

HANS ULRICH OBRIST

THERE IS NO INSIDE AND OUTSIDE ANYMORE. THE VIEWER IS IMMERSED.

**Interview with mvj held in the Serpentine Gallery,
Kensington Court, London, March 15, 2010**

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Thanks for your e-mail; I like the photograph you took here. It's nice, it's a panoramic view.

Michael von Graffenried: Yes, I am stuck to it now.

You mean to the camera? So you only use this camera?

Yes, mostly. I don't know when I will stop; I am still in my panoramic period.

I will record our conversation on video. It's terrible, look, my lens is dirty. I need some liquid, don't I? What should I do?

If you have a tissue, I can fix it for you. You have to clean it by making circles on the lens, like this. But you don't need the image for the interview, do you? It's more useful to have the sound of us speaking together, don't you think?

(looks at the clean lens) **Oh, thanks.**

We're already in the middle of the interview. Let's go back to the very beginning. Was there an epiphany, a moment you can recall when you decided to get into photography? When did it all start?

There is one moment that I remember. I was in Amsterdam, or somewhere in Holland. I had this very cheap Kodak camera and I took a low angle shot of a guy with big wooden clogs, very typical of Holland. But the starting point of the panoramic camera was in 1991. I had been invited to Algeria

for an exhibition in honour of the 150th anniversary of the Swiss Confederation. I went to the market, and I found out that nobody wanted to have their picture taken. They all kept on hiding from the camera. I remember this guy I bought some vegetable from. We talked for some time about his business, where I came from, and at the end of our chat, I asked if I could take his picture. And he said no. So I was very disappointed and I asked my friends, why don't people want to have their picture taken? And they said: don't ask.

Just do it.

Yes, just do it, just take the picture. I said no, I can't, I have to have their consent. My friends said, if you ask us, we have to decide and we don't want to make the decision. So just take the picture. So I had a choice, to leave and never come back or to start cheating. I discovered this old camera that is very mechanic, without focus, but with it you can take pictures without looking through the viewfinder, just by pressing the shutter. The camera stays on your belly and no one notices.

So that, in a way, your body becomes the camera.

Yes, you just move, you always have to look for the right position for your body. You have to be very near, to get into the situation. So I learnt. Then the civil war broke out and they started attacking foreigners. I discovered I had three advantages: I looked like an Algerian, I had the friends I had made before the war, and I had this camera. So I decided to keep on taking pictures in Algeria. When it was all over, I found out that the camera was also useful in our Western cities. Today, everyone is very self-aware and starts acting up the minute

he or she sees a camera. So this camera is good. It allows me to take real pictures of real situations.

The last time you came, I wasn't even aware that you were taking my picture.

Yes, today, the only way to take normal pictures of the reality is to steal them.

So you've used this camera ever since?

Yes. First I worked with it for eight years in a country where no one wanted to have their picture taken. I had a very bad feeling about it, I felt so dirty and ashamed. But I was the only one still there and I had to keep on taking pictures. In 1998, I published the book *Inside Algeria*. It came into the hands of Fatiha Boudiaf, the widow of the assassinated president. She heard about the exhibition in Paris and said she wanted these pictures shown in her country. Everybody thought she was crazy, but it worked. To me, it was like bringing back the stolen pictures. And the people not only forgave me for stealing them, they started talking. Photography was not enough anymore, words were needed. So I travelled back with an Algerian filmmaker who lives in Switzerland, Mohamed Soudani, and we filmed the people as they looked through the books and talked about the ten years of horror, the 300,000 dead and the beginning of Islamism. At the time, it seemed to me Algeria was like a laboratory, where things went on that would later concern all of us. And that is what happened, after 9/11. So I did something I shouldn't have done, but in the end, they saw that I had lived these things with them and the book was the proof. There was still no confidence between Algerians; but they saw me coming from far away, and they thought: to him we can speak. That is the secret of the film.

You basically went with a camera where no one else went with a camera anymore. Your camera was the only one around.

I was the only foreigner, yes. Algerians kept taking pictures, but foreigners stopped going to Algeria. Journalists, poets, writers, theatre directors were being killed. Between 1993 and 1994, around 90 journalists were killed. I stayed. I was always with a friend, never alone on the streets. It was like East Germany, you never knew whom you could trust. On the streets, I just kept quiet, because then I would have been found out. But nobody talked anyway, so my keeping silent was not suspicious.

