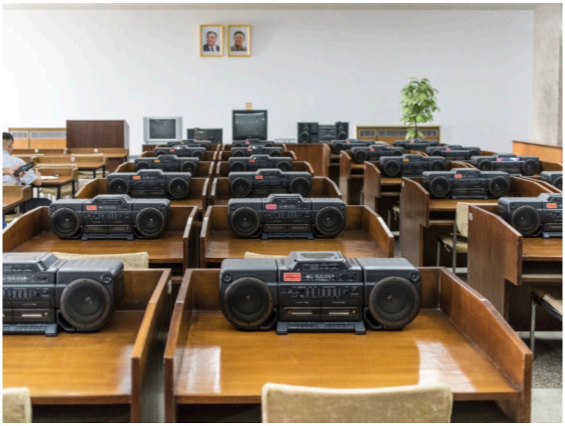

Carl De Keyzer Audio-visual room at the Grand People's Study House, Pyongyang. The small red placard on each audio set indicates that it was a gift from one of the Korean leaders to the facility. The room contain (...)

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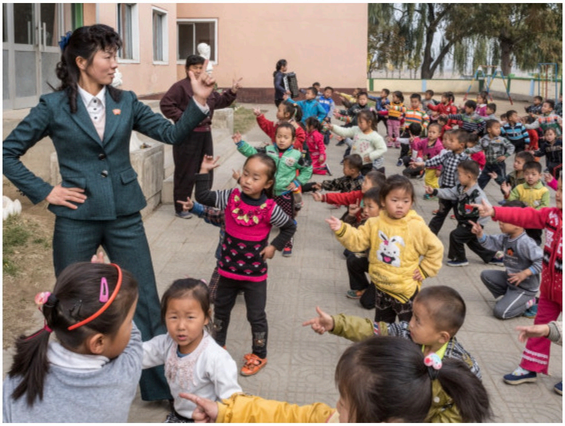

Carl De Keyzer Teachers instruct kindergarten students in dance; Chongsan-ri Cooperative Farm. Nampo, DPR Korea. © *Carl De Keyzer | Magnum Photos*

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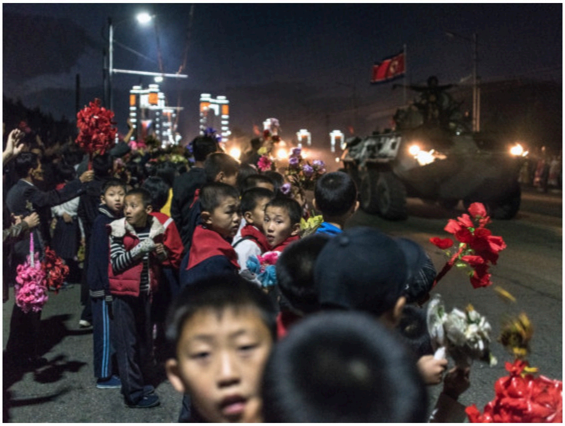

Carl De Keyzer A Korean People's Army armoured personnel carrier flying the DPRK national flag rolls by as children look on. Pyongyang, DPR Korea. © *Carl De Keyzer | Magnum Photos*

