



ED VAN DER ELSKEN

CAMERA IN LOVE

films by van der Elsken. We also extend our thanks to the NOS/NTR for permission to show the documentary by Jan Bosdriesz, and to the private collectors in Amsterdam and Edam who have also made some unique material available for the exhibition.

The staff of the Stedelijk Museum and Jeu de Paume have worked hard to ensure the best possible presentation of Ed van der Elsken's work. We would like to thank Hripsimé Visser, curator of photography at the Stedelijk and of this exhibition, and Manique Hendriks, trainee curator at the Stedelijk, who have devoted so much enthusiasm and knowledge to this project, in collaboration with Jeu de Paume. We also thank the teams at our museums who have helped produce this exhibition. The publication would not have been possible without the inspiring and informative contributions of our guest authors. The extraordinary images have been presented to their best advantage thanks to the outstanding graphic design by Mevis & Van Deursen.

The Stedelijk Museum would also like to thank the foundation Paradox for collaborating on the presentation of the audiovisual *Tokyo Symphony* and the former Leiden University students Tamara Berghmans, Sophie Crabbé, Daphne Hogeweg and Frank Ortmanns for their research on Ed van der Elsken's books. We are particularly grateful to Amsterdam City Council and the foundations, donors and friends for their vital support, and to the museum's sponsors for their generous contributions. We also thank the Supervisory Board for their continuous support and trust.

The Jeu de Paume remains indebted to its funders whose invaluable and ongoing support allows us to continue making such important exhibitions: the French Ministry of Culture and Communication, and Neuflyze OBC and the Manufacture Jaeger-LeCoultre in Paris, its principal partners.

Beatrix Ruf
Director, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

Marta Gili
Director, Jeu de Paume, Paris

Biography

1925 Ed van der Elsken is born in Amsterdam on 10 March 1925. A year later his mother Huberta Johanna Gijsberdina Pardoel and father Eduard van der Elsken and their three children move to Betondorp, a newly built garden suburb on the outskirts of Amsterdam. It is here that Ed van der Elsken spends his youth.



Childhood photo of Ed van der Elsken, c. 1930

1942 The Netherlands is invaded by the German army on 10 May 1940. In January 1942 all Dutch men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three are ordered to report to the Nederlandsche Arbeidsdienst (Dutch Labour Service) for unarmed military service. Van der Elsken is also called up, but he succeeds in having himself declared unfit for service by adding a substance to his urine sample that makes him appear to be diabetic.

1943 Van der Elsken decides to become a sculptor and attends the Institute for Applied Art on Gabriel Metsustraat in Amsterdam. However, under a renewed threat of labour conscription, he is forced to go into hiding in Bergeijk, Noord Brabant. When the southern Netherlands is liberated by the allies in 1944 he goes to work as an interpreter at Eindhoven airfield. Shortly afterwards he volunteers for the mine clearance service and goes to Belgium where he is trained to dismantle explosives.

1944 During the last winter of the occupation the northern Netherlands suffers huge shortages of food and fuel. Twenty thousand people die as a result.

A group of photographers, including Emmy Andriess, Cas Oorthuys, Carel Blazer and Ad Windig, document the impact of the "hunger winter" and the occupation in Amsterdam. They are referred to as De Ondergedoken Camera (The Underground Camera). The same group establishes the photography section of the Gebonden Kunsten federatie (Association of Practitioners of the Applied Arts, or GKf) in 1945.

1945–47 After van der Elsken is discharged from the army he moves back to his parents' home in Amsterdam. He is exempted from military service because of his war volunteer status.

Weegee's (1899–1968) Naked City (1945) is published and features black-and-white photographs of the dark side of New York – accidents, murders, arrests, house fires – in the 1930s and 1940s. The book makes a great impression on van der Elsken.

Willem Sandberg is appointed director of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1945. He manages to raise the museum's profile with his experimental and progressive policies. Sandberg will later buy work from Ed van der Elsken for the museum's collection and award him several commissions.



Sandberg, l'homme qui dit oui, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1964

Van der Elsken wants to become a projectionist and enrolls at the evening trade school, Avondambachtsschool, in Amsterdam in order to obtain an electrician's qualification. He changes his mind, however, and decides to become a photographer. He takes a correspondence course at the Fotovakschool college of photography in The Hague but fails the exam. Ed van der Elsken also works at De Arbeiderspers publishing house, where as a technical proofreader he is responsible for checking galleys.

Van der Elsken moves to Admiralengracht in Amsterdam. He takes photographs in the streets using his father's 9x12-inch plate camera. In order to save up for his own Rolleicord camera he works for village photographer Jan Brouwer in Wormerveer, assists photographer Louis van Beurden, and works for a time at Nico Zomer's studio.

Photographic agency Magnum Photos is established in Paris by Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, George Rodger and David Seymour. This is the first agency where photographers retain ownership of their work.

1949 Van der Elsken joins the professional association GKf, which brings him into contact with Emmy Andriess, Ad Windig and Paul Huf. He is given accommodation at Ad Windig's home in return for working in the darkroom. Windig introduces him to journalist and later cinematographer Jan Vrijman (1925–1997), with whom he will later frequently collaborate. At this time he is given a few commissions, including photographing ships and cranes for the Royal Dutch Shipowners Association.

1950 Van der Elsken moves to Oudezijds Achterburgwal 64 in Amsterdam. He becomes depressed after his engagement to a fellow student is broken off. He decides to go to Paris, like many other artists, writers and poets who left for the French capital after the war, including painter Karel Appel and writers Rudy Kousbroek, Remco Campert and Simon Vinkenoog, whom van der Elsken meets in the city.



Simon Vinkenoog and Karel Appel, 1953

Kryn Taconis, the Magnum and GKI photographer, provides van der Elsken with a letter of introduction to Pierre Gassmann, director of the Pictorial Service, Magnum's photo laboratory. He is given a job there and rents a room on Rue des Martyrs in Montmartre. At the lab van der Elsken meets Hungarian photographer Áta Kandó (b. 1913), and they start a relationship. After a few months he resigns and begins photographing in the streets again. He moves to the Left Bank and makes contact with a group of young bohemians who kill their time on the streets and in the bars and cafés of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

Some of them are involved in the Lettrist International, the group of writers, poets and philosophers led by Guy Debord. In his memoirs, which he produces in collaboration with Asger Jorn, Debord uses photos by van der Elsken as material for collages.

1953 Van der Elsken comes into contact with Edward Steichen, curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Steichen selects eighteen photos by van der Elsken for the exhibition Postwar European Photography (1953) and one for the exhibition The Family of Man (1955). On Steichen's advice, van der Elsken starts work on a book of photos of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.



Edward Steichen and Ata Kandó, Paris, 1953

The Netherlands is hit by a severe storm on the night of 31 January. Van der Elsken is one of the photographers who takes pictures of the great flood of 1953 for the photobook De ramp (The Disaster), published by De Bezige Bij.

1954 Ata Kandó and Ed van der Elsken marry in Sèvres, just outside Paris, on 26 June.

Love on the Left Bank is published in four parts in the British magazine Picture Post and in the Dutch magazine Wereldkroniek.



Self-portrait on the street with Vali Myers, Paris, 1952

1955 Ed van der Elsken moves to Achtergracht 39 in Amsterdam, along with Ata Kandó and her three children. Karel Appel paints the walls of the children's bedrooms.



Karel Appel and one of Ata Kandó's daughters in the children's room on Achtergracht, Amsterdam, 1955

Van der Elsken's first solo exhibition, featuring sixty-two of his photographs, takes place at the Art Institute of Chicago from 10 May to 1 July. It then moves to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

Youth culture is in the ascendant. Many adolescents no longer feel bound by conventional norms. They hang out in the streets, listen to jazz, dance to rock 'n' roll and watch American films. In Germany they are often referred to as *Halbstarcken* (literally "half-strongs", the German equivalent of beatniks). In the Netherlands, Jan Vrijman and van der Elsken decide to document this new youth culture. Their article "De nozems van de Nieuwendijk" in the magazine Vrij Nederland introduces the word *nozem* (used to denote a Dutch Teddy boy) to the Netherlands. They are the first example of what will later be called youth culture, assertive youngsters who hang around in the streets, often dressed in leather jackets or suit jackets, their hair greased into a quiff. Thanks to a television broadcast on his Saint-Germain-des-Prés photographs, van der Elsken meets television director Leen Timp and becomes interested in film. Shortly afterwards he makes his first 16mm film with Jan Vrijman, about CERN (Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire) in Geneva.



Three brothers outside their pub on Zeedijk, Amsterdam, 1958

Ed van der Elsken and Ata Kandó divorce on 16 September.

Johan van der Keuken's Wij zijn 17 (We Are 17, 1955) is published, a photobook featuring portraits of hesitant, insecure adolescents. Van der Elsken meets the young photographer shortly beforehand and is very taken with his work.

