

PRESS RELEASE

## THEATRE OF REALITY ED VAN DER ELSKEN

2 September – 22 October 2022

Annet Gelink Gallery is proud to present *Theatre of Reality*, yet another exhibition by Ed van der Elsken (1925 – 1990) in which we highlight an important thread within Ed van der Elsken's oeuvre, one that has not previously been the subject of an exhibition.

*Theatre of Reality* focuses on how reality and imagination are intertwined in Van der Elsken's photography. He not only takes photographs of 'reality', which he encounters on the street, but also of imitated or created realities such as dioramas, wax figures, drawings, graffiti, advertising dolls and posters. By combining the reality of the moment with a text, sculpture or drawing in a single photograph, Van der Elsken's photographs can often be interpreted in multiple ways, making them more than just a record of an event. The photographs take on a layered meaning.



Ed van der Elsken, *Durban, South Africa*, 1959

By juxtaposing photographs in his books and confronting the painted or sculpted illusion of reality with an actual shot, a visual narrative emerges. He also applies this principle to his journalistic assignments, such as the (travel) reports he produces for magazines like *Revue* and *Avenue*, for which he often selects his photos, combines them, and provides them with personal texts. Hence the appropriate text on Ed's press card: 'International brotherhood of rather honest reporters'. Van der Elsken is not merely interested in 'the truth' but in the ambiguity, contradiction, and ambiguity of reality.

The title of this exhibition is taken from the text that Jan Vrijman wrote for *Once Upon a Time*, the book on which Van der Elsken worked during the last years of his life and which was published posthumously in 1991. Vrijman aptly describes how Ed, as a photographer and reporter, took the liberty of dealing freely with the reality he encountered and documented. Something that was unusual in engaged photography in those days, the sixties and seventies: "Ed opened the eyes of a new generation of photographers and taught them to look. But he also did more: he showed how a reporter can influence, change and dramatise reality. He grew into a visual artist, who mastered what he observed and so created his theatre of reality".

In the exhibition, we begin with what Van der Elsken calls his "poster series," photographs he took in Paris in the early 1950s. This series of photographs shows people on the streets of Paris in an often-humorous visual dialogue with monumentally pasted-up advertising posters. The series consists partly of staged photographs, but mostly of photographs of situations as he encounters them on the street. Such as a disabled war veteran playing the banjo lying in a wheelchair with a *bad guy's* gun pointed at him on an advertising or movie poster, creating a layered story in one image.

Van der Elsken also often uses texts that he encounters on the street; for example, he photographed his muse Vali Myers leaning against a wall in Paris. On the wall, chalked in white, is the text *Grève* while he leaves the letter 'G' of the French word *Grève* (strike) out of the picture and it now reads *Rêve* (dream). The text *Rêve* combined with the figure of Vali produces not only a melancholic but also a hopeful image. You often see this contradiction when Ed uses text in his photographs.

Van der Elsken does not only use illusion to give a humorous or more poetic representation of reality. Van der Elsken is also socially critical, sometimes explicit and sometimes more ambiguous. In the 1960s, this is noted in a review in *Die Zeit* of Van der Elsken's book *Sweet Life* (1966): "His main achievement is to have broadened the field of photo-reportage to include the things in which people's dreams find their expression. This spiritual dimension he finds in posters, popular art, waxworks and amusement-parks [...] Through this painterly approach his photographs adopt a stance in which all idyllic exotism disappears, they become political."

His use of technique plays a big role in the printing of his black and white photographs, by using strong contrasts he can dramatize the image. As in the famous photograph of the bench in Durban, Van der Elsken shows his anger at apartheid in the evocative way he prints this photograph. By using the technique of "dodge and burn" he creates a halo around the man's head, suggesting sanctity and superiority of the white African. Or as he himself said: "I had very specific wishes about the reproduction of my photographs, the image had to be dramatic, contrasting, aggressive, expressive. So was the content of the photographs."

Ed himself describes this approach as subjective photography, choosing a position between documentation and fiction. In doing so, he distances himself from the more common reportage and street photography of the time which is more oriented towards the 'objective'. Van der Elsken explores photographic imagery. A photograph is more than a representation or registration of the actual situation, but gives space to the imagination, sometimes producing almost cinematographic and narrative images, such as the photograph of the man on the sidewalk at 42nd Street in NY, Jackie Kennedy on tour in Cambodia, and of course the photograph of the begging veteran in a shopping street in Kyoto.

As Frits Gierstberg so beautifully describes in the catalog for the exhibition *Lust for Life* (2019): "Throughout his oeuvre, image and reality thus constantly run through each other – there is actually no difference, just as in people's minds there is no essential difference between the 'real world' and the world of their dreams, fears, and sorrows."

Ed van der Elsken's work has been featured in numerous major solo exhibitions at home and abroad in recent years. Such as *Feest*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (2020), *Lust for Life*, Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam (2019), *Through the Eyes of Jan de Bont*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (2018), *The Loving Camera*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2017), *La Vie Folie*, Jeu de Paume, Paris (2017).

He is highly acclaimed for his distinctive publications, the most memorable of which are: 'Love on the Left Bank' (1956), 'Bagara' (1957), 'Jazz' (1959), 'Sweet Life' (1966), 'Eye Love You' (1977), 'Hello, Amsterdam!' (1979) and 'Once Upon a Time' (1991).

Ed van der Elsken's work is part of the following collections, among others; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (NL), Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam (NL), Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Amsterdam (NL), Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (DK), Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris (FR), The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago (USA); Museum of Modern Art, Kawasaki (JP); MoMA, New York (USA); Fotomuseum The Hague (NL), Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid (ES)