

San Francisco, November 16, 2011

My name is Cuny Janssen. I am 36 years old and mother of two girls, five and one, and stepmother of two young men of 19 and 22. I am an almost-step-grandmother. I married a photographer, an art historian and a gallerist, all of whom are one wonderful man. In my work as a photographer I concentrate on children and nature. In recent years adults and the domestic arena have gradually entered my viewfinder.

*\*I must explain the process of what happened. In the portraits I focussed a lot on the face and the gaze. Later I started to literally step back to get more information into the picture. At some point I started to separate that information from the portraits - they became separate pictures - to not lose focus on the child in the portrait. Finally, books became a great opportunity for me to bring everything together again.*

I have so far published six photobooks, all of which you can see here on this table. Immediately after I've finished you'll have a chance to look at my books as well as some by others I want to discuss here. I'm now working on the next one, featuring pictures from Yoshino, a sacred mountain in Japan.

Besides visiting San Francisco, this lecture is for me an opportunity to study a little bit more of what I can only call *hineininterpretierung*. It's pretty hard to translate this big German word into any other language so I'll try to describe what it means:

giving or putting a meaning into something after-the-event, interpreting an unintended meaning.

I first began to suspect the existence of such a phenomenon when I visited the South of India for six months in 2002 to take pictures of children of all the different castes.

*\*Going to India was the start of a big plan I had: to travel all over the world to take pictures of children so I could, may be after 20 years, see all of them together, to see the differences and similarities. You could say: to do my own 'Family of Man' (Edward Steichen).*

[Photos of children from India]

I made my first photobook, *India*, from these and other still portraits of children from a spread of backgrounds – from communities of Untouchable beggars to rich Brahman families. I wrote in that book about the universal similarity of people: 'Each individual is moved by their own vulnerability and ambivalence. Their emotions and desires fascinate me. I am convinced that all people are essentially the same, whether rich or poor, intelligent or simple. The amazing paradox, however, is that each person is also unique. Every person is formed by different life experiences and each creates his or her own mix of human generalities. Ultimately, it is phenomenal to discover the individual in each person – valuable, dignified and authentic.'

I intentionally gave no other information. The children there had serious daily, even hourly, circumstances they had to deal with – being an Untouchable, for example, or having a father who owns

half of the city of Chennai (Madras). I didn't give any specific information about any particular child because I knew from experience that that could distract the viewer from the kernel of what I had wanted to portray, simple human dignity and authenticity.

Without yet being aware of the concept of *hineininterpretierung* and having never even heard of that long German word, I wanted to avoid coloring the viewers' appreciation, or perception, of the subjects of the Indian portraits, though at the time I did not quite know why. I was struggling with a concept to do with a viewer's perception that did not clarify itself in my mind till I went to the new state of Macedonia for three months the following year to take pictures of children.

[Photos of children and nature from Macedonia]

In 2003 I went to Macedonia for three months; I wanted to photograph children who had been through the war. I was curious about whether their trauma would be visible in their faces. I should have guessed before I went that this would not be the case, but I simply wondered what I would see.

*\*This resulted in the book 'Macedonia, Portrait/Landscape' that shows children and their land and in which a very short discription of the conflict situation of the people in Macedonia is given. It includes the fact that the children in the book have various ethnical backgrounds.*

While taking the pictures I wasn't looking for bullet divots in the walls, but nor did I avoid them. In those months in the Balkans I spoke to many people, visited many refugee households from all the different ethnic groups who had so recently been killing each other and were still each others' enemies. I listened to every side of every story and I could only agree with all of them. *\*I didn't do this to be as complete as possible in my research, like an academic would, but it was pure interest and the only way for me to understand what was happening.*

My take on Balkan people, in general, is that they are passionate and given to indulging in nostalgia. I'll never forget sitting with new friends at a table one day, in a dark cafe, smoking, hearing their fiery complaints about just about everything that was wrong and unjust in their corner of Europe. With this in mind and closely examining my portraits of the children, sad, serious, angry, I realized that theirs was a natural state of being.

Then something happened. After looking at the book, most people said the same thing: "You can really see what the war has done to them." They wanted to see the war. The children in my pictures never laugh. They look natural, but concentrated. This doesn't mean they are unhappy. Still, people wanted to see the war and I could only wonder if they succeeded in doing so because they *knew*, which is *hineininterpretierung* or, if it was really *visible*.

I knew that those children had picked themselves up in their young lives and had the same daily emotions as everyone has. The look in their eyes could as well be part of the Balkan way of looking into the world; nostalgic, slightly heavy. Or another possibility: looking very seriously and almost angrily into a camera could simply mean that the child was in a bad mood that day.

And the landscapes became guilty too. Unsurprisingly people see it as land that had so recently been fought over, or, the nature as a silent witness of the war.

What connects these two in my opinion is that nature and children look to the future.

Nature, the landscape that surrounds people, is part of their identity, consciously or not. That was the simple idea I was working with; the land and it's people.

Please understand me. It was never my intention to mislead the viewer. I thought that I had only to stay as objective as possible, and just present a few facts, a context.

But the question remains. We will probably never know if the people seeing these photographs for the first time see the war simply because they know it happened, or, if the Balkan wars are really visible in the faces of these children. The work, the photos in the book have an existence all of their own and I am content about that; it was never my intention to prove or confirm anything.

