

serge
cohen

Photography never ends



Serge Cohen in Jerusalem, © Andréas Licht



Interview

Photographies

Who is

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Serge Cohen was interviewed by Andreas Licht the 3.3.97 in Paris

When did you make your first photographs ?

As a child on a journey with my parents. I had a very little camera. I was already putting much effort in making nice pictures of the monuments we visited.



Zephania Tshuma, Zimbabwe

When did you decide to be a photographer ?

I was seventeen years old. As a child I always wanted to become a painter. I've drawn and painted a lot. Then I thought, that it would be easier taking pictures. Afterwards I saw an exhibition of Jean-Loup Sieff. There, I felt like making pictures the way he did. That time there weren't as many exhibitions like today. Today you can see fifty exhibitions in Paris. In former times it was something special. And then was the movie "Blow up" by Antonioni. This influenced me, and many others my age.

How was your beginning as a photographer ?

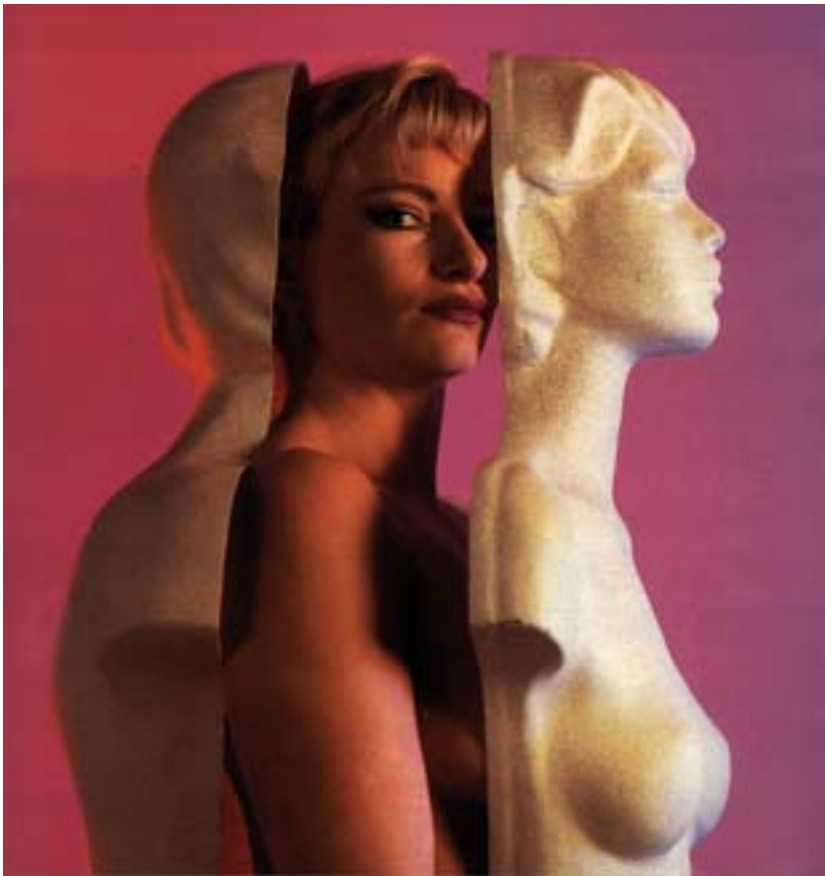
When I finished school I asked a photographer in our house if he needed an assistant. He said yes. At his place I got my first professional impressions: it lasted six months. Then he went to Brussels and I was missing the "big master". Afterwards I started to photograph on filmshoots for the agency SIPA. This worked out very well.

Today this wouldn't be that easy anymore. And then I made a big mistake. I didn't want to stay in Paris anymore and moved to my former german girlfriend's in Cologne. This was not a good idea. At the time Köln was something like the desert Gobi compared to Paris. I lost a lot of time because of that. I was nineteen.

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A long time passed before you went to FAZ magazine. What have you done in the meantime ?