1956 Van der Elsken's first solo exhibition in the Netherlands, in the company canteen at Steendrukkerij De Jong & Co in Hilversum, is inaugurated by Jan Vrijman. It mainly includes work from his Paris period.

Van der Elsken moves to Koningsstraat 5, close to Nieuwmarkt in Amsterdam.

Love on the Left Bank is published in Dutch, English and German.

National television is launched in the Netherlands on 2 October 1951. Broadcasting company VARA transmits a programme about Love on the Left Bank.



First television broadcast on Love on the Left Bank, 1 March 1955, Venster, AVRO

The Family of Man opens at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. The exhibition, curated by Edward Steichen and previously seen at the MoMA in New York, consists of some 500 photographs by 273 photographers from sixty-eight different countries.

Elvis Presley has his first number one hit with "Heartbreak Hotel". His famous slicked-back hair and quiff are sported by young rock 'n' roll fans everywhere now, not just nozems. Ed van der Elsken makes grateful use of the new fashion as a subject for his photographs.

The Hungarian uprising begins on 23 October. Soviet tanks roll into Budapest to suppress the protests. Van der Elsken photographs the Dutch protests against the Soviet invasion.



Demonstration against the Soviet invasion of Hungary, Amsterdam, 1956

In December van der Elsken leaves for the Oubangui-Chari region, later Central Africa, on the border between Congo and French Equatorial Africa, to take photographs on commission for publishers De Bezige Bij.



Ed in Oubangui-Chari, 1957



Ed van der Elsken at the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, mid- to late 1950s. Photo: Cas Oorthuys

1957 Van der Elsken stays in Oubangui-Chari until March.

Ed van der Elsken and Gerda van der Veen marry on 25 September.

The Dutch CoBrA painter Karel Appel travels regularly to New York from 1957 onwards, producing paintings inspired by jazz, the "barbarian anti-music" as he himself calls it. He also makes his own *musique barbare*, experimenting in a sound studio. Appel paints portraits of jazz musicians Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and John Coltrane. Ed van der Elsken and Jan Vrijman will make a film about Karel Appel in the early 1960s.

1958 Van der Elsken's Bagara, a photobook chronicling his trip through Central Africa, is published in German, Afrikaans, French and English.

Van der Elsken receives the Africa Explorer's Award for the best book on Africa.

The Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam starts a photography collection. In its first round of purchases, the museum acquires a selection of van der Elsken's photographs from Love on the Left Bank and the series on French Equatorial Africa.

1959 Ed van der Elsken publishes Jazz, a photo-book based on reportages made between 1955 and 1959 at large jazz concerts in the Netherlands, particularly the night-time concerts at Amsterdam's Concertgebouw.



Ed in Mexico, 1960. Photo: Gerda van der Veen

Ed van der Elsken and Gerda van der Veen leave for a fourteen-month round-the-world trip. They travel to West and South Africa, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, Mexico and the United States. To pay for the trip, in addition to photo-reportages van der Elsken makes travel-ogues for television and a commissioned film on Dutch shipping companies entitled Van varen (About Sailing), which he completes in 1961.



Zengakuren communist student demonstration, Tokyo, 1959

1960 Members of Zengakuren, a communist/anarchist student organization, demonstrate in Japan in the early 1960s. They protest among other things against the American occupation of Vietnam. Van der Elsken photographs their demonstrations in Japan.

Ed van der Elsken and Gerda van der Veen return from their world trip; their ship docks in Rotterdam.



Home again after their round-the-world trip, Amsterdam, 1960

1961 Disappointed at his failure to get the book about his global travels published, van der Elsken turns his back on photography

14 Ed van der Elsken

and starts making more films. In 1961 he makes De Appel-iep (The Appel Elm), a short film about a tree stump Karel Appel painted in his studio and that is placed in Amsterdam's Vondelpark, and Karel Appel, componist (Karel Appel, Composer).



Museum visitors viewing La veuve du coureur (The Rider's Widow) by Robert Müller at Bewogen beweging, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1961

On his own initiative he makes the film Bewogen beweging (Moving Motion) featuring the innovative exhibition of kinetic art at the Stedelijk Museum, including work by Jean Tinguely. He also makes a series of photographs of the exhibition.

Tinelou, Ed and Gerda's first child, is born on 12 June. The name Tinelou is based on Tinguely, whom Gerda greatly admires. Van der Elsken remains in close contact with Tinguely.



Postcard from Jean Tinguely, 1962-63

1962 Van der Elsken and instrument maker Henk Meinema experiment with film equipment, developing new techniques for recording synchronous sound with a 16mm camera, in accordance with the principles of *cinéma-vérité*.



Portrait of Ed van der Elsken, 1964. Photo: Eikoh Hosoe

Willem Sandberg, director of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, asks van der Elsken to film the Dylaby exhibition, which features a "dynamic labyrinth" designed by artists, including Daniel Spoerri, Robert Rauschenberg, Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely, through which visitors must navigate.



Entrance to Stedelijk Museum featuring work by Jean Tinguely during the Bewogen beweging exhibition, 1961

- 1963 Van der Elsken makes a film for television about Gerda's pregnancy and the birth of their son Daan Dorus on 8 May entitled Welkom in het leven, lieve kleine (Welcome to Life, Little One; approx. 36 min., broadcast on 15 January 1964).
- 1964 Van der Elsken spends a lot of his time filming; he also works as a reporter for the Algemeen Handelsblad newspaper.
- 1965–69 Amsterdam begins to feel the revolutionary atmosphere of the 1960s. The Provo movement is established in May 1965. The movement organizes happenings and engages in provocative actions against the established order. Van der Elsken is on

hand to record the unrest in the city. In 1966, for example, he photographs the riots during the wedding of Princess Beatrix and Claus von Amsberg of Germany, and the construction workers' riots in the city centre. In 1969 he photographs the student occupation of the Maagdenhuis (the administrative centre of the University of Amsterdam). He also photographs Dolle Mina, an Amsterdam-based group that campaigns for equal opportunities for men and women and the legalization of abortion in the Netherlands.



Provo demonstration against police action during the wedding of Princess Beatrix and Prince Claus, Prinsengracht, Amsterdam, 1966



Occupation of Maagdenhuis ended, Amsterdam, 21 May 1969



Activists of the Dolle Mina feminist group, Amsterdam, c. 1970

1965 Van der Elsken attends the short film festival in Oberhausen for the second time and makes a documentary about it.

1966 Ed van der Elsken's book Sweet Life is printed in Japan and published in Dutch, English, French, German, Spanish and Japanese. It is followed a year later by the four-part Wereldreis in foto's, containing photographs of his round-the-world trip.



The entrance to the exhibition Hee... zie je dat?, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1966. Photo: J. Mud

Hee... zie je dat? (Hey... Did You See That?), a solo exhibition by Ed van der Elsken, is held at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam from 8 September to 23 October. The exhibition is designed by

Wim Crowel. It takes the form of a happening: the entrance hall is covered entirely in photographs and visitors have to walk across a large picture of a naked woman to enter the galleries. In response to the exhibition van der Elsken is commissioned to produce photo-reportages for glossy magazine Avenue.

1967 Van der Elsken's first reportage for Avenue is published. It is about Cuba, and he even manages to photograph Fidel Castro. He will continue to travel and take pictures for the magazine until 1976.

1970 Van der Elsken travels with poet and biologist Dick Hillenius to Suriname, where they photograph the Akurio people for Avenue. He also travels to Moscow to produce a reportage with Nico and Anne Scheepmaker.

1971 De verliefde camera (The Infatuated Camera), an autobiographical film, is shown on Dutch television (by broadcaster VPRO) on 24 June. A year later van der Elsken receives for the film the Dutch State Prize for Film Art.

Ed van der Elsken and Gerda van der Veen separate. Van der Elsken moves to a smallholding in Edam.



Ed van der Elsken in front of his house in Edam, c. 1973. Photo: Aleksander Jalousinski

1972 Van der Elsken travels to Chile for Avenue. Later that year he goes to Italy to see Vali Myers, his one-time muse and the main character in Love on the Left Bank. In the film Death in the Port Jackson Hotel she reflects on their time in Paris.

1973 Ed van der Elsken and Gerda van der Veen divorce on 25 June. He meets Anneke

Hilhorst while she is hitchhiking, and shortly afterwards she moves in with him on the farm in Edam.



Self-portrait with Anneke Hilhorst, Edam, c. 1973

Van der Elsken starts experimenting with Super 8 film.

1974 Margriet magazine invites van der Elsken and editor Peter Lichtenauer to travel to Bangladesh to produce a reportage on the disasters that have hit the country. Van der Elsken also makes his first synchronous audio slideshow during this trip, recording sound while taking the shots for the slides. The audiovisual is broadcast on television and plays a key role in the fundraising effort for Bangladesh.

1975 Van der Elsken continues to experiment with audio slideshows. Some of them are broadcast on television. Van der Elsken also opens a gallery in his home to sell his photographs.