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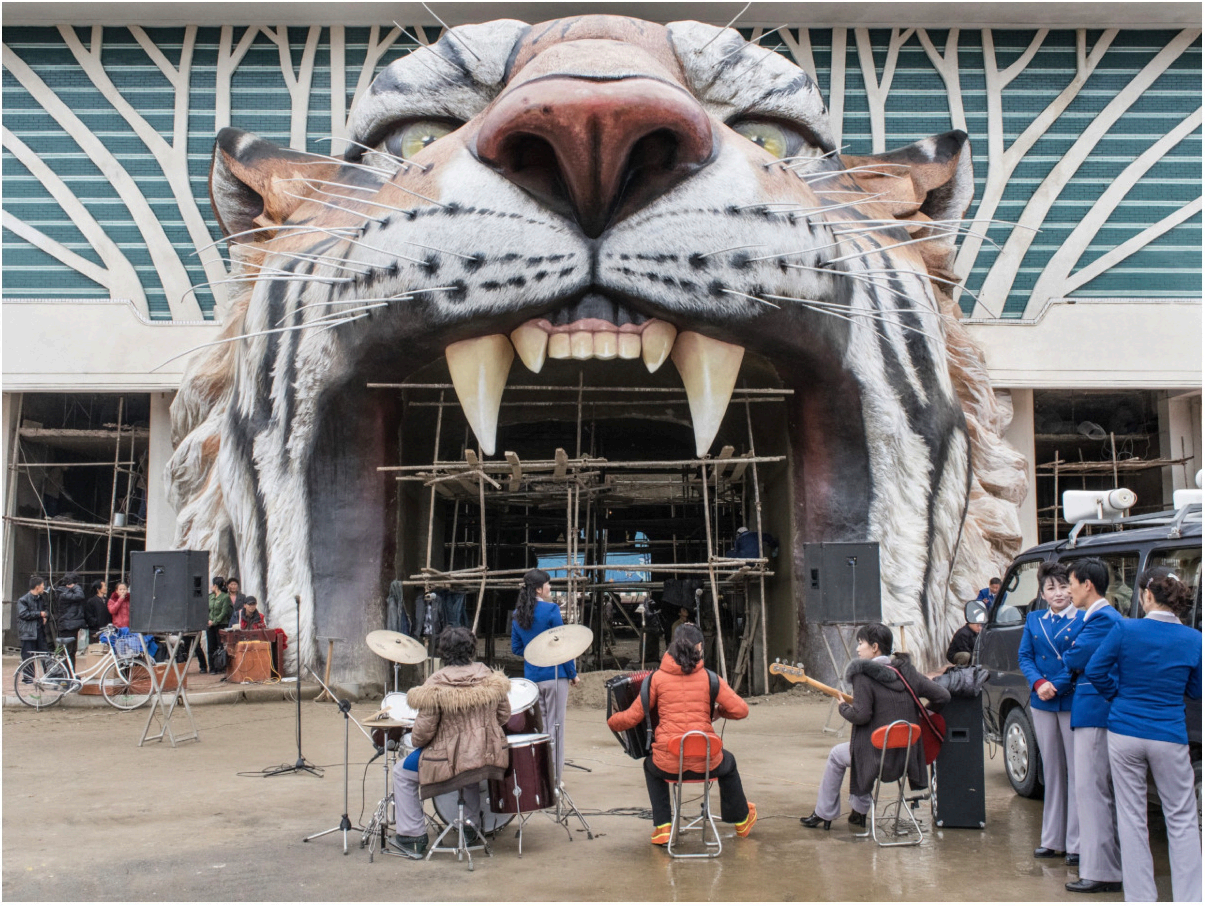
Do you think that it is even possible to build an accurate picture of ordinary life in North Korea or were your experiences too controlled to tell?

Nobody really knows, I guess. There was no contact with locals, only with the guides. You can get more information once you're outside the country. I was happy to visit the entire country, probably for the first time. More was not possible.



Carl De Keyzer A mobile band performs music in front of the entrance to the Pyongyang Zoo, while under renovation; Pyongyang. Small bands often visit construction and work sites to encourage people. Pyongyang, DP (...)

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Carl De Keyzer Warm-up room inside of the May Day Stadium, Pyongyang. The stadium was once home to the Arirang Mass Games, an enormous choreographed show, with over 100,000 participants depicting the revolutionar (...)

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Carl De Keyzer Father and son sit down for a rest in front of the April 25th House of Culture; Pyongyang. April 25th is the founding date of the Korean People's Army, and the enormous structure is used for import (...)

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NEWSROOM

North Korea

Hiroji Kubota

Was there anything you'd like to have seen but didn't?

There were places I couldn't visit or photograph that looked very interesting in my opinion, such as the 'International Friendship Museum,' where all the presents from all the heads of state are shown, or the Palace of the Sun were the mausolea or mausoleums of the former leaders are, and the Army Museum. I saw a lot of very interesting situations and places but was not allowed to photograph or we were too distant to photograph. We crossed a lot of villages where we couldn't stop or where I was not even allowed to shoot from the window.