It's an interesting thing, also when you think of portrait photography. Is there talking going on? Henri Cartier-Bresson told me that sometimes when he took a picture the person talked a lot. Bonnard, on the other hand, wouldn't say a word. Obviously, when you're filming, people talk, but while you're taking pictures you cannot have a conversation.

You can't talk. If you talk you can't take pictures. It's better to be with someone who will talk and people will stop noticing you. So if you like, the connection with Cartier-Bresson would be this: he was also very discreet and wanted to do pictures without anyone realizing. But this camera is the most discreet you can imagine. It is not a hidden camera, the

people can see it, but they think it is on hold and not working, hanging around my neck.

In 1991, you were already quite advanced in your trajectory. You started to take photographs much earlier. And I suppose it all started in Switzerland. We are both Swiss, we grew up in Switzerland. Paul Nizon wrote this little book "Diskurs in der Enge", where he basically talks about the idea of exile, of him and Giacometti

ALGERIA WAS LIKE A LABORATORY, WHERE THINGS WENT ON THAT WOULD LATER CONCERN ALL OF US. AND THAT IS WHAT HAPPENED, AFTER 9/11

and all artists going into exile. How was Switzerland for you? You took your first picture when you were 15 or 16, how did you then come to photography? What was important? Switzerland has a long history of photography. In Zurich, there is the famous Schule für Gestaltung, where Hans Finsler was the professor of, among others, Werner Bischof and René Burri. Were you part of that line of photographers? I'd like to know more about your beginnings.

It started with René Gardi, who was an ethnologist and a writer from Bern. He said that if you had no experience of the *Guggershörnli*, which is this mountain near Bern, there was no point in going to Africa because you would never experience anything there either.

So I began, literally, outside my door, in the old city of Bern, and started recording my surroundings: the coffin maker, the flower seller. My first book was called *Under the arcades of Bern*. Then the circle got bigger. I went into the Parliament, which was to me like this big theatre. When my pictures of politicians sleeping or picking their nose were published, scandal broke out. The Parliament photographers said I shouldn't be allowed in, that I was breaking the rules. But because of my jealous colleagues, the scandal made me famous at once. Then I began working on my country. I did Switzerland in the eighties; the drug addicts in Zurich, the banks, the beggars in the street ...

The invisible side of Switzerland?

No, it was the reality. I am interested in people, whether they are having problems or good times. The book was called

Swiss Image, the image of Switzerland, of course. Everybody then said I was a bad Swiss, only looking for the dark sides of the country. But I love Switzerland! Otherwise I couldn't have worked for ten years on it. The exhibition was first shown in the Elysée Museum in Lausanne and then around the world. It's what got me into Algeria. Someone from the Swiss embassy in Algiers rang and asked if I wanted to have the exhibition there. I told him that the Algerians would not be interested in Swiss photographs and I would not be interested in doing an exhibition only for the diplomats present in Algiers. I asked him to find Algerian photographers to organize a workshop with. I travelled there three months before the exhibition, we worked together and we became friends. If you have one friend in an Arabic family, you become friends with the entire family. And they have big families! I learned about a hospitality which does not exist in our countries. If an Arab is standing on our doorstep, we fear him and shut the door, but they let me in. That is how I fell into Algerian society. This was my chance. That fact helped me afterwards, when the civil war started.

Can you tell me more about René Gardi? Is he still around, is he still alive?

No, he died in 2000.

So it is too late to interview him.

Yes, but you would find his life and personality very interesting. He was a writer and a traveller. In 1967, he made a film, *Die letzte Karawane (The Last Caravan)*, about a caravan in the Sahara, which was shown in schools all around the country. He influenced me because he was an anthropologist, and I see myself as kind of an anthropologist. I am very interested in human beings. If you ask me to take pictures of flowers, or landscapes without people, I'm in trouble. The human being is always in the centre. And then it gets political, because people say I look at the dark sides of things, but it's not true. I am interested about things that people do not like to look at. They don't want to see the beggar on the streets, so they just avoid looking at him and stop realizing he is there. I take a picture, I put it in another context and then people become aware of the situation. First you have to see, then you have to accept the situation seen, and it is only by accepting the situation, that can you start to work on changing it. I went into taboos. Taboos are a big issue in my work. Get them out, have the people accept that they have them. Then they can do whatever they want with them.