1976 Development organization Memisa commissions him to make a film about the "Third World". He and Anneke Hilhorst travel to Pakistan, Thailand, Borneo, Bangladesh, India, Malawi, Madagascar, Brazil, Haiti and the Solomon Islands. The resulting film, Het is niet mis wat zij doen (What They're Doing Is a Good Thing) is broadcast by AVRO in January 1978.

1977 Eye Love You is published. The basic theme of this full-colour publication is love between a man and a woman, which is the same all over the world. That same year, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam exhibits the slideshow of the same name.

1978 Hallo! Een nieuwe Ed van der Elsken (Hello! A New Ed van der Elsken) is published. The book juxtaposes photos which in some way have an associative relationship, interspersing them with a number of double-page images.

1979 Amsterdam! Oude foto's 1947-1970 is published. Van der Elsken selects images from his archives showing the lively streets of Amsterdam in the period from 1947 to 1970.

Ed van der Elsken and Anneke Hilhorst's son Johnny is born on 7 July.

1980 Avonturen op het land (Adventures in the Countryside). Van der Elsken makes both a film and a book, in colour and black and white, about his life in the countryside near Edam. The film is broadcast by VPRO on 30 March 1980.



Hippies, Edam, c. 1969

Ed van der Elsken and Pieter Boersma are awarded the Rijksmuseum's annual documentary photographic commission. The subject is broadcasting in the Netherlands.

1981 Second part of the film Welkom in het leven, lieve kleine (Welcome to Life, Little One; approx. 80 min., broadcast by VPRO on 24 January 1982), featuring his children as they grow up.

Parijs! Foto's 1950–1954, published by Bert Bakker of Amsterdam, is based on a selection from his archive of photographs from his Paris period.

1982 Een fotograaf filmt Amsterdam (My Amsterdam, literally "A Photographer Films Amsterdam"; approx. 57 min., broadcast by VPRO on 29 June 1983) is a filmic portrait of Amsterdam and its residents.



Ed van der Elsken in his Mini Moke, Amsterdam, 1977.
Photo: Fred Vijver

1983 "Ed's Amsterdam" column in Het Parool newspaper.

The Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam buys 177 original vintage prints from Love on the Left Bank.

Leiden University purchases the original copies of the book Sweet Life for its print collection.

1984 Ed van der Elsken marries Anneke Hilhorst on 8 March.

La Grande Parade, director Edy de Wilde's final exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum

Amsterdam. Van der Elsken takes pictures of the artists, which he will publish shortly afterwards in a book entitled Are You Famous?

1985 Elsken: Paris 1950–1954 is published by Libroport Co. Ltd of Tokyo.



The 491 photo group preparing the ELSKEN exhibition, Tokyo, 1986

1986 Major exhibition in Tokyo, Japan: San-geruman-de pure no koi (L'Amour à Saint-Germain-des-Prés). Van der Elsken visits Japan, where he has many fans, numerous times in the 1980s.

Exhibition at the Institut Néerlandais, Paris: Une histoire d'amour à Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

1987 Van der Elsken receives a grant from the Dutch Ministry of Welfare, Health and Culture to produce a photobook on Japan.

1988 Jazz 1955–1959.61 published by Libroport Co. Ltd. of Tokyo.

The photobook De ontdekking van Japan (The Discovery of Japan) is published by the Fragment publishing house in Amsterdam. After fifteen trips to Japan van der Elsken selects photos that highlight his fascination for the Land of the Rising Sun, with its mix of traditional values and customs and a lifestyle influenced by Western capitalism.

Van der Elsken receives the David Roëll Prize for lifetime achievement.

Having been commissioned by Japanese publisher Orion Literary Agency, van der Elsken starts work on a book about Korea.

On his return to the Netherlands he is informed that he is terminally ill.

1989 Van der Elsken documents the progress of his illness in his film Bye (approx. 108 min.).

1990 In March van der Elsken receives the Capi-Lux Alblas Award.

He makes his last recordings for Bye in June.

Ed van der Elsken dies on 28 December. He is buried at the Grote Kerk in Edam.

Bye is broadcast a month after his death, on 27 January 1991.



Ed van der Elsken in his sickbed, Edam, 1990.
Photo: Anneke Hilhorst



Chez Moineau, Rue du Four, Paris, 1953

"Collecting my kind of people"

Hripsimé Visser

"Always I have been designing equipment to 'catch life as completely as possible'. My ideal would have been to have a tiny camera built inside my head with a lens sticking out and recording 'artistically' twenty four hours a day. I am coming rather close now with lightweight video equipment (I have not yet had my head operation.) And now, while I am sixty-one years old, comes the doubt about this recording everything all the time. And I may go back to the way in which I worked in the beginning: walking the streets with one little camera, three rolls of film, no assignments, collecting my kind of people."¹ This is Ed van der Elsken: a man with an urgent desire to grasp life, a generous dose of humour, plagued by healthy doubts, experiencing a slight sense of nostalgia as he looks back on the beginning of his career. Above all, however, he was a man obsessed by technique. Techniques which allowed him to "catch life", which gave him autonomy and which he could use to amass his "own" special collection. All his equipment served that one purpose.

"Collecting my kind of people": this statement reaffirms the predominant image of van der Elsken's work as an egodocument. Not only did he often film and photograph himself, his family and those around him, he also sought in other people, in the many countries he travelled to, the properties he attributed to himself, which he identified with, chief among them being authenticity and pride. In his early work he observed people on the street cautiously, from a distance. Yet he soon developed a strategy, a way of working, that he described using the somewhat aggressively masculine metaphor of the "hunt". But although he was certainly neither modest nor wary in his work, his cameras were far from deadly weapons and his pictures were generally the result of an interaction. It is no coincidence that one of his books is called *Eye Love You* (1977), and one of his films *De*

verliefde camera (The Infatuated Camera, 1971). On the street, he set his sights on people he thought were beautiful or unusual, and he challenged them with a glance, a witty comment, a gesture. To van der Elsken, contact was an essential prerequisite for a picture. What he then did with his "catch" was at least as important, and related to another aspect of technique he loved: montage. Ed van der Elsken not only made photos and films that still appeal to us today, he above all created dramatic, funny and moving narratives – books, films and slide shows/audiovisuals – in which images are linked in exciting and dynamic ways. During preliminary research for this exhibition it became clear to me once more how important technique and montage were for Ed van der Elsken, and above all how freely, individually and experimentally he used them. He created strong images that are unmistakably of their time, and yet also timeless. Some of his books are almost iconic. His films have been rediscovered in the past couple of decades, and his audiovisuals restored. His work is dynamic and open, quint-essentially twentieth century and yet as topical as the day it was made.

Staged

Ed van der Elsken's career spanned more than forty years. It began in his birthplace, Amsterdam, in the late 1940s, but really got going in Paris in summer 1950. "Ed van der Elsken, 12 Rue Guisarde Paris, idées photos" he once scrawled on a tatty Rhodia notepad.² It most probably dates from 1951. The young photographer had been in Paris for a while, like many other Dutch artists who had been drawn to the metropolis in their desire to escape the narrow-minded gloom of post-war Holland. He resigned his job with the Pictorial Service photo laboratory, where he had spent six months printing work by Magnum photographers like

- 1 Ed van der Elsken, typed letter to Colin Naylor, 2 April 1986. Ed van der Elsken Archive, Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam, inv. no. 029000365 (Cor 21).
- 2 Rhodia notepad, undated (1951?). Ed van der Elsken Archive, Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam, inv. no. 029000375 (Doc 1).



Rhodia notepad, 1951

Robert Capa (1913–1954), Ernst Haas (1921–1986) and Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908–2004), the “crème de la crème of art and reportage photography”, as van der Elsken put it.³ He had already become a photographer back home, learning the trade partly via a correspondence course and partly on the job. Now he wandered the streets with his Rolleicord. He sometimes took slightly journalistic photos that would be published by a Dutch or French newspaper. Occasionally he would jot down things that struck him on his notepad. The notebook contains lists of subjects and even sketches, like storyboards with the typical square format of the camera he used. A series of numbered

sketches of a clochard washing himself by the Seine resembles a comic strip, with its different perspectives. It also has a filmic quality. The photographer seemed keenly aware of the difference between what he saw and what would make a convincing story. The drawings are also a kind of exploration. Van der Elsken was clearly trying to get a grip on reality.

