

Personal Statement  
ENTREPRENEUR 4.0 AWARD 2014

## ERWIN OLAF BERLIN

Ever since the early 1980s, I have been visiting Berlin on a regular basis, sometimes to work there, often just as a tourist. As astonished I was in the 1980s that it was even possible to surround a city by a wall and a patch of no-man's-land, even to divide it into two parts, for the last couple of years I have been equally astonished how rapidly this city is shaping up as the center of Europe and that it now possesses appeal at a global level. It's a metropolis with an incredible amount of history and also characterized by a strong sense of democracy, a place where freedom, anarchy and hedonism are prevailing in large and divergent subcultures.

When the Netherlands bestowed the State Prize for Fine Arts, the "Johannes Vermeer Prijs", upon me in 2011 -- under the condition that I would invest 70% of the prize money in a project that would help my own progress as an artist -- I knew right away that I wanted to realize a photo project in this reanimated capital. As photographer/artist and as part-time filmmaker, I have been feeling the urge to create an own world ever since I first held a camera in my hands and started realizing my own projects. This finds an expression in the pictures which I create and which mirror my dreams, nightmares, anxieties, associative streams of thought, visions of the future and surreal observations -- sometimes even amounting to a blend of all of these. Thus it was perfectly obvious to me that working at different locations in Berlin would be the right choice for this project. This was a huge step to take, as I have been creating my own world in a studio now for several decades, only doing it in other surroundings every now and then. However, a city like Berlin with all its unique and historically significant places represented an incredibly appealing challenge. Furthermore, it was necessary to work on site, because otherwise I wouldn't have been able to convey my messages in a clear manner.

The philosophy behind my series "Berlin-2012" has several levels.

My original starting point was very simple. Berlin is a city in motion; the current political and economic situation in Europe more and more turns Berlin into the center of Europe. (Ever since the fall of Berlin Wall, the city has actually been located near the geographic center of Europe.) This has become visible and palpable over the last decade in particular. At some places in this city, it feels like you are standing in the eye of the cyclone; green, easygoing, historic areas alternate with newly blooming squares and streets while appealing new buildings arise next to architectural monstrosities. Everywhere visitors are looking directly into the eye of a rich and sometimes also dark past.

The second part of the past, the one that inspires me the most and which, I feel, we are currently reliving, although probably in a different form, is the interbellum, the period between the First and the Second World War. This was an age when the fine arts, architecture, literature but also the urban nightlife saw a major boom and when people were excessively dancing "on the edge of a volcano". Since I have noticed some rather obvious parallels between the interbellum period and our own time, I set the goal for my photo project in Berlin of using as starting points only places that already existed between 1918 and 1939. Only by using this approach, the similarities between our own time and the period between the two wars can be highlighted in the most formidable way.

In addition, I did research on the paintings (New Objectivity but also Surrealism), photography (by journal-

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ists, artists and dilettantes), fashion as well as interior and other forms of design of that age. This led to an incredible amount of information while I didn't even know at that moment how I could process all that knowledge in the service of a free photo project. After all, my intention was not to create a copy of the past but rather to use it exclusively as inspiration and stimulus for something new. When I started out, it seemed to be a burden that I had created my own world in recent years -- until I experienced a revelation in my deliberations during a long delay of a commercial flight.

Since the time I started making photos, and even before that, I have been captivated by the topic of power: the relationship between the "haves" and the "have-nots". How should people exert power that has been handed to them? Who does possess power? What consequences does power have for the individual's disposition? Why do we love those with power and despise them at the same time? It is virtually impossible to me to give any definite answers to these questions, even though they keep fascinating me. Aspects of the topic of power were dropped into my lap while the delay of the flight provided me with the opportunity to observe a large group of tourists: parents with children who were very bored because of the delay. The children were asking for ever more space -- and it was granted to them by the parents and by other people who were waiting. This observation led me to the realization how massively the power of children has increased over the last several decades, in particular in the countries of Western and Northern Europe. Space that is granted to them by their parents, and protection that is provided to them by the government. Youth has gained an irresistible attraction for many people. The world of fashion and advertisement is overpopulated by young models. One has to be careful in how to raise one's child these days, because both the state and the immediate surroundings are all too eager to hold parents accountable if they don't raise their children in accordance with accepted norms. Children are allowed to raise their voices more often, even loudly so. Educators are less and less giving orders and rather resort to discussing things. It goes without saying that these exaggerated observations are the fleeting and imprecise views of a dilettante observer, but they offered to me, in a very direct manner, a central topic of my Berlin series: "How would the world look like if the children would rule over the adults?"

