

BANT Magazine/ Aylin Gungor (June 2006)

AG: How did u get your start in photography? What is your history as far as schools and what led u up to this point where u do photography professionally?

JVH: I started photographing with the age of 12 when I got my first camera for my birthday which I dearly wished for. Then I took on simple photography lessons in my high school with the age of 15. Then established myself between my friends as THE photographer in the GANG and portrayed all my friends in very conceptual and complex scenarios which I directed. Here I started taking first inspirations by Annie Leibovitz and Herb Ritts but also Sebastiao Salgado and later on David LaChapelle and Peter Lindbergh. With age 19 I managed a first solo exhibition in a local gallery with my friend's portraits and then started exhibiting in various local group-shows. I started assisting a professional industry photographer who told me everything technically about photography that I wanted and needed to know. Already there I had a very clear idea of style and composition and usually Art-Directed my photographer's shoots. We were a great team: Us having great ideas, me focusing on the style and him making anything technically possible with his skills in photography. We worked together for 2,5 years.

My professional career (which had not properly started then) was supposed to end when I decided to become teacher for handicapped children to which I dedicated about two years with practical experiences in schools and preparing for University. A friend took me on a trip to England to go and visit some Art Schools and I took my portfolio along. I got offered a place straight away and was convinced to take the chance. My parents agreed and I moved to South of London and attended Art School at the Surrey Institute of Art and Design in Farnham.

They properly twisted my head around and shook me upside down ... (meaning: they totally confused me – in a good way) and I changed my style and expectation towards photography totally. I skipped all ideas about technique and started to think photography: What can photography do and what can it not. Why should I do photography as there are a million better ones out there already and I questioned everything that I saw... only then I found ideas what I could do that was unique and also important to me... I experimented a lot and ended up using a little snap shot camera with no technical features. I loved the fact that I learned to work really well with the most complicated cameras and studio equipment and now left all that behind and purposely neglected technique. It was all about the image and what I wanted to say.

After graduation in 2002 and some travels I ventured into London and decided to set up my own photographic network www.photodebut.org which supports, promotes and connects emerging photographers. This was mainly to connect and support myself and like minded people. I always believed that in a group you can gain much more than alone.

From then I did various things like Stock Photography, Editorials, some fashion (which I hated), Portraits and was also commissioned to do some solo-shows and projects.

I got in contact with good people in the industry and worked as picture editor in a Picture Library and as Director of Photography at DIVA Magazine.

Besides I always had to work a bit in Bars or other small jobs.

AG: What was the first photograph that you shot that told you, "this is it...photography is the real thing for me?"

JVH: It is a BW portrait of my brother which rocked my world. I loved the Black and White... I loved the energy... I loved working with my first 6x6 RolleiCord. I printed it up very large and we put it into the toilet in our family's house. I think it is a great spot... as I always start dreaming nostalgically about the beginnings of my photography.

There is also a portrait of a local girls-gang which I just love. They look so fierce and serious... I loved that beauty. I always dreamed to make a fashion shoot with them... but it just remained a nice idea and adorable images.

AG: Some of your colour photographs, the colours are very rich such as the blues in the sky. Is this attributed to your selection of film or use of filters or a combination of things? Basically how do u get such strong colour?

JVH: It is firstly a punchy cheap film: Fuji Superia and a cheap Snapshot Camera Nikon Lite Touch - A 35mm cheap plastic snap-shooter with a 28mm fixed lens and a flash choice. That is it (cheap is sometimes just great! – And as you know: Everybody (non professional) loves to have happy strong punchy snapshots... so the makes and the processing are done accordingly)

As all pictures get processed and scanned by a local lab in Freiburg, they get processed with a standard filter from Fuji for Holiday Snapshots and get even punchier and sharper!

AG: Which publications do you regularly contribute to or where might someone typically see your work?

JVH: There is no regular publication. I work mainly on projects for all sorts of magazines and focus usually rather on my own ideas and work. Sometimes I do portraits or fashion. But I am not too fond of that. I love my projects and working on a larger concept. Not just an emotional shot!

AG: Is it hard for a photographer to work on some special personal art projects such as yours rather than working for some companies with a nice standards and budget... I mean for the surviving.

JVH: Not for me as I always made a difference... some work was always for my own pleasure which I had to fund myself and sometimes I am lucky and make a good job. As soon as I decided that snapshot is my thing I screwed the costs down and didn't spend too much money anymore...and also: I never expected to become a full time photographer and worked at all sorts of places and things which were always photo-related. I think photography students need to be taught that there is not only the one option for them: A professional photographer. There are so many other great jobs in the photography industry. I love the diversity. And I love managing and organising... producing photography seemed to me a great interest to work in. That's why I set up these photography networks – working with loads of other great photographers.

Today I feel I found the balance and do commercial work, producing other photographers and do loads of fun personal work for galleries and exciting publications.

AG: Do u have any interesting stories of photo shoots or clients u have worked for or subjects you have shot?

JVH: I recently shot a self promo Christmas card for London's most prestigious Branding Company Wolff Olins: It had to be fun, instant and multi cultural for the season of our western Christmas and New Year.

They decided to send me to the nearest snow-patch in Europe (which was a glacier in the French Alps) The Brief was to find a landscape (on my snowboard) in which I should pee (yes pee - urinate!!!) the word HAPPY... which symbolised anything good for the season... if you are Buddhist...