René Gardi obviously came from the literary world. How about photographic influences? Were you inspired by photographers such as those from Magnum, or was it different, the influence of life really?

I've always been a completely lonesome cowboy. I went to school, did my School Leaving Certificate and then I stopped, I did not go to university. I wanted to be on the streets, with the people. I was never the intellectual. One could say this panoramic camera takes boring pictures. An art critic once wrote that I use the panoramic camera because I couldn't choose what to take, which was an evil criticism of my way of working. But today photography is always airbrushed, staged. It is never about the banal, boring stuff,

which is what I am interested in. How did I learn about photography? I am self-taught. I just spent hours and hours in libraries, poring over books and magazines. Which can lead to two reactions: either you think you will never be good enough and you give up, or you think you can do better, go further. That was always my motivation to go outside and find out about the human being.

It seems to me you went in concentric circles, from the mountain Gardi talked about to Switzerland and then to the world. I have the feeling that over the years, you made a portrait of Switzerland, and then of the world, which is very interesting because to make a portrait of a city, never mind a country, is so complex. How do you cope with so much complexity?

You have to find out who you are, what your relationship is to the others. First it was Switzerland, which was also to me a symbol of rich, Western countries, then Algeria, which I found very interesting because of its history, the mixture of French and Arabic influences and then Islam. For the time being, I think I am doing a portrait of Islam, where it is and where it is going: for example, in the Whitechapel area of London where I live. But this camera does not really do portraits. In fact, I would say that one shot contains about seven or eight portraits. Portrait, to me, is something that you pose,

YOU HAVE TO FIND OUT WHO YOU ARE, WHAT YOUR RELATIONSHIP IS TO THE OTHERS

with the people obviously knowing what you're doing. I like to take the picture before or after the portrait.

So you never made portrait photography?

I did when I first started, to earn money, but I'm not really interested in that. Take the portrait I did of you. I just pushed the button without your knowing... and now I have everything, your books, I can see what you're reading.

Absolutely, you have so much information. You basically have my whole office, the books, the DVDs, the table, the garbage bin, the chaos, the view, the cars, London. It's a city, in fact.

What I found out is that when you have huge prints of these panoramic pictures and go closer to look at them, you stand where I was standing when I took the picture. And you're actually there with Hans Ulrich Obrist in his office and you cannot escape. The picture sucks you in.

It is interesting because in some way, is it reminiscent of what architects such as Diller Scofidio talk about, which is a feeling of immersion. You don't have the situation where you get the viewer on one side and the

photographer on the other anymore. There is no outside and inside anymore. The viewer is immersed.

It's about bringing people together, probably, also, people who don't want anything to do with those in the picture. That is a very important aspect of my work, the magical aspect of what I do. The work I did in Africa, *Eye on Africa*, is about meeting black people. I had these black people of Cameroon put up on billboards in several cities in Switzerland. And if you are in front of these big pictures, you think you are there with them in the picture. I'm not sure whether the white Swiss wanted to meet these black people of Cameroon, but they couldn't escape.

That also leads us to the forms photography can take, on the different forms of apparition of a photographic image. Again, Cartier-Bresson, in the interview I made with him, said that the book is often the right format for photography. A photograph is sometimes nice to have on a wall, but to him, the book was not just a secondary thing. It could actually be the primary thing. You've done a lot of books, I have the feeling that they are almost like art works. There is a long tradition of making books in the history of photography; photographers have always been very involved in the layout and the format of their books. At the same time, in your case, you also have the billboards, which are another form of appearance of your work. Can you talk a little bit about this, because it does not seem galleries or museum spaces are the only space for your work?