The Rolleicord is a camera that is held in front of the stomach, forcing the photographer to compose the picture in mirror image on the focusing screen. The images are square, and a roll of film has only nine or twelve exposures. Van der Elsken therefore had to use his film sparingly, and he would initially take only one or two – at most three – pictures of a subject. He photographed homeless people, sword swallows and escape artists, lonely characters in parks and cafés, demonstrators, lovers, children, animals, a drunk being arrested by the police, a lamp-lighter, a glazier... Generally speaking, thanks to the Rolleicord, they are fairly static photos with subjects that also featured in the work of his fellow photographer Robert Doisneau (1912–1994), who was more than ten years his senior. They are however slightly less aesthetic, slightly more gritty, often featuring characters with a certain pathos. Van der Elsken was not inspired by the French photographer but by the grand master of raw “reality” photography, American photographer Weegee (1899–1968) and his book *Naked City* (1945). Van der Elsken’s pictures became less static once he began working with a Leica, a compact camera that meant the photographer could be more dynamic, allowing him to position himself more in the centre of the action.

He no longer made sketches like the one of the clochard in his early studies – at least I did not find any – but staging scenes remained a constant thread running through van der Elsken’s work. He rarely waited patiently for the “decisive” moment, preferring to give it a helping hand – fairly obviously at first, but then increasingly in the manner of a light-hearted, dynamic art director.

For example, he jotted down on his notepad: “As ‘punchline’ of the poster series, the photographer in a wacky poster situation.” Van der Elsken’s “poster series” shows people in the street, often in an amusing visual dialogue with huge

3 Ed van der Elsken, *Parijs! Foto's 1950–1954*, Amsterdam 1981, n.p.

advertising posters. I did not come across the “punchline” featuring van der Elsken himself during my research, though he does appear in some of his poster photographs. In several of the pictures we see his wife of the time, photographer Ata Kandó, and her children, who just “happen” to be passing by. Pictures of his family taken indoors resemble nineteenth-century *tableaux vivants*, and the black-and-white photos he took of Ata as she toiled over day-to-day chores are by no means candid. Van der Elsken is like the main character in Krzysztof Kieślowski’s 1979 film *Amator* (released in English with the title *Camera Buff*) who, once he has discovered the power of the camera, can only see the world in framed fragments. He even tries to capture an argument with his wife over his obsession with the camera in an imaginary photo, thumb and index finger held at right angles in front of his eye. In Paris, van der Elsken wanted to produce a book about his daily life, incorporating what he later described as “romanticized fictional elements”. He had some situations replayed for the camera, particularly ones involving strong emotions and conflicts, like the theatrical scene where his friend Barbara’s lover pushes him down the stairs. He never finished the book – he quickly came to regard it as too depressing, too negative – though he did later use part of it in a publication about his time in Paris.⁴



Blind accordionist on one of the grand boulevards, Paris, 1951



Ata Kandó, her three children and the photographer seen in the mirror, Sèvres, 1954

Subjective Photography

4 Ibid.

In this book, *Parijs! Foto's 1950–1954*, which was published in 1981, van der Elsken described his approach as “subjective photography”. In fact, he takes a position somewhere between document and fiction, distancing himself from the more “objective” documentary which was still in vogue at the time, particularly in reportage photography. He also opted for a different approach in a formal sense. On his notepad it says somewhere: “make reportages ‘photographically’, among other things panoramas, distortion, excessively hard and soft prints, blurs, extreme close-ups, perspective, montages, etc.” In other words, he challenged himself to explore the photographic idiom, irrespective of theme or subject. Subjective Fotografie was an official movement initiated by German photographer Otto Steinert (1915–1978). Steinert explicitly rejected the dominance of reportage and documentary humanism, and demanded that photography be given artistic status, following on from the spirit of experimentation of the modernists in the pre-war years and of individual expression. Interestingly enough, van der Elsken’s

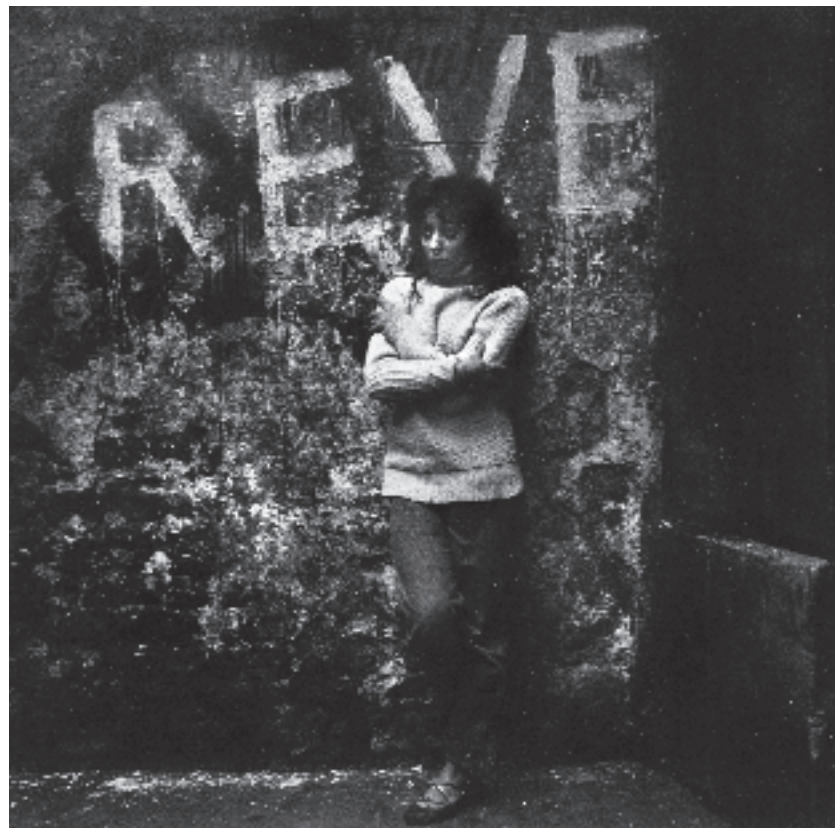


Barbara and Bud, Paris, 1950–54

early work was appreciated by both Steinert and the leading exponent of documentary humanism, Edward Steichen (1879–1973), curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Steinert showed work by van der Elsken at the second exhibition of his movement in Saarbrücken in 1954–55, and Steichen included him in a group exhibition at MoMA in 1953 as well as the *Family of Man* exhibition that opened in 1955. A critic who reviewed the MoMA exhibition singled out van der Elsken's work: "His pictures of student life in the cafés of the boulevard St. Michel are rollicking documents of carefree youth, the subjects as uninhibited as Weegee's."⁵

The comparison with Weegee was an honour, but the interpretation of van der Elsken's photographs was incorrect. The youngsters he photographed in the cafés and streets of the Rive Gauche between 1950 and 1954 were not carefree, and they were certainly not students. The bohemians of Saint-Germain-des-Prés were largely young people of various nationalities who had all been damaged by the war in some way or other. They spent their days in cafés and restaurants, many of them addicted to alcohol and drugs. Van der Elsken identified with their bleak view of life, but he also maintained the distance

he needed to be able to photograph them – by no means always with their assent, and as often staged as documentary. He preferred to photograph them at night with no extra lighting and his photos are dominated by velvety blacks that contrast with



Vali Myers, Paris, 1952

the sparkle of the lights. Cigarette smoke and reflections evoke the atmosphere of wild dance parties, messing about and communal meals, of proud and desperate young people, of bodies embracing or asleep. His muse was Australian dancer Vali Myers: a flamboyant character and the natural focus of male desire. Her portraits show a beautiful, seductive, tragic and lonely young woman (see pp. 93, 97, 98, 100–101, 105, 106, 107, 109, 112–113, 114, 118).

Between Document and Fiction

Van der Elsken had shown Steichen his photos when he came to Paris to research his *Family of Man* exhibition. The MoMA curator was impressed: “Ed, it’s a complete story. Why don’t you make a book of it?”⁶ This would be no ordinary publication. Van der Elsken created a photonovel, a personal fable based on his partly documentary, partly staged pictures. He arranged his photos around a semi-fictional account, a dramatic and hopeless love story between Ann (Vali Myers) and Manuel (van der Elsken’s alter ego). To add some local colour, he had his wife of the time, Ata Kandó, take pictures of the French capital.

Steichen’s *The Family of Man*, the travelling photography exhibition on humanity, began its journey at MoMA in 1955. A year later it also opened in the Netherlands, at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, exposing the Dutch public to the power of photography for the first time. By then van der Elsken had returned to the city of his birth, and he would undoubtedly have seen the exhibition. With its mix of fact and fiction and its sombre undertone, *Love on the Left Bank*, also published in 1956, was however a far cry from the positive humanist message of Steichen’s parable. The autobiographical element of *Love on the Left Bank* was a sign of things to come. This first book by van der Elsken, which was published simultaneously in Germany and the UK, attracted both praise and vilification. The new, personal voice was acclaimed, but the dismal, negative tone shocked some of the public, the documentary “verity” of the pictures apparently weighing more heavily than the fictional composition and narrative.

