

This text is a 'Question and Answer' between Anouk Kruithof and Joerg Colberg on the occasion of FOAM magazine #20 where the project Becoming Blue was published in (September 2009)

Q: "Becoming Blue" is what one could call conceptual portraiture. Could you explain the ideas behind it?

A: Becoming Blue is a photography project which I was working on over two and a half years between 2006 and 2008. My observations, ranging from everyday life in contemporary Western society to the behaviour of people, together with my personal experiences created the need to start with Becoming Blue. My interest lies especially in the question: "What impact has 'stress' on the emotional and mental condition of the people?" I started inviting mostly unknown people, which I selected on their behaviour, appearance, body posture, and sensitivity. I let them wear blue clothing and asked them to give themselves over in limbo in front of the blue studio background. I chose the colour blue, because blue, among others, stands for the infinite, the sky, the calm and meditative. These meanings are in great contrast with the unpleasant, unexpected actions that I either carried out during the sessions or asked the subjects to carry out themselves. My aim was to use this combination of action and reaction in a fictitious and slightly ironical manner to "inject" stress and fear on the portrayed. The actions produced many surprising and confrontational situations between the portrayed and myself. Because of the isolation of a person by the blue clothing and the blue background, in addition to the impact that the colour has, in the images you focus on the emotional reaction of the portrayed. And that is what I mainly want to communicate about.

Q: It seems as if the process of portraiture, of confronting a person to take her or his portrait, is something you want to control as much as possible as the photographer?

A: The portraits are often made by a remote control, so I myself was not aware of the so-called "photo moment". In my work, the coincidence is always an important factor, because the coincidence ensures openness in my images.

The final visual images contain insignificant intermediate moments, which are the outcome of the action/reaction situations. They are the in-between moments, which only the medium photography is capable of capturing, and that's what I am very fascinated by.

At all times, I want my images to recall a response and to evoke questions. When I selected the photographs, I consciously chose the unguarded moments, which show a mental short circuit, an unconscious or almost meditative 'state of mind'. Becoming Blue represents the emotional and psychological condition, in which man is jammed. The three claustrophobic still life's of the blue spaces, which are 'woven' between the portraits series (in the book and the exhibition), reinforce this feeling of entrapment.

Q: At the end of the day, you are at the "mercy" of the viewer, though, and you can only influence what she or he might think about the portrait to a certain extent. Isn't there the danger that what you had in mind might not work? Were you ever concerned about that?

A: No, I was not concerned about that, because the way people interpret my work I cannot control,

since every viewer is looking at art with his own background, memories, feelings, thoughts and even prejudices. When I am making my work, I do not worry about how my final images might be working out on the public. I think it is important to focus on making the photographs and to follow my intuition in the process. Because I am using chance during the process and I also show all kinds of traces of my 'actions' in the final images, my work is interpretable in many different ways and perhaps even not understandable for some viewers. But the goal is also not to please everybody with my work. My goal is not to tell understandable stories. My goal is try to move the spectators' feelings and thoughts, and therefore my work has to be open to questions. I have had very extreme (almost black and white) reactions to *Becoming Blue*: Either spectators find it incomprehensible and frightening, or they are extremely touched by the emotional impact of the project.

Q: Of course, I'd be curious about your artistic/photographic influences. Which artists have shaped you?

A: Before I started the project *Becoming Blue* I was already questioning the long tradition of portraiture, because - amongst other things - I started photographing people at the beginning of art school in 2000. The photos of *Becoming Blue* are not primarily a reaction to portrait photographs, which are trying to catch the vulnerability of one's personality. I am aware of what I am doing with the portrayed. I actually make them very vulnerable in their positions because they agree to give themselves over to limbo. But my relation with the subjects is open and fair from the beginning until the end. I don't see my images as photographic portraits of people, which concern the individuality of a person. The anonymous sitters, portrayed with their physical and emotional expression, give form to my project as some kind of 'living sculptures'.

Therefore, I have numbered all the 41 persons I portrayed for this project, and the titles of the images are: "Untitled" (with a subtitle: "the numbers in order of time") My images don't have any names, which show the individuality of a person.

Among many others artists, which I appreciate, in this interview concerning my project *Becoming Blue* I like to talk about the filmmaker Ulrich Steidl (*Import/Export 2007*, *Hundstage 2001*) because he also works with unknown people, whom he selects from everyday life. The persons he works with are not actors, the people I work with in my 'staged' photographs are neither. He also works a lot with chance. To me it is amazing to see the moments in the film where it 'flows' out of his control. The tragedy-comedy aspect in his films is also something I found interesting. It relates the said and bad things in life - something I find important as well.