I tried to survive with all kinds of jobs. But I kept on photographing and created a portfolio. I introduced myself to different editors. I went to Hamburg, I went to Paris. Sometimes they gave me little jobs. It really started for me while working for the FAZ-magazine. That was a coincidence. I went back to Paris. I had nothing in front of me. By accident I got to know some people of the FAZ-magazine. First I worked for a daily. Then I got to know the correspondent Wilfried Wiegand. Little by little I worked more and more. After that I managed to contact the magazine. They took three of my reports. One report about the `passages` of Paris, one about the island of Re, and one about the wine-cellars of Paris-Bercy. This was unbelievable for me. I put my last resources in these reports. I will never know, but maybe I would have given up if it hadn't worked out. I was thirty and didn't have many perspectives. I really thought about quitting and about trying to do something reasonable. I was very lucky. Today it would be much more complicated to start working with a magazine.

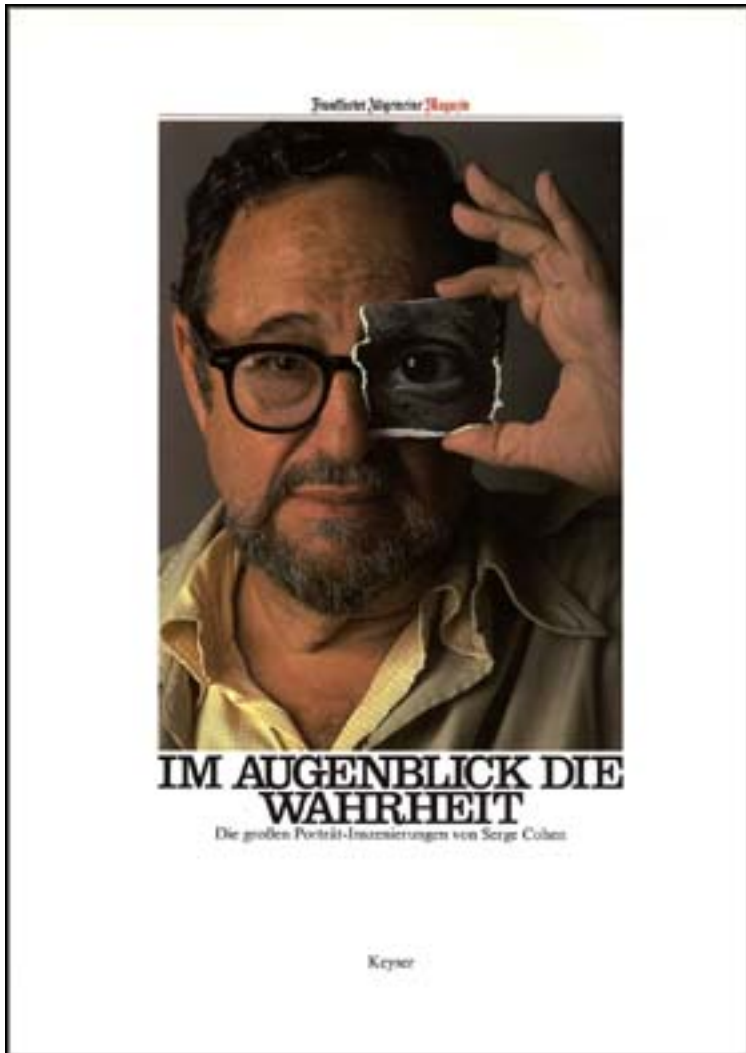


Els Deceukelier, actress , Belgium

Who hired you at the magazine ?

The art-director of the magazine was the big Willi Fleckhaus. The professor Fleckhaus. I've never tried it before. Then I met him. He took three reports. Afterward he kept on offering me jobs. He offered me my big chance. One year later he suddenly died. Then his assistant Hans-Georg Pospischil became art-director, and he too kept on giving me jobs. Afterward him and the main editor gave me an editorial as photographer. This was a wonderful time. Suddenly I had much more success then before. It all seemed like a dream to me.

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Cover, Arnold Newman (Photographer) with the eye from Picasso

You mainly got famous because of your portraits. Where do you get your ideas from ?