Thirty years after van der Elsken’s photonovel was published, American

photographer Nan Goldin (b. 1953) would paint an equally raw and engaged portrait of displaced young people in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986). Though van der Elsken was not literally a source of inspiration, Goldin did recognize in him a kindred spirit.⁷

Other photographers were also seeking a personal voice in the 1950s: Robert Frank (b. 1924) in his book *Les Américains* (1958) / *The Americans* (1959), Roy DeCarava (1919–2009) in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955) and, in the Netherlands, Johan van der Keuken (1938–2001) in *Wij zijn 17* (We Are 17, 1955). Like van der Elsken’s photonovel, these books are what Martin Parr and Gerry Badger call stream-of-consciousness photobooks, analogous to the literature of the time.⁸ There are however substantial differences between them. Whereas in the well-known American edition of Frank’s book the text and images are separate, in DeCarava’s book the photographs appear alongside the “musings” of a woman observing her neighbourhood from a window, and van der Keuken’s book of portraits of his sombre classmates includes an empathic introduction by his friend, the writer Simon Carmiggelt. In *Love on the Left Bank*, van der Elsken is present as his alter ego in both the narrative and the pictures. Even more characteristic – and a preview of his later career as a cinematographer – is the filmic structure of the book. This lies not so much in the rapid sequences or in the use of motion blur – formal characteristics that can be achieved with either a photographic or a film camera – but rather in the structure of the narrative, with its flashbacks and dynamic shifts of perspective. William Klein’s book *New York* was published in 1956 and, like *Love on the Left Bank*, “it is supremely about process. It is about the process of making photographs, and about the further process of editing and sequencing them, playing with them and making a coherent statement.”⁹ Like van der Elsken, Klein (b. 1928) was also a film-maker who explored the boundaries of both media in his books.

Composition

The lively, dynamic layout of his photobooks became van der Elsken’s trademark. Many alternate edge-to-edge prints with spreads and smaller images printed

- 6 Van der Elsken, *Parijs! Foto’s*, n.p.
- 7 Nan Goldin, personal communication with the author, 1997.
- 8 Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, *The Photobook: A History*, vol. 1, London and New York 2004, pp. 232–39.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 243.

on a single page or in a series across a double page. Like *Love on the Left Bank*, *Bagara* (1958), about van der Elsken's trip to Central Africa – a powerful but also somewhat anachronistic impression of what he called the “real” Africa – was designed by Jurriaan Schrofer. Van der Elsken designed two of his subsequent books himself: the small-format *Jazz* (1959) and the large-format *Sweet Life* (1966). The format of *Jazz* was virtually square, and *Sweet Life* was completely square. Van der Elsken spent a lot of time working on his books, keen above all to find the right combination of images, in terms of both form and content, as if every turn of the page must reveal a separate, compelling work of art, conveying a spatial composition. The effect is fundamentally different from that of a book with just one photo per spread, appearing like artefacts framed in a white border, as in Frank's *The Americans*. In van der Elsken's books, a photo could be cropped in a variety of ways; an image always stood in relation to another image. Unlike *Love on the Left Bank*, there was no text accompanying the photo layouts in these three books. Any text – an interview in *Bagara*, pieces by fans and aficionados in *Jazz*, personal notes in *Sweet Life* – was included in a separate insert. This underlines the break with classical reportage and is a sign of van der Elsken's faith in the power of the image. In later books he would sometimes add text between and beside the photographs, as in *Amsterdam! Oude foto's 1947–1970* (1979) and *Parijs! Foto's 1950–1954* (1988), and his posthumously published book about Hong Kong (1997).

Van der Elsken's love of technique could also be seen in his mastery of his art. For all his feigned nonchalance, he was in fact highly skilled in the darkroom. His early prints vary wildly in tone, but they are always flawless. He played with chemicals, seeking ways to accentuate the black in his pictures. By modulating the exposure of certain elements he managed to create dramatic effects, such as the halo that often appears around his characters, lifting them out of the background so that they appear almost like sculptures in the image space. He simply made prints when they were needed – for a publication, a book, an exhibition – without any notion of a fixed format or limited editions. The expanding market for photography and museums' growing

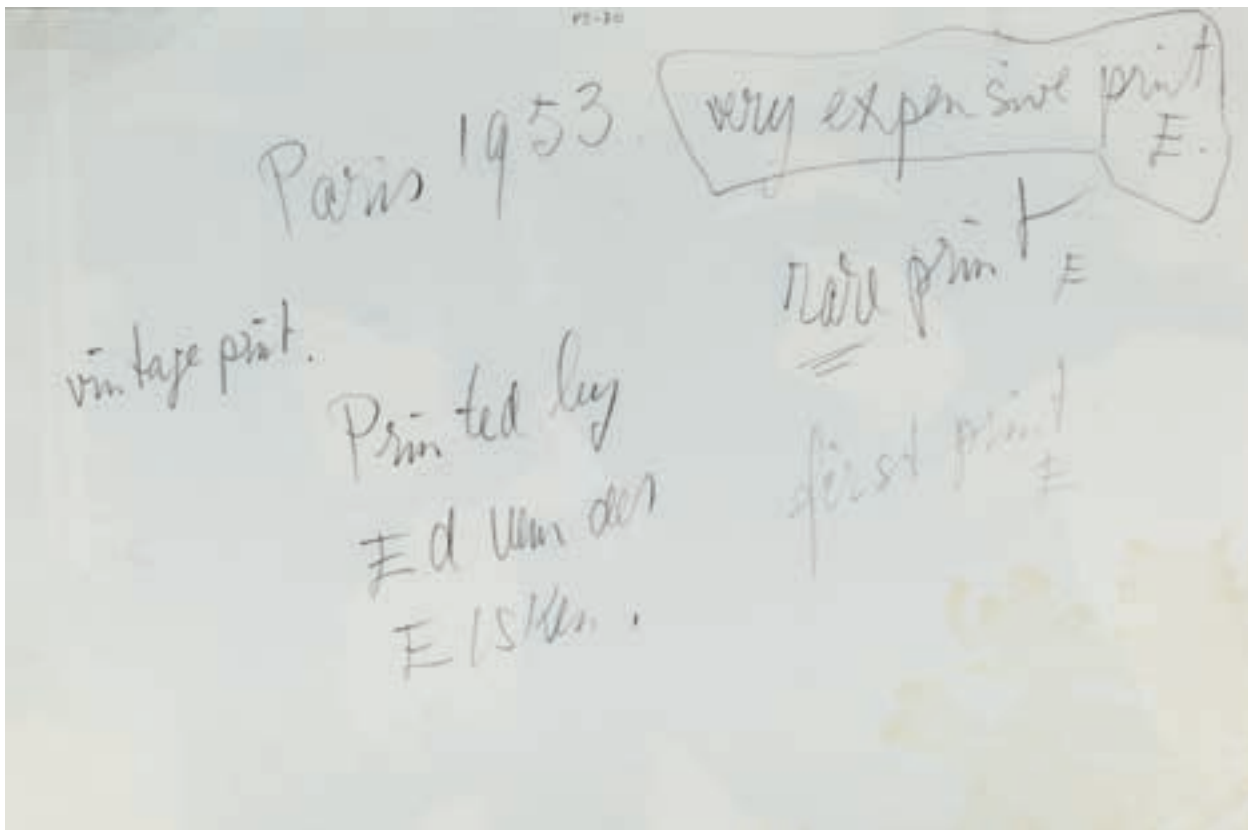
appreciation of the medium, however, made him realize that his prints could be quite valuable. In the early 1970s he opened a gallery at his home, unfortunately with little success. In an attempt to sell his work, he would write firmly on the back of a beautiful print: “This is a vintage print by Ed van der Elsken”. In the early 1980s he offered to sell the original material from *Love on the Left Bank* and *Sweet Life* to a number of institutions in an attempt to raise money for new projects and new equipment.

Colour

Of all the Magnum photographers, van der Elsken admired Ernst Haas the most. Haas liked to experiment with form, and was photographing in colour as early as 1951. Though van der Elsken also began taking slides in the early 1950s, colour would not become a substantial feature of his publications until the 1970s. Nevertheless, at his first large solo exhibition in Schiedam (1959) he did project slides of his Africa work and *Hee... zie je dat?* (Hey... Did You See That?), his solo exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1966, and included light boxes showing slides. Publishing in colour was expensive and, at that time, the preserve of commercial genres like advertising and fashion. It was



Home gallery, Edam, 1974



Barbara and Bud, Paris, 1950–54 (verso)

not part of the repertoire of any self-respecting reportage photographer, and certainly not of any photographer with artistic aspirations. Black and white was the accepted museum convention. It was not until he started producing travelogues for the new glossy magazine *Avenue* in the late 1960s that van der Elsken began to work almost exclusively in colour. When he produced his photobook and audio-visual *Eye Love You* in 1977, he was one of the first photographers in the Netherlands to use colour for non-commercial purposes. This was followed in the 1980s by works like *Avonturen op het land* (Adventures in the Country), the book that was a counterpart to the film of the same name about his life in the countryside near Edam with his wife Anneke Hilhorst, and the audio-visual *Amsterdam*, an ode to the colourful youth culture of Amsterdam in the 1980s. After van der Elsken's death, as colour photography became more and more accepted, some of his slides were marketed in limited print editions. To the general public, however, Ed van der Elsken remained a black-and-white photographer.