> "To my great surprise of the 400 images submitted only three were refused"
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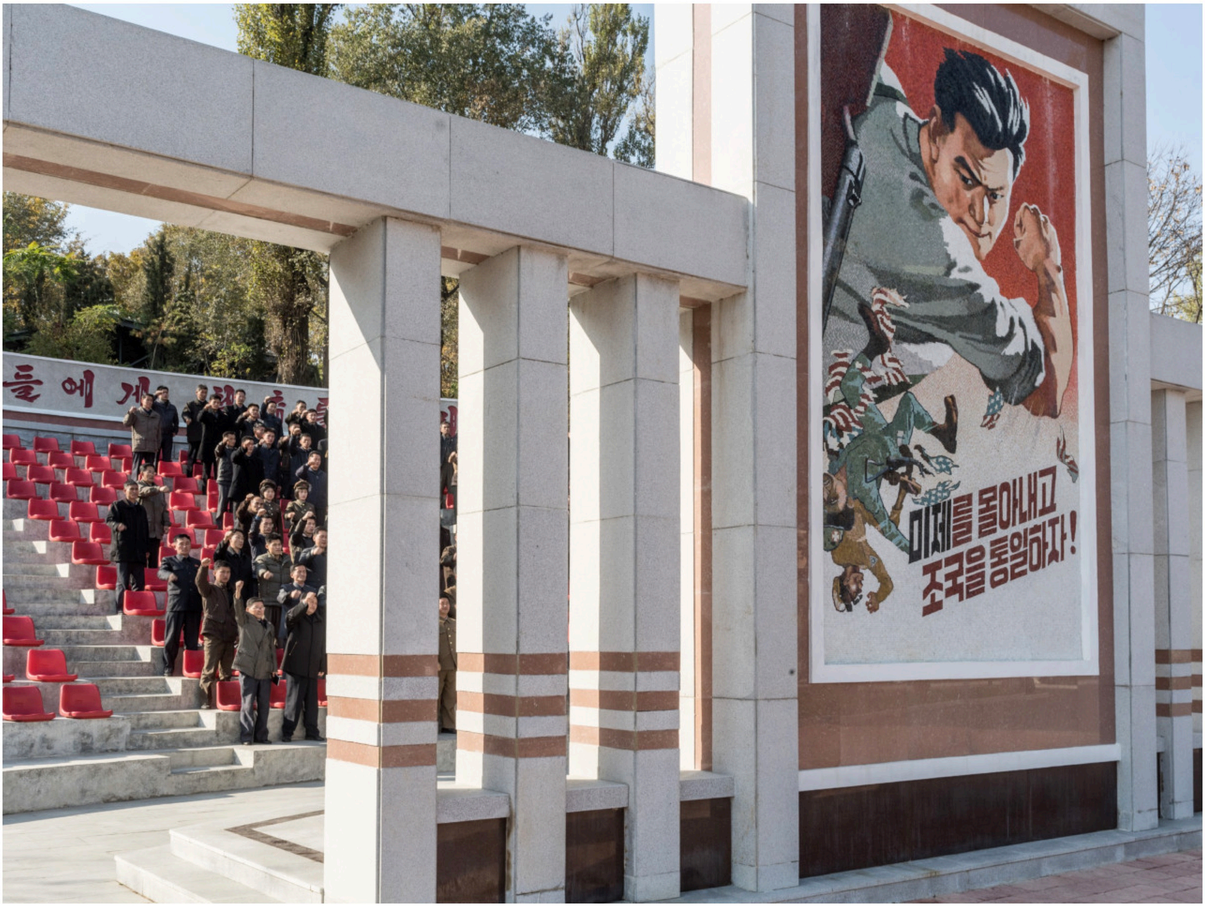
> - Carl De Keyzer



Carl De Keyzer "Let's drive out American Imperialism and Unite the Fatherland" reads a poster at the Sinchon US War Atrocities Museum; Sinchon, South Hwanghae Province. Political slogans are written in red, and b (...)

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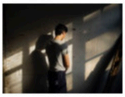


NEWSROOM

Escape From North Korea

Chien-Chi Chang

How did the picture you saw of North Korea compare with how you see the country portrayed in western media?

There is a lot of western propaganda as well. We like to see DPRK as the next big enemy, if only to sell papers and media. I could be wrong of course, there is a decent amount of manipulation going on with visitors but I would say that a lot of information is exaggerated.