That's kind of gymnastics, that's permanent exercising. Photography never ends. I see many pictures. I know what I like. Sometimes it's a big headache that end up in nothing. Sometimes the ideas come by themselves, sometimes you've been thinking for days. That is comparable to songwriting. The first three songs work out well, the fifth time you have to suffer. Except if you are a genius, what I'm not. It's work though.

There is a book with portraits of yours called : "In an instant of truth". Why?

This is the instant of truth in the arena when the matador kills the bull. This was invented by the master editor of the FAZ-Magazine Thomas Schröder. You can imagine a lot of things out of this.

Does the person being photographed have an influence on the picture ?

Not much in the moment you photograph. It's astonishing that people allow me to photograph them the way I want to, even if I do wrong. You don't really get any help but neither are you detained. I would surely react in a different way being the model. For sure the model has an influence before, throughout his personality. This influences me. I always try to realise that the picture fits to the person and if possible to no one else.

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What can a good portrait show ?

There are two kinds of portraits. There is the snap-shot, like the portraits of Cartier-Bresson, where you get the feeling it happens by accident. It`s a passing moment, which anyway says a lot. I`m thinking of the portrait of Matisse or Giacometti. This is one way to do portraits. The other way is the way I`m doing it. It`s a lot of staging like with a sculpture on a pedestal. Both are o.k. Both can offer you nice results. You can even imagine, that a photographer can do both. I would like to do both. For the magazine I have to do more staging.

With whom did you like to work the most?

It`s always connected with stress and lack of time, because I always need more then one photo. I need at least three photos for the magazine. But the best were, beside the stress and all that, the ones with Richard Avedon, Samuel Fuller, Antonie Tapies and Serge Lutens. Because they helped me, they beared me. Avedon was special, very intelligent, very lovable

and helpful.

Do you have a favourite portrait ?

Avedon with his negative, Tabori with his burning book, Marie-Jo Lafontaine with the eye on the monitor, Jasper Johns with the hand. Maybe I only managed to do four good pictures in my life. Very good, this still has to be proved.



George Tabori, Theater Director



Jasper Johns



Richard Avedon

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Anything happened to you while travelling ?

Usually never while travelling. With a portrait this can happen more easily. For example that it doesn't take place. That happens sometimes. For example that the person doesn't show up at all. Once I was in Munich for Sean Connery and he never came.

I was in the same Hotel with him and he never came. But yes once something happened to me. In Spain. My suitcase was stolen at the airport and I had to do the report. A whole trip for nothing, I had to come back

Whom do you still want to photograph ?

There aren't many. With lots of them it didn't work out though. I would have liked to photograph Michel Carné, but unfortunately he died six months before..

Are there any photographers you admire ?

For sure. Lots' of them. Leibnowitz for instance, Wilfried Bauer. That are the two directions. Portraits and travelling. But there are so many. Penn, Avedon, Guy Bourdin. There are astonishingly many photos and photographers. I see many good pictures. A frightening amount, especially if you know how difficult it is and how much support you get. Newton. Karsh. Of course Cartier-Bresson, Doisneau.



Jean Marais

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Would you still become a photographer ?

Impossible. What can I answer ? Maybe not ? It's really too difficult.

What would you suggest a young person who wants to become a photographer ?

I would tell him how it was with me and that I only managed it by miracle. And then he would have to make his mind up. I would tell him that there are only few chances to survive a lifetime. If you aren't really rich you can't really escape from it. If it works out it's lots of fun. It is a dangerous thing to do. Talking about existence it's dangerous. He will suffer. In this profession one is forced to see clearly and more deeply if you want it or not. That can have consequences, good ones or bad ones.



Cover FAZ-Magazin Issue 579 4/91
Marie-Jo Lafontaine, Artist, Belgium

And I also think that if somebody really wants this, needs it, has the heart and the urge to watch sharply and deeply he won't escape from it. If he'll not be a photographer, he will do something appropriate.

It's something you are born with. You choose photography as a profession because you want to learn, because you want everyday to be filled with a journey, a human, an idea, something that all the others don't see. There is not only photography, writing, or painting. One wants to learn something. There are other reasons. Holding on the time. You do this, it's a dangerous game.

Serge, thank's a lot