MY WORK IS ABOUT BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER, INCLUDING PEOPLE WHO DON'T WANT ANYTHING TO DO WITH THOSE IN THE PICTURE

The book is very important, because you can do what you want with it. If you sell your pictures to a magazine, you will only have a four or six-page spread. The space and choice will be limited. So the book is an escape. Even in that field, I'm very strict. I almost never hire a publisher, I do the packaging myself. For example, I worked on *Inside Algeria* with the best printer in the world, Jean Genoud, from Lausanne, and the designer Werner Jeker, both of them artists in their own way, before selling the book to several publishers, Aperture in New York, Hazan in Paris and Benteli for the German edition. All the editors had to accept the finished product. I remember Eric Hazan telling me "we are the editors, and you're giv-

ing us a finished package?" and I said yes, but I have the best printer and the best designer, what more do you want? And they accepted it. But the problem I now have with the book format is that it is not as powerful. You meet the people in the pages but you're not sucked in. I spent two years working on two drug addicts, Astrid and Peter. I did a reportage, if you want to call it that, on their life and the things they went through, prostitution, prison time. I made a book out of it but I didn't stop there. I had the 32 panoramic images printed out in very large formats and put up on the streets. For example, you had a picture of Peter selling heroine right in front of the police station, and the policemen had to look at that. The message was that these people are not strangers, not immigrants from a faraway land. They're our neighbours, not the monsters one would like to think of as being. After the installation in the public space, I produced a film in which Astrid and Peter explained why they took part in the project. I did that in Switzerland and then I wanted to organize a similar type of installation in France. Do you remember when I came to visit you at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, asking if you had an idea about how I could do it? I've been trying for years in France, but it is extremely difficult, as drugs are very taboo. One day I will. But the French only see drugs in terms of crime and repression.

That leads us to the topic of unrealized projects, such as this project about drug addicts in France. Do you have any others, too big or too small, that you haven't been able to pursue because of censorship, or even self-censorship? You know, as Doris Lessing says, there are the novels one does not dare to write. There is self-censorship. What are your unrealized projects?

I do realize the projects, but taboos are probably the biggest issue. It's always about taboos, even though they differ from country to country. When I did this installation about Astrid and Peter in Switzerland, the journalist from *Le Monde* wrote "The Swiss government allows pictures of drug addicts on the streets", although I told him that was not the case, because, as a Frenchman, he could not imagine that someone could do such a thing without the consent of the authorities. What was the question?

Your unrealized projects, dreams?

My dream is to go on, go further. Very often, I don't have a plan. A lot happens by accident. If the guy from the Swiss embassy in Algiers had not called me for an exhibition, I wouldn't have gone to Algeria, spent 15 years of my life going back and taking all these pictures and doing the documentary film. Chance is the word. It was the same with the drug addicts. Someone from an association asked me to do something and I said I would, but only if I could find people who would take responsibility, agree to have their face shown and give their name. That was a problem. Finding Astrid and Peter took some time. When you ask a drug addict if you can take his picture, he'll say "how much will you pay?" I would go: No, I'm not even offering you a cup of coffee, all I can offer you is to be famous for a situation you probably don't want to be famous for. But about my dreams: I have no dreams. I just walk on. Now I'm here in London, in ten days I will be back in Paris and I have no idea what I will do next. It's

always accidental. Something happens, then I see it and I grab it.

A very Swiss thing is obviously the idea of exile. There seems to be a long tradition of Swiss people who go abroad. It is part of our DNA, I suppose. And also, growing up in such a small place, one longs for big cities.

The view of the Mittelmeer. There was this famous exhibition in the Kunsthaus in Zurich.

Yes, Bice Curiger's show «Freie Sicht aufs Mittelmeer» (Unobstructed view of the Mediterranean).

Eradicate the mountains to have the view of the Mediterranean.

THERE IS SUCH TOLERANCE IN LONDON. YOU CAN BE WHO YOU ARE

I live between London and Berlin, but I don't know about you. You're a week in Paris, a week in London, back in Switzerland... What is your base? Do you have a base?

I do have a base: Paris, where I moved twenty years ago and where I raise my two daughters. I have travelled a lot, to many countries. The project about Islam brought me to Sudan, Syria, Lebanon, to Egypt... But of course I always come back. You need some borders. But with Switzerland, it can be very hard to accept that the Swiss have some kind of blinders. The last thing I was very much disappointed with was this vote against the minarets.

Yes. First there was this Poster campaign all over the country, and then this majority vote actually banning minarets. And I remember on that day you sent an e-mail, which reminded me of Thomas Hirschorn against Blocher, saying you would not show your works in Switzerland anymore.