Shifting Positions

Ed van der Elsken often made his own position quite clear in both his books and

his films. Later in his career, as he looked back on his early work, he moderated some of the positions he had previously taken. He was writing his own history, creating his own mythology, approaching himself like one of the characters in his books and films. In the late 1970s Vali Myers, who was Ann in *Love on the Left Bank*, wrote in a letter: "Dear Ed, O.K. here we go, but writing about the Paris that we knew was hard and it hurts. The kids who survived the afterwar years in our quarter Saint Germain des Prés can be counted on the hands. It was rough and tough, a world without illusions, without dreams. It had a dark, stark beauty like a short Russian story, of Gorky that one never forgets. They were uprooted kids, old for their young years, from all over Europe. Many had no home or parents no papers (stateless) no money. Their legal status for the 'flic' was vagabonds, for which all of them landed in prison, sooner or later. We lived in the streets and cafés of our quarter, like a pack of bastard dogs and with the strict hierarchy of such a tribe, students and workers were 'outsiders'. The few tourists on the lookout for 'existentialists' were 'game' (for a meal or a drink) but no one sold themselves. There was always cheap booze and Algerian hashish to get by on. What we had we shared, even to a migoo (the butt of a cigarette)."¹⁰

10 Vali Myers, handwritten letter to Ed van der Elsken, November 1979. Ed van der Elsken Archive, Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam, inv. no. 029000375 (Cor 16). Myers means "mégot" when she writes "migoo". She added in red: "How in hell do you call cigarette butt in French???"



Yakuza (Japanese gangsters), Kamagasaki, Osaka, 1960

- 11 Bibeb [Elisabeth Maria Lampe-Soutberg], "Ed van der Elsen: 'de liefde, man, vrouw, meisje, het leven, weet je wel'", in: *Vrij Nederland*, 17 September 1966, pp. 5, 10.

Van der Elsen had asked Vali Myers to share with him her recollections of her time in Paris, and even sent her copies of his photos to refresh her memory. Those memories feature in the film he made about her in the early 1970s, and he quotes her letter almost verbatim in his later book on Paris. *Love on the Left Bank* is just one of the themes covered in that book, which are all closely related to his life as a young photographer in Paris. Looking back, he appeared to feel a need to underline how things really were back then, so he replaced the romanticized account he published previously with the "real" memories of his muse.

Van der Elsen was a different photographer by then. He attributed the change to his travels, particularly the round-the-world trip he undertook with his second wife Gerda van der Veen in 1959–60. In an interview in 1966 he spoke of the vitality and enthusiasm that seized him on that trip which, despite the misery he sometimes witnessed, meant that he was no longer able, or indeed willing, to portray life with such pessimism as he had in the early 1950s in Paris.¹¹ His first trip to Japan during his world travels signified for him the final breakthrough of his interactive approach. There, the street photographer discovered the mode that would make

him famous. The culture and the people of Japan fascinated him, and he would visit the country several times, particularly in the 1980s, eventually producing a book and an audiovisual that was completed after his death. Interestingly, several books he published from the end of the 1970s onwards were in fact based on his older work, featuring images from his photo archive. Besides Paris and Amsterdam, this is also true of several publications he made for the Japanese market, including *Africa 1957*, which was published a year before he died. The striking thing about this book is not its design but the pictures he selected from his archive which, together with the text he wrote, play down the exotic vision of the "authentic" Africa that had characterized the original publication *Bagara*.

Although he cannot be called an engaged photographer in accordance with the 1970s definition – politically engaged, left-wing, focused on exposing injustice – he was often very outspoken and critical in his analysis of social issues. Sometimes this criticism was explicit, as in the well-known photo of the bench in Durban, sometimes it was journalistic, as in his pictures of the riots in Amsterdam in the 1960s, and sometimes it was laced with supreme irony, as in the photo of white

tourists in Africa photographing cute black kids. Ed van der Elsken was fundamentally a soloist, a romantic who liked to do everything alone and so rarely accepted commissions and was never part of a movement or group. This is also why he converted his film cameras so that he could work alone as much as possible. He certainly did not suffer from any sense of false modesty. His texts and interviews paint a picture of a self-confident photographer and film-maker who knew exactly what he wanted to film or photograph and how to do it. In the late 1980s, during one of his trips to Japan, he gave a lecture to students highlighting his subjects and methods, including the techniques he used (three cameras, telephoto and wide-angle lenses). But he was above all keen to impress upon the students that they should not let anyone or anything dictate to them, that they should find their own subjects and style even if this meant that, like him, they remained eternally poor.¹²

It was typical of Ed van der Elsken that he dreamed of transplanting a camera into his head so that he could continually record the world around him. A camera-man who was mad about technique, who always bought the latest equipment and converted his film cameras so he could operate them alone. A romantic who started out identifying his own desperation in his peers, and later saw his lust for life reflected in the people around him and on his travels. A hunter of photographic prey that he would seduce and provoke. A storyteller for whom every photo was a potential building block in a unique visual statement. A child of his times: sombre in the 1950s, rebellious in the 1960s, liberated in the 1970s, reflective in the 1980s. A strong character who unscrupulously threw himself into the fray and, in his film *Bye* (1990), the moving account of his terminal illness, who had the courage to strike out on new paths right to the very end.

12 Ed van der Elsken, "Walking the Streets of Tokyo", typed lecture, 1981. Ed van der Elsken Archive, Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam, inv. no. 029000420 (Doc 28).



Simon Vinkenoog and girlfriend, Paris, 1950

Photographing as a Need

Nan Goldin

When I first saw the book *Love on the Left Bank* I realized I had just met my predecessor. My real predecessor. The feeling was similar to that of meeting a lover, or that I had found a brother. Earlier, when I discovered art photography at the age of nineteen, the artists that really resonated were Diane Arbus, Larry Clark, Weegee and August Sander, and in the following decades Christer Strömholm, Anders Petersen, Jim Goldberg have moved to the top of the pantheon.

Ed didn't quite get the attention he deserved. Yet when I was introduced to his work, I felt incredibly close to it. It felt the most tender to me, was unbelievably sensitive, and so full of love. In my own life, I have been obsessed with photographing the people that either were my lovers, had been my lovers or I want as lovers. Like Ed I write myself in as the lover. Sometimes the obsession lasted for years. It was photography as the sublimation of sex, means of seduction and a way to remain a crucial part of their lives. A chance to touch someone with a camera rather than physically. It is this notion of being obsessed with someone, and through the photographs making them iconic, that resonated with me in his work. Ed did this with Vali, whom he calls Ann in the fictional text that accompanies the book. But his work is anything but fiction. The work takes the form of an old time photo-novella, written in the first person in which he writes himself in Ann's lover.

I always feel that the great pictures are the ones you actually remember, and his are part of my own memory. So much of his work I can summon in my mind's eye. The photographs of Vali playing with her breasts, or dancing in her apartment or wherever she lived sustained the magic that he also revealed in her public persona. He had a way of photographing the embrace that surpasses photography as in the photograph of Simon Vinkenoog (and his "petite amie"). It's like I am seeing bodies for the first time. They so inhabit their own skin. They are so naked, I can feel the flesh.

Others of his photos that come to mind are the beautiful pictures of his first wife and his home life that are so casual yet so profound. Somehow he was able to document life in the truest way, and always finding beauty and staying connected to the otherwise mundane. He had a unique way of transporting himself into the Scene. His book is an extensive chronicle of the daily lives of Vali and her crowd on the Left Bank; of real rebels and anarchists trading secrets, lovers and sharing inebriations in the bar all day. He never seemed to be an outsider.

Shortly after Ed's death I was visiting friends and their two sons. They lived on a piece of land that met Ed's land. His son and his younger wife came over to meet me. They had nursed him through his illness while Ed himself filmed the process of his death. Eventually they invited me into their house. It was one of the great opportunities I have been offered in my life. It strengthened my feeling of a bond with Ed, and it proved to me that hippies will always recognize other hippies, even now, long after, no matter what decade or country. It is becoming quite rare, yet I was happy to know that some of us still exist.



The entrance to the exhibition Hee... zie je dat?, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1966. Photo: J. Mud

Under, Outside and Between: The Elusive Art of Ed van der Elsken

David Company

In the pantheon of Dutch photography and film, Ed van der Elsken is a major presence. His achievements, over forty years of active work, loom as large as those of any artist from the Netherlands since the 1950s. Beyond his home country, however, he has not been quite so well known, although in recent years he *has* come to be recognized as something of a pioneer: an unpredictable free spirit whose images seemed to spring directly from his own idiosyncrasies. His photography escapes classification, his books defy genre, his exhibitions threw the curatorial rulebook out the window, and the extraordinary range of his films never ceases to surprise. Just when you think you have the measure of the man, another aspect will steal your attention. It is the apparent *boundlessness* of van der Elsken's work, so inseparable from the irrepressible boundlessness of his personality, that now appeals internationally.