After I made it, the series took on a life of it's own, open to anybody's interpretation.

*\*In Macedonia it was the first time for me to take pictures of landscapes while knowing what I was doing. That was thanks to the book 'Why People Photograph' written by my hero Robert Adams. His writings taught me to structure all my photographs in Silence, Time and Light. Portraits as well as landscapes.*

I would now like to show two series of photographs made by two other photographers and to ask you again, What do we really see? In both series we see the pictures differently when we know the context, though in different ways.

The portraits of dogs are intriguing; their silence and intensity never fail to grab my attention.

[Photos Charlotte Dumas]

A single shared experience unites all of these American working-dogs. They were all at the same place, at the same time, one decade ago, searching for survivors in the smoke and dust of the wreckage of the World Trade Center. That shared experience was the incentive for Charlotte Dumas to pursue this subject and to photograph the dogs.

For the last ten years Dumas has photographed European animals controlled or trained by people, such as working dogs, horses and tigers. She has photographed dogs with such

occupations as hunters, lifeguards and truffle seekers. She always manages to show the animals as individuals with their own character. In that sense her photographs are real portraits.

When I discovered the context of this particular series something happened, (again!) and this may well be an extreme example of *hineininterpretierung*.

*Knowing* that the dogs are united by the experience of searching for survivors at the 911 atrocity I *wanted* to see them as a symbol of the first decade of the 21st century, and in shame I have to admit that almost in panic, I projected all the problems right now in the world onto these poor dogs. Let me explain:

Lately I've been annoyed, like so many others, about what has happened worldwide in the last ten years, and is still going on. Among many other things I am worried about the cruel insanity of the economic crisis gripping both Europe and America today and the lack of consciousness about the decreasing resources. I feel I'm witness to a period of heaving change that in future history books will be remembered as a period when so much happened, or ended, or began.

My point is that it was never Charlotte's intention to make me tremble in my shoes, and if it is *hineininterpretierung* or not, it doesn't matter. Beside the beautiful series that it is, it has had the capacity to alert my consciousness.

I would like now to show you a series by Michael Wolf.

[Photos Michael Wolf]

Without knowing what I was looking at, I was truly shocked.

These are passengers on the Tokyo subway in a series by Michael Wolf called *Tokyo Compression*.

In many ways it isn't what it looks like and at the same time it is. It's not some dreadful gas-chamber. *Knowing* that these photographs were taken in the subway, a banal day-to-day situation, makes it hard to believe what I actually see. That they are alarming images loaded with beauty and silence makes them intriguing and fascinating to me. These too alert my consciousness.

*My Grandma Was A Turtle*

[Photos of Native American children]

In 2008 I took these pictures of American children who had indigenous ancestors and had been raised within Native American families. I was curious to see just how much of the children's Indian ancestry would be visible – another subject particularly prone to *hineininterpretierung*. I had not been interested in visiting a reservation, where I knew I would find Indians familiar from photobooks and the movies. It was important to me to find modern families who lived like other American families, in a house, with a job and a car. Because of that, the first title I thought of for this series was *No Feathers and No Horses*, simply to break with the common image-in-expectation held by many, including myself.

The title I finally came to was *My Grandma Was A Turtle*. It came from something I heard when visiting members of the Delaware tribe. They told me that there are various clans within the tribe that took their names from the Turtle, the Turkey and the Wolf. The tribe is matriarchal and the name of a clan indicates precisely in what way the children are related to their ancestors. The child's clan was simply that of his maternal grandmother, the mother of his mother. Above all, it was important to me that the children were being raised as Indians, so that they were conscious of exhibiting an Indian identity. So a tall blond boy named Scott Burks, with as little as thirty percent Indian blood, could still feel, and present himself, as an Indian. In the series you can see children who look like that, as well as others with dark hair and many more with familiar Native American features who are uncertain about whether their great-grandmother was a full-blood Indian. I found this fascinating and finding out just what would be visible in the appearance, features, demeanor and attitude of these children, relaxed in their own homes, encouraged me to visit them and to research their backgrounds. In the book about them the names of the children and the tribe each of them belong to are given. I have never published the name of any child before, out of respect for their privacy, but in this case I made an exception because combined with the *visible*, the title, acknowledging tribe and clans, provided context. As ever I photographed the nature that surrounds the children. In this case, however, the land, as in Macedonia, carried extra meaning because of its history. I wanted to look at the land without being disturbed by any ideas about who it belonged to in

history or who it belongs to now. I didn't want to demonstrate or prove anything, I just looked at what I could really see, as I did with the children. It is the future that creates a relationship between nature and children. I am above all attracted by the resourcefulness of life.

What will be visible in the photograph, how much information will be needed to provide a context, to create or give a meaning, which photographs might become a series, how to avoid repetition, how to ensure the picture is not didactic, knowing or guessing who will look at the photographs – all of these decisions influence the choices to be made before a picture is taken, during the taking of the pictures, while making selections and in the final presentation. Even after all these considerations and well-made choices, you never know what time will do and how the meaning of a series can be changed by *hineininterpretierung*, be it for the better or for the worse. I'll put my trust in posterity.

New work:

Yoshino Antology

S.O.S. Village Children