I had to do something. My two very best friends of twenty years are Muslims, secular Muslims. I am lucky to have them. But the majority of Swiss people have no idea about what Islam is. The minarets were just a pretext to reject something foreign, because they don't know better. But I never actually thought the vote would pass. On the voting day, I was in the Tate Gallery with my friend, he got a text message and said "it passed" and I said: "it's not possible." But it had. And now I live in the Whitechapel area, "Banglatown" as it's nicknamed, and there is such tolerance here. You can be who you are. Banning the veil, that is what they are discussing now in Paris. England and France were both powerful countries with a lot of colonies. How did they deal with them? France wouldn't let go and wars were fought. I have the feeling that the British let the colonies go. And now, with Banglatown, you have this colony in London. They are here, helping with the economy. So who is right? Which country is handling the situation best? It's very interesting. I'm trying to find the answer.

So that is your current project. That might be the next book.

I don't know, but I'm working on it. Something will definitely come out of it.

You must have huge archives. How many photographs do you have in store? How are they organized? Is it a kind of a gigantic mnemosic atlas à la Abi Warburg? How does it work?

I'm a mess, you can't imagine. I'm not like Gilbert and George at all. It's one big chaos. I'm the only one who can find anything in there. If I die, you can throw everything away. I kept a small studio in Bern that is still full of big boxes and stuff. I've often dreamt for it to burn down and that I would be rid of it, because I don't dare to get rid of it myself. I'm hoping for fate to free me of all of it. That's why a book is good. What's not in the book, you can forget about.

About your books, you've done so many, which ones are your favourite? The ones you felt were a real breakthrough, where you'd found a language? Your first book was about Bern.

Under the Arcades of Bern, in front of my door. You can walk from the station to the Bear pit without getting wet.

WHAT'S NOT IN THE BOOK, YOU CAN FORGET ABOUT

Who published it?

Verbandsdruckerei, in 1978. Early on. There was already a writer, Servius Golowin, who was interested because he studied ghosts.

And then?

Then there was a folk music festival on the Gurten mountain. I covered it for three days and I did a book. It was crazy, a challenge. The third was about the Swiss Parliament, the title is Bundeshaus-Fotografien.

Parliament is obviously a fascinating place. It reminds me of Maqbool Fida Husain, the Indian avant-garde artist of the Independence, who was actually an elected Member of Parliament. He never spoke, he would only draw. And in the end everybody was very surprised because he produced this big book, from inside the Parliament, the Sansad Portfolio. There seems to be some connection.

At the same time as I was working in the Parliament, with the politicians and these old people pretending they were holier than thou, I was a stage photographer for the theatre. And sometimes I forgot whether I was in the Parliament or in the theatre. I still see myself as a stage photographer.

The whole world is a stage.

Yes, the world is a big stage and I am still a stage photographer, if you like.

What followed the book on Parliament?

Switzerland. I went to the Emmental, to lots of places. I remember going to the solar races in Biel, they were called "Tour de sol".

THE ONLY WAY TO ACHIEVE REALISTIC PICTURES IS TO STEAL THEM

The beginning of the ecological awakening.

Yes. And I made one picture that was very good in the sense that it showed a clashing of worlds, as horses driving a carriage reared in fright in front of a solar car. The picture was so amazing that people started saying that I staged my pictures, that I made them up. They said this cannot be real, that I was always pushing and provoking the situation.

You were accused of manipulation.

Yes. And that is the worst thing you can accuse me of, because that is exactly what I don't do.

So Photoshop never played a role?

To me, Photoshop is the enemy. Today, photography is no longer real. Every picture you see, be it in magazines or elsewhere, is completely staged. Even the access to the images is controlled, so that people know you are coming and are putting on a show. They are never themselves. That's why I use this camera. You can take photos without looking through the viewfinder and nobody notices when you are actually pressing the shutter button. It's the only way to achieve realistic pictures.

So the computer hasn't really changed anything?

No. It helps with the working material, to compare pictures on the screen, because the panoramic camera is very poor quality. I actually think this limited quality plays a part in my work, because that's the reality. It must be this quality, as reality is never perfect. For me, it's the best. The pictures are sincere. And there is a loss of sincerity in every moment today.

So after the Parliament, the Emmental, then it becomes a portrait of Switzerland...