I was now able to employ the visual language of the past, places, light, clothes, hair and make-up for constructing a possible future world in which the child is overly powerful and older people are subjected to the tempers of eight- to fourteen-year-olds. Sources of inspiration, like the works of Otto Dix and George Grosz mainly but also the sports and circus photography of the early 20th century, merged into this topic, making it possible for me to create my own world: the disillusioned circus figure dismissed by a teenager, the athlete reprimanded by the young master of the house and older women standing in the shadow of blossoming beauty. However, there is also the doubting lad who is ignoring the message of the Pierrot. Shortly before finishing this photo series, it became clear to me that these pictures would be ideally suited for a print technique that had already fascinated me for several years. In 2006, my manager and I were invited to a guided tour behind the scenes of the photography section of the Getty Museum in L.A. It turned out to be a very memorable afternoon; the conservator showed pictures to us that were in their most beautiful form. It was striking how conservation became ever more difficult the larger the respective

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artwork is. Large cold-storage rooms had to be built in order to keep prints from discoloring or even to forestall their complete disappearance.

However, when photographic works of the 19th century were presented to us afterwards, it became apparent that these so-called carbon prints have been preserved in an astounding quality. Carbon print refers to a black-and-white procedure that is based on a mixture of carbon or “lamp black”, gelatin and photosensitive material. The format of the prints was very modestly small but the quality was exceptional. Every detail was still immensely sharp and fulfilled the highest standard even after a whole century had passed.

This raises questions that I have been asking myself for the longest time as regards the usefulness of large-format prints in today’s photography: Does this merely serve to impress the viewer? Is the photographer’s goal to come close to what a painter can do? Is all of this just a ingenious trick to make more money? Etc. etc.

And because the question of preservation is such a sensitive issue in connection with modern art and photography, I took this as an opportunity to create prints of my latest works, those made in the context of my Berlin series, in the classic carbon print technique for the first time. The photos, the topic and the print technique matched each other seamlessly, which is why I couldn’t let this opportunity of initiating a dialog on this with my colleagues by creating and exhibiting carbon prints pass.

After a longer search, I finally found an expert who was ready to teach me the basics of the craftsmanship involved in carbon printing. It turned out to be a very work-intensive and time-consuming process, which I originally found to be very exhausting but which ultimately cast its spell over me. It is intriguing to understand that time almost wasn’t an issue at all in the 19th century when it came to the creation of durable photographic prints. Patience was the one thing that mattered. For me, as a photographer with an often frantic career, this proved to be a surprising turn of events. It became obvious that it was impossible to change the laws of carbon printing. Patience, calmness and precision are, apart from the surprisingly cheap materials, the necessary preconditions for creating the perfect carbon print. These are qualities that often meet disrespect in our own time. All of this was very thought-provoking to me as regards the profession of the photographer/artist, and I believe that in the future my photos will hugely benefit from combining a calm and traditional approach with topics relevant to our modern, dynamic and rapidly changing world. It is my personal vision that the traditional principles have to go along with the subject matter, and the immersion in this approach will undoubtedly remain visible in my work in years to come. Visual art and photography that is solely focused on subject matter and that uses the absence of form and the lack of craftsmanship as a stylistic device appears increasingly flat and insignificant to me.

Erwin Olaf, Amsterdam  
4. September 2013.