Muslim... Christian... it was simply happiness and fun they wished to all their clients.

They sent an Art Director along who had never seen Snow before... hence he has never been on a Snowboard before... well... I taught him the basic moves and left him on the baby lift whilst I went off with many litres of liquids in my backpack in order to write the word 'happy' in the snow. It took me a while to come up with the perfect mixture for Pseudo-Urine: 60% pineapple juice and 5% cherry-juice which I found in a local supermarket and heated up with 35% boiling water in order to melt the snow. This looked yellow enough to be convincing! We checked that!

The Art Director was still of no use on the second day. I envied him for spending all day on the slopes. I had no time for proper snowboarding as I was busy snow-writing 'happy' about 100 times. Back in London Wolff Olins picked their favourite shot and printed it as A1 poster on very thin (bible-) paper. It looked great.

They were really excited about the results, but when I afterwards showed them my small cheap camera... which I had used for this, they couldn't believe it and thought I was joking. It took me a while to convince them... that was sooooo much fun! Great great great! I loved it!

AG: Your photography projects have an incredible texture of density and light and also have great stories. Is it difficult to control the composition of what you have in your head? How did your 'Dreams of Flying' project come along? It is unbelievable, so simple but greaaaaat idea and great photography and great kids?

JVH: I have all pictures in my head before I photograph them... I see them or have them in front of my inner eye and know that I have to translate them into a photograph. But I am also open to improvising. I love playing on the photo-location. The images always have to make sense to me and I need to know where I would fit the images in within all the other photography I know from out there. I believe in a greater visual library where copies are superfluous. I also think that there is too much bad imagery out there. I think that life is too short for bad images... but then again: What would be good images if there wasn't anything to compare it to.

'The Dreams of Flying' came about when I was commissioned by a Parisian Gallery for a book project. I played photography and forced myself to think every hour of a 24hours-day to come up with a great picture from scratch. Concept, Location, Props, and Models – all improvised on the spot. Terribly exhausting but also quite exciting!

I had a friend with a dog around and the boy next door was there too... I had the idea to have a boy riding on a dog. I knew that the dog would never allow that in normal gravity. So I came up with the

lying-on-ground-idea. I took the yellow turban which I brought from my India journey and cut out some silver stars. Ready were the props for the dog picture. The other images of 'Dreams of Flying' followed only much later. It took me a while to fully grasp the idea and its potential. And then we (me and the kids) went on and planned adventures to be realised!

AG: How did you find those kids? How did they react to the project? I am thinking especially of 'The Racers' Picture. This one is perfect.

JVH: They are my neighbour kids and their friends and their friends. We used to do a lot of photography already together in the past. They loved the project and it took them only little time to understand it but as soon as they got it we had loads of fun...and they had loads of ideas themselves.

AG: The landscapes look very unique and I guess it is really hard to shoot landscapes different than other photographers do.

JVH: About the landscapes: I am a Country-Egg. Living in London made me longing to nature. I love being out there, the horizon, the smells and the wind. I am very keen to leave the city as often as possible. On each trip I would try to find the perfect landscape-picture to bring it home to the city. I feel this is my romance with nature. I am looking for places that feel slightly supernatural. Places that are that tiny bit too perfect. Places that remind me of a stage-design and somehow play on that kitschy idea of Nature. These are the picture-postcards that I shoot for myself. Beyond that, I also see in my images that they are beautiful empty stages for an imaginary theatrical play to happen. That's my game with the landscape.

AG: Do you ever photoshop your imagery?

JVH: hardly ever... and if then very minuscule... it actually does not matter! I do not change anything in the picture but maybe tidy up a little stick which laid on the street as it distracts from the pebble next to it.. I could have also taken it out in person but did not see it when I took the picture!

AG: What are you working on, presently?

JVH: A story about two boys who go on an adventure trip and a pseudo-documentary-story about a child in India!

AG: Who inspires you in general?

JVH: Music and Literature. People in the streets. Bad photography.

AG: What other interests do you have besides photography?

JVH: My friends... very much so! Walking in the nature. Loads of great music.. loud and danceable.

AG: So what about music... and movies? Are you interested in them as well? What are you recently listening to and which movies did you watch lately?

JVH: I listen to all kinds of 'great' music. I believe in music in general and can find sense and perfection in Hip Hop as much as in the cheesiest and most perfect pop song.. but also Heavy Metal can sometimes be amazing.. or a simple classical piece.. and a man with a guitar can make me shut up too. Norwegian Music is divine.

To name a few Artists: Radiohead, Björk, Aphex Twin, Tori Amos, Eric Satie, Die Fantastischen Vier, Thomas Dybdahl, Michael Jackson, Jack Johnson, AHA (only early stuff – best pop ever), Cinematic Orchestra, Coldplay, Keith Jarrett, Buckshot Lefonque, Dino Saluzzi, Joe Jackson, Kate Bush, The Killers, Leonard Bernstein, Nils Petter Molvaer, Nina Simone and so many other Music-Magicians!

I love dancing and wished that I could have become a professional dancer (contemporary ballet) if not a photographer!

My favourite movie this year: 'You and me and everybody we know' and that French Movie with Daniel Auteuil. I think it was called: Cache. Wow, that was amazing

My overall favourite movie is 'Far Away so close' by Wim Wenders.

So... I think I told you loads now... this was the longest interview ever. I hope I gave you everything you wanted. Thanks a lot for making me think.