Bigger and bigger and bigger.

So, it's a portrait of the world?

Of the human being, I would say.

Joseph Beuys once said that everybody is an artist, but he specified "every human being is an artist, as long as he is really human". Would you agree?

That's very good, yes. But what is human? And how many humans are human? That's the big question. There is a lot of inhumanity around. To be human, you have to look around you and explore. That's what I try to do. I know that photography cannot change the world, but it can be a trigger, a kind of electroshock for brains that are a bit tired and don't want to think. It provokes further thinking.

So you can break indifference.

You can add food for thought.

Have you ever done cities? Portraits of cities?

That would be Cairo. I had a flat downtown, on the sixth floor. There, again, I walked out of my building and took pictures of the neighbourhood. After a few weeks, I meet this gallery owner who tells me I'm a famous artist from Switzerland, and that he will do an exhibition of my work while I'm in Cairo. I agree and send him eight panoramic pictures. No reaction. A week later, I get a call. He says he's lost sleep, that if he shows my work he will lose the gallery. I say that I can't see where the problem is, that these pictures show the banal, everyday life of Cairo, how is that dangerous? Then, I go to a printer. He takes one look at the work and says he is not allowed to print the pictures, that they're "press material" and have to be submitted to censorship. I know there is a strong censorship in Egypt, but I couldn't see the connection. It was self-censorship and also, to me, hypocrisy. Why couldn't you take pictures of things that everybody sees everyday on the streets and have them shown? That's when I met Alaa Al-Aswani.

The author of The Yacoubian Building.

Yes, his work is all about the hypocrisy of the society. So we spent nights smoking in his dentist's office. Then I found another printer and didn't tell anyone about my project anymore. I went to the twelfth floor of my building. The Nubians, economic refugees from the South of Egypt, live on the rooftops of Cairo. My building was right out of the Yacoubian building, with people praying while I walked out of the elevator on Fridays and the poor on the rooftops. And I did a one-day-long exhibition on the rooftop slums. Until the very last minute, a guy dressed in civilian clothes but pretending he was a policeman tried to prevent it. Eventually one hundred people came to see the pictures and drink tea served by the Nubians.

We started with René Gardi, who obviously comes from the literary world, now we have Alaa Al-Aswani. There is a long tradition of collaboration between literature and photography. Did you collaborate with poets, with writers?

Encounters always happen by chance. I felt very close to Aswani and he felt the same. He was ashamed that I could not do my gallery show.

Anybody else you had exchanges with, Paul Nizon?

I did meet him, but we never worked together. I did not

work with Aswani either, it was just a very inspiring exchange. The biggest collaboration I've had is with Mohammed Sou-dani, the filmmaker. He's very interesting, with an extraordinary story. He's black, which made it difficult for him in Algeria, as the country sees itself as a white country and does not want to be part of black Africa. As a Black person, what do you do to be successful in a white country? You play football. He was a very good footballer, got into the national team. He goes to Switzerland for a match, where a guy notices him and says, if you want to come and play here, give me a call. Mohammed used to work as a cameraman for the national television. When he had to do the military service, they chose him to be president Boumédiène's cameraman and he had to record the dictator's speeches, which he didn't want to do, so he called the Swiss guy and fled the country for Switzerland. He's Black, African, Muslim, Arab and a good Swiss. So he has a great mix of cultures in himself, the very best kind of a human being. I knew I could trust him and work with him in Algeria. A lot of French television channels wanted my connections in Algeria for their stories and I always said no. The trust issue was too big. He is really a very good friend and that is one of the reasons I decided to do something after the minarets ban.

HE'S BLACK, AFRICAN, MUSLIM, ARAB AND A GOOD SWISS

As a sign of solidarity, somehow.

Yes, because of the ignorance. It's not about Islam; it's about what is not Swiss. All that comes from outside Switzerland is evil to the Swiss. They're hypocrites. They're in Europe, but they pretend not to be and don't want to be in it. That is hypocritical. It's like in Cairo. They want it to be about camels, pyramids and Cleopatra and not the reality of daily life in a megalopolis of 8 million people.

One very last question: Rainer Maria Rilke wrote his advice to a young poet. In 2010, what would your advice to a young photographer be?

Just look. It's easy.