One of the major reasons why van der Elsken eluded attention was that he was not overly interested in the overt craft of "fine art" photography, nor in the making of single iconic images for contemplation as perfect squares or rectangles. For so long this was the rather narrow way that our museums and art histories assessed photography. Likewise, his films were highly informal, and often technically erratic, giving the disarming impression of being unmediated slices of a wayward and peripatetic life. His aesthetic seemed to be based on improvisation, spontaneity and chance, one image leading almost accidentally to another and another. Today, of course, contemporary art is deeply interested in the informal and hybrid practices that reflect the ways in which everyday life is now so precarious and fragmentary. Perhaps van der Elsken's time has come. What follows is a series of observations about key moments

from his work and their continued relevance.

An apparent split between pictorial formality and flowing informality has always haunted those who might claim to speak on behalf of photography. Indeed, with hindsight we can see that between 1920 and 1970 (the half century of what we now call modernism) the identity of serious photography was caught between two extremes: a preciousness that attempted to defend some idea of the purity of the medium, and a hybrid outlook that was expansive, open to outside influences and the possibilities of combination. Think of the difference between, for example, Edward Weston and László Moholy-Nagy. Weston's aesthetic began and ended within the border of the highly wrought photographic print. Moholy-Nagy pushed beyond the frame to the space of overlap and exchange with graphic design, sequencing, sculpture, film, writing and more. Or closer to the present, think of the differences between Jeff Wall as a maker of singular photographic pictures that stand alone and invite autonomous aesthetic judgment, and Wolfgang Tillmans's swarming interplay of various types of image, print and presentation. Of course there are commonalities. The division is not fixed or final, and there have been many modern photographers right in the middle of all this. Walker Evans made photographs as formally exemplary pictures, beloved of the museum, in what he called "the documentary style", but he was also interested in editing, sequencing, writing and mainstream publishing beyond the precious *livre d'artiste*. Weegee photographed crimes scenes and scandals for New York newspapers but had great formal ambition for his images, which he wanted to exhibit. Weegee's book *Naked City* (1945) influenced van der Elsken profoundly. Nevertheless, the

tensions never quite resolve or dissolve. They are part of what makes the medium perplexing and compelling, along with its inherent antagonisms between document and artwork, chance and intention, accident and design.

No doubt van der Elsken's open and pluralist approach belongs somewhere along the trajectory that runs from Moholy-Nagy to Tillmans. But as with so many photographers who found their artistic calling in the 1950s – notably Robert Frank and William Klein – his work emerged from a testy relationship with *reportage*. Almost from its beginnings photography had great potential as a responsive, reactive medium with an intimate connection to everyday life and its events. It led to the exciting flourishing of photographically illustrated magazines in the 1920s and 1930s. But the post-war mass media of Europe and America reduced so much of that excitement by establishing reliable and predictable conventions for picture stories that were often unchallenging, spectacular and easy to consume. By the 1950s the original, *experimental* basis of reportage seemed almost lost. Van der Elsken, Frank, Klein and others emerged at this point with radical acts of defiance. (Frank probably summed it up best: "I didn't want to produce what everybody else was producing. I wanted to follow my own intuition and do it my way, and not make any concession – not to make a *Life* magazine story.... Those goddamned stories with a beginning and an end."¹) In their own very different ways all three refused to accept that reportage was the property of publishing corporations, insisting upon the absolute necessity for invention and individual voice. New experiences always demand new forms of expression. Photography and film could not be reduced to the formulæ and consensus of the mass media.

Moving to Paris in 1950 at the suggestion of his friend, the photographer Emmy Andriess, van der Elsken worked at Pictorial Service, the darkroom used by the newly founded Magnum photo agency. There he printed the work of, among others, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa. Aged twenty-five he was temperamentally unsuited to modelling himself on either of those two. Falling in with a bohemian crowd around Saint-Germain-des-Prés, he began to photograph his friends,

their relationships, parties, apartments and bars. The images accumulated. What kind of form might give meaning to these photographic bits and pieces of a life lived with "beautiful losers" trapped on the margins of society?

Van der Elsken captured the innate theatricality of his loose circle of creative acquaintances. In front of his camera their gestures and mannerisms were so archly self-conscious it is as if they were permanently performing. The photographs express the dilemmas of a group caught between an impoverished reality and the acts of imagination or self-determination that might lead to change or escape. When the British weekly magazine *Picture Post* bravely serialized some of his images in 1954 it announced, "This is not a film. This is a real-life story about people who do EXIST." But the truth was somewhere in the middle.² The following year the Dutch TV station AVRO made a program also based on these photographs. Van der Elsken was not too impressed with it, but it was enough to interest him in the possibilities of filmmaking, especially in that speculative space between the single image and the poetic sequence that came to shape so much of his work.

In the coming years van der Elsken fashioned from his photographs what would eventually become his first book, *Love on the Left Bank* (1956). It was a remarkable combination of images and writing that blurred all possible lines between fact and fiction, reportage and literature, photostory and cinema.³ The photographs

- 1 Robert Frank, "Interview at Wellesley College" (1977), in: Eugenia Parry Janis and Wendy MacNeil (eds.), *Photography Within the Humanities*, Danbury, N.H. 1977, p. 37.
- 2 *Picture Post* published van der Elsken's images across four issues in February 1954. Van der Elsken had first encountered *Picture Post* a decade earlier, during the war, when he was shown a copy by British troops.
- 3 Ed van der Elsken worked out the design of *Love on the Left Bank* in collaboration with Jurriaan Schrofer.



Love on the Left Bank, André Deutsch, London, 1956, pp. 29–30

themselves carried the sexually charged allure of a youthful, existential Parisian demi-monde, which may well have been enough to secure publication. But it is the peculiar form of the book, with a narrative structured around an almost cinematic flashback, that keeps readers on their toes, not quite knowing how to relate to the images and the lives depicted.

Issued in the Netherlands, Germany and England (a French publisher could not be found), *Love on the Left Bank* was romantic but also alienated and embittered.⁴ At its heart is an impossible nostalgia for a vanished Paris, an honest and painful cry of that first post-war generation at the onset of an accelerated consumerism. Many young artists were finding that the Paris of the 1950s was no longer the Paris of the 1920s and 1930s.⁵ Relying on instinct and confidence in his own unlikely mixture of influences, van der Elsken had made a groundbreaking work that continues to appeal to subsequent generations.⁶ To call it a “photobook” is to somehow miss the point. *Love on the Left Bank* defined its own genre, and can be seen as the precedent for books as varied as Larry Clark’s *Tulsa* (1971), Nobuyoshi Araki’s *Sentimental Journey* (1971), Gaylord Oscar Herron’s *Vagabond* (1975) and Nan Goldin’s *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986).

Although smaller and more focused, *Jazz*, published in 1959, was just as innovative. It was a pivotal time for jazz music. That year saw the release of several landmark albums, including Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue*, Dave Brubeck’s *Time Out*, Charles Mingus’s *Mingus Ah Um*, and Ornette Coleman’s *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. In the smoky spotlights of Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw, van der Elsken photographed Chet Baker, Gerry Mulligan, Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughan and many more. The results could have been simply a strong collection of portraits of the great jazz players and singers of the era. Through cropping, sequencing and layout it became a meditation on what it means to translate one art form into another. How can fixed and mute photographs articulate flowing sound? *Jazz* is almost a visual score in book form. Some spreads are packed with small photos butted against each other, like clusters of bebop notes played at speed. Across other spreads the position of the



Jazz, De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam, 1959, pp. 20–21

players in the frame suggests musical notes ascending and descending. Several pages carry images cropped along the elongated forms of a trombone or clarinet, as if to visualize extended solos. At times the varying areas of white space around the images feel like moments of stillness and silence between bursts of action and sound. Van der Elsken does not simply *mimic* the music he loves; he invites the reader/viewer to consider this rich parallel between jazz and photography as forms emerging from play, structure, style, reaction and personality.

The same year, van der Elsken allied his camera to yet another art form: *dance*. In the three small and little-known volumes of *Nederlands Dans Theater*, he begins with a group of dancers in their studio but soon takes them out into the world. They enact their poses and routines in front of industrial architecture, on beaches and rooftops, and in the street. The books are completely upfront about the energetic artifice of it all. Van der Elsken is documenting while collaborating and improvising – inviting the performers, the viewers and himself to enter a distinct imaginative space belonging equally to dance and photography.