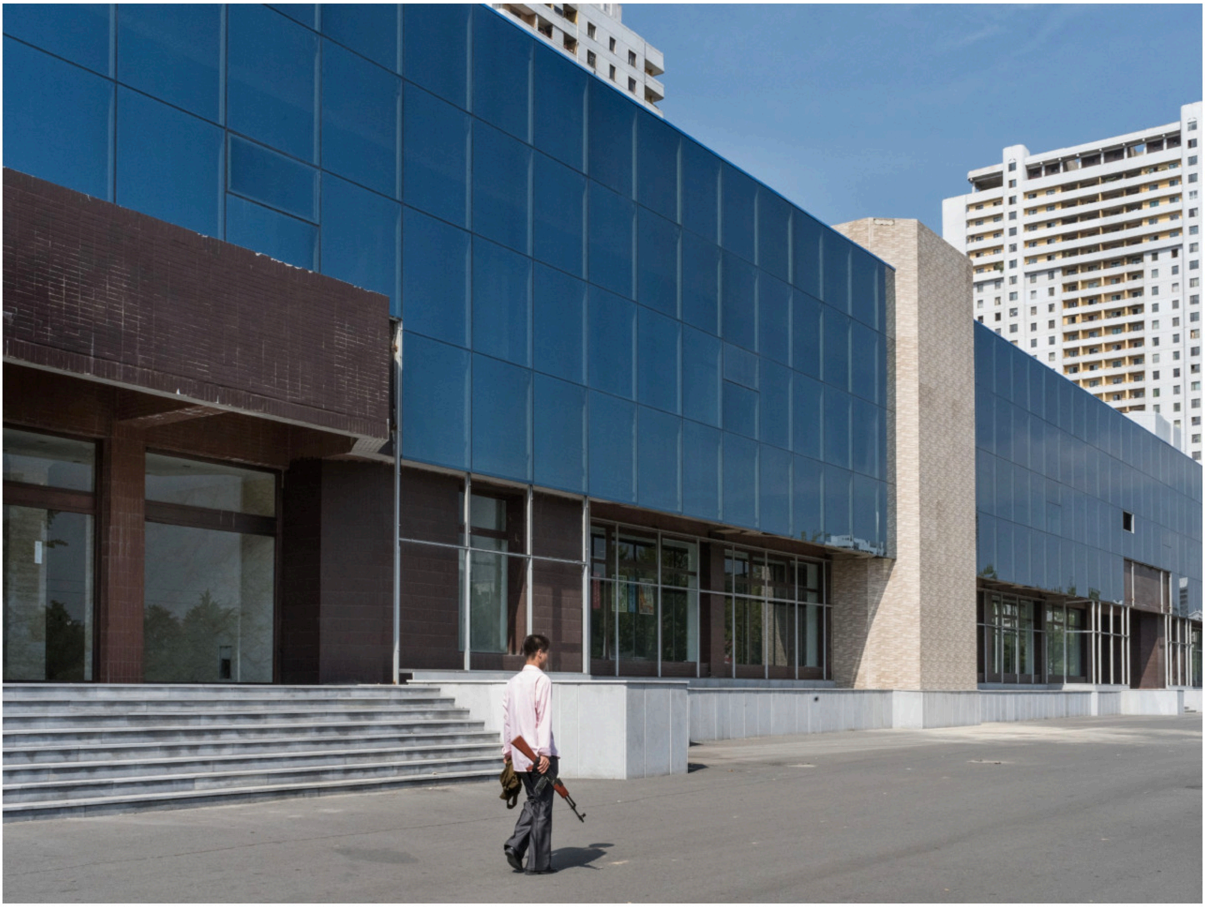
How does the design of the book echo the content within it?

The book is designed like a communist bible. The double leporello design is inspired by old Buddhist writings that are often presented in accordion books – Korea used to be Buddhist.

The paper I used in the book is the same type of paper used for Chinese advertising you receive in the mailbox – a reference to propaganda.

**Image captions were provided by Koryo Tours.*

Images from this body of work are on displace in In Ghent, Belgium until April 2d at Citadelpark (behind SMAK museum). More info here.
In Brussels at the Roberto Polo Gallery from March 23d – May 19th.
In Helmond / Holland at the Helmond Museum from June 18 – Sept 23.
Book publlished by Lannoo Belgium. Available here.



Carl De Keyzer Man carrying a mock-up AK-47 for a political rally; Kwangbok Street, Pyongyang. Political rallies are a regular part of life in the DPRK and involve citizens from across Korean society. Pyongyang, (...)

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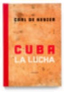

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Magnum Collection Poster: Moscow, Russia. 1988.

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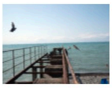
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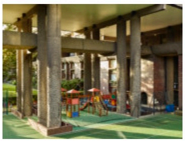
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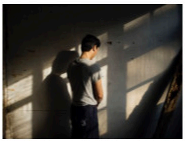
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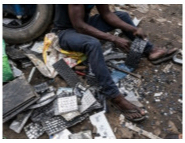
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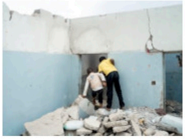
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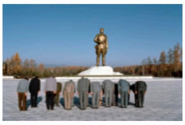
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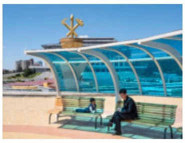
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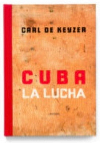

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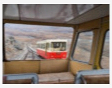
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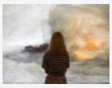
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