In 1959 and 1960 van der Elsken made a fourteen-month voyage around the world, with his wife Gerda, visiting the United States, Mexico, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Hong Kong and West Africa. He took pictures and shot movies for himself but paid for the trip by making images for magazines and TV travelogues. Upon his return he soon had a very large book dummy ready to go, but he

- 4 To avoid possible scandal and censorship, the English-language version of *Love on the Left Bank*, made for distribution in the UK and the USA, omits the interracial sexual relationships of the original.
- 5 Desperate to get to Paris after the war, the American William Klein enrolled for art classes in the atelier of Fernand Léger, who informed his students that the Paris art scene was over and they should get out into the world, into architecture, film-making and graphic design. See David Company, “William Klein’s Way”, in: *William Klein: ABC*, London 2012, n.p.
- 6 See Tamara Berghmans et al., *Looking for Love on the Left Bank*, Paris 2013).



Spreads from the book *Nederlands Dans Theater*, A.W. Bruna & Zoon, Utrecht, 1960, pp. 14–15, 4–5

struggled to find a publisher. When it did appear finally in 1966, under the title *Sweet Life*, the impact was extraordinary. Published in Germany, France, Spain, America, Japan and the Netherlands in an edition of 17,000 copies, this vast, global odyssey flowed over 208 large-format pages. It was received as an impassioned riposte to the slick new 1960s imagery of colour tourist brochures, lifestyle magazines and TV adverts for exotic places. From his 5,000 exposures van der Elsken produced hundreds of gritty, grainy prints in high contrast with deep blacks and few mid-tones. The prints had to feel as physical and material as his raw encounter with the world around him. On the page the images are bled to the edges with no white borders, placed together without white space between, in a non-stop rush of visual sensation.

Van der Elsken's visual exploration came directly out of his appetite for social exploration, for defying norms and expectations. In *Reis rond de wereld* (*Journey around the World*, 1960), which is not so much a film as a compilation of travelogues, we see him in a little pair of swimming trunks, balanced high up in the wind

between two masts of a ship, camera in hand, trying to get a series of shots. His movements are agile, confident and determined. For him photography was as much a physical and psychological activity as a matter of making pictures. He often talked of standing in the street feeling as if a large area around him was a force field of hyper-awareness which he could make palpable with his camera. It was a projection of his creative will onto the world. He felt a camera could protect him, like a passport, in the face of unpredictable or extreme experience.

In Durban, South Africa he found himself the only white man in a beer hall in a black township. In Chiapas, Mexico he was the only European present at a religious ceremony (and was almost stoned to death). At many points in his photography and films he pictures himself naked in bed with lovers, as if the images were confirmation or trophies of a life lived with the greatest emotional intensity. He was both voyeur and exhibitionist. Even when he was dying, he filmed himself undergoing treatment for cancer, showing the surgeons' lines on his body and displaying the X-rays of his tumours (*Bye*, 1990). Although he was active and productive for four decades, van der Elsken never had what today we might be tempted to call a "career", or even an artistic trajectory: he had a *life*, and the images he made were his own way of experiencing and externalizing that life. The richer and more varied his life, the more his images embodied the range of his experiences. Commitment to the mediums of photography or film never came into the equation. In many ways van der Elsken's work is a realization of the ideal that film-making might become as fluid and reactive as writing (what the French film critic Alexandre Astruc called "la caméra-stylo", or camera-pen).⁷

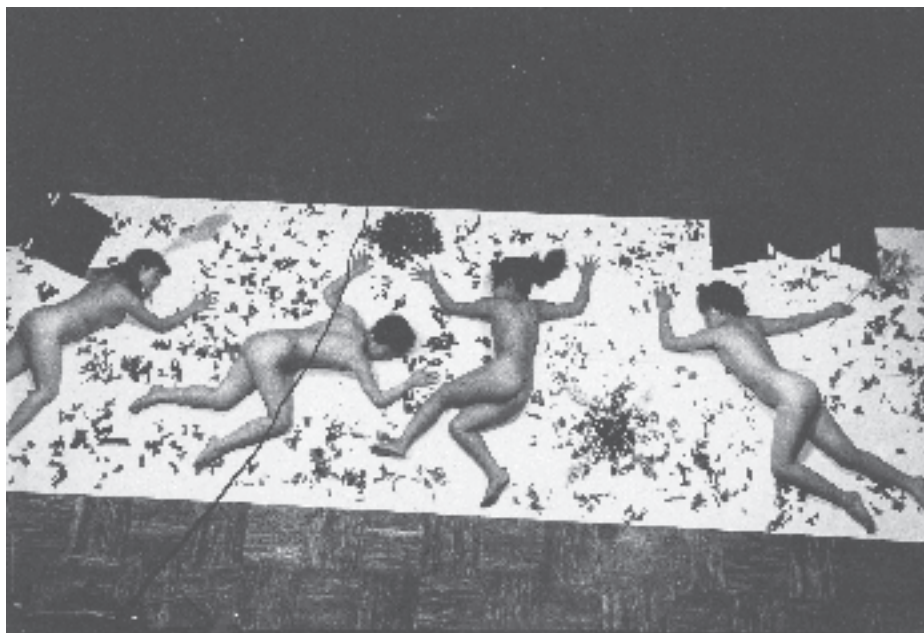
Sweet Life is often compared with the run of "city books" made by the Paris-based American photographer and film-maker William Klein (*New York*, 1956; *Rome*, 1959; *Tokyo*, 1964; and *Moscow*, 1964). Along with their preference for grainy, hyper-journalistic photographs, both men were intimately concerned with the editing, writing, design and layout of their books. Both were suspicious of the myths of objectivity, preferring to interact energetically with their subjects – provoking, goading, teasing, flirting, so that in the end everyone is an actor and aware of the

7 Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo", in: Peter Graham (ed.), *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, London 1968, pp. 17–23. Originally published in French as "Naissance d'une nouvelle avant-garde: la caméra-stylo", in: *Ecran français*, no. 144 (30 March 1948), pp. 17–18.

situation. Indeed, looking through the Japanese section of van der Elsken's *Sweet Life* and Klein's *Tokyo* we come across images of complex performance art events, dropped into sequences of street photographs. Klein shoots the "action painter" Shinoheira, boxing his way along a sheet of paper, his hands wrapped in rags soaked in ink. Shinoheira is painting and performing, for his own art and for Klein's camera. Similarly, van der Elsken photographs naked women laying on a sheet of white paper, as if in some strange ritual, and this is his explanatory caption for the image:

Nudes in a photographic experiment conducted in a darkroom with olive-green light. The strip of white paper is photographic paper, or rather two strips, each four feet wide and twenty-six feet long, placed together on the floor with the emulsion side up. On the paper, girls in decorative poses arranged – draped, you might say, by Takeji Iwamiya, leading industrial photographer in Osaka, who was making a photographic mural on commission from a department store.... Bits of colored paper on the open spaces, to give texture, pattern. You understand. When everything was in its proper and beautiful place, there was strong exposure by electronic flash. Then the models got dressed, the photographic paper was developed, and presto-chango: everything that was not protected from the white flash came out black on the picture; the rest, primarily the bodies of the girls, remained silhouetted in white. I made this photograph with a Leica at the moment the flash bulbs went off. Many thanks Takeji. Iwamiya also makes lovely books of old buildings, old things, traditional Japan.⁸

This scenario and these words, written with such obvious delight and fascination, show how van der Elsken was not in the least interested in distinctions between mediums, nor the distinctions between artists and supposedly non-artists, nor between the fine arts and the applied arts, nor between documentary revelation and the artful picture, nor even between his own creativity and that of others around him. Life was one extended, improvised continuum of occurrences and associations. The only truly artistic act that



Four naked Japanese women lying on a huge piece of photographic paper at the studio of photographer Takeji Iwamiya, Osaka, 1960

mattered was to be attuned to the flow and one's place within it. Making images was van der Elsken's way of doing this. We could even go so far to say that the one medium he cared about above all others was himself. Take creative care of one's life and the images will follow.

8 Ed van der Elsken, *Sweet Life*, New York; Cologne 1996, n.p.

Van der Elsken carried forward this energy in the presentation of his groundbreaking exhibitions, especially his 1966 solo show at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *Hee... zie je dat!* (Hey... Did You See That?). The exhibition survives through a handful of installation views, one of which has come to symbolize van der Elsken's approach to making exhibitions. It shows a room covered entirely in borderless images – walls, floor and ceiling. It is a total photographic environment, rejecting any neat rows of fine prints on the museum's white walls. Viewers could not stand outside the work and gaze at pictures in frames; they were obliged to enter the work, walk on it, and become part of it. The biggest image in that room was a larger-than-life cut-out of a naked female body, laying face down. With her feet near the entrance, visitors would come into the room between her legs, so to speak. It is possible the idea was inspired by the artist Niki de Saint Phalle's famous twenty-eight-meter-long multicoloured female figure installed at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm earlier in 1966. Visitors entered through her vagina. Inside, the artists Jean Tinguely and Per Olof Ultvedt had constructed kinetic sculptures, a planetarium, a milk