



Willem Diepraam, a Slow Photographer

A Gift to the Print Room

• MATTIE BOOM •

The photographer Willem Diepraam, born in 1944, intends to leave the fruits of his long career to the Rijksmuseum. In his own words the Rijksmuseum is 'the soundest ship of art', with top flight works of art and history from all periods. The tradition that it conserves, stretches back to the very origins of printing, reaching the present by way of early photography. Diepraam's photographic work will be in good company there. Diepraam is the photographer of the broad sketch, of the human document, in black and white and many shades of grey in between. Every photographic print has weight and a certain gravity. He photographed a family on the deck of their barge; a couple strolling in a run-down district in The Hague and a group of caravan dwellers: slowly, quietly and frankly. Sometimes everything is concentrated into a single head that fills the picture. But the picture may also remain empty. A salt lake on the Caribbean island of Bonaire is a white line in the middle of the composition; only on closer scrutiny do we see the faint drawing in grainy white. There is always a reasoned, spare composition, and far-reaching direction of light and dark.

Diepraam's oeuvre will eventually be housed in the Rijksprentenkabinet alongside series by image makers from all over the world, be they print-makers from previous centuries or

Mali, 1981.
Gelatin silver print,
606 x 505 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
RP-F-2009-210.

photographers from the nineteenth and twentieth. In that company are the great photographers to whom he is indebted – Roger Fenton, André Kertész, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank. There are also minor artists, whom he more or less discovered himself as a collector – William Post with his white snow landscapes, Karl Struss with little gems of subtle platinum prints, and the deep, dark photographs of the streets of Glasgow by Thomas Annan. Diepraam's position as both photographer and collector invites us to look and compare, and also raises questions about the development of visual culture over time. What happened in the period between the sixteenth century, when an engraver worked literally for months on the production of one image, and our own time when communication rolls on never-endingly as a colourful image? Diepraam, who loved and loves to take his time, to look with concentration, occupies an interesting in-between position among his contemporaries. In essence he developed a kind of slow photography before the term was coined. In our digital age more and more photographers and artists are rediscovering the old analogue approach in broadly-sketched and highly-detailed scenes. And that is precisely what Diepraam's hunt for

the essence of photography has been, but a couple of decades ago.

Diepraam has become famous as the photographer who determined the image of the weekly news magazine *Vrij Nederland* in the 1970s.¹ This relationship made him a photo-journalist, close to social reality. Week in, week out, one or more photographs – Dutch and foreign affairs – had to be run alongside the reports, so Diepraam's images, which also appeared in journals like *Nieuwe Revu* and *De Groene* between 1969 and 1990, were a constant presence in the lives of countless Dutch people. Stories for which he supplied pictures included the fall of the colonels' regime in Greece, the Carnation Revolution and the end of Salazar's rule in Portugal, while on home ground he produced very diverse work on topical subjects. He also took numerous portraits in interviews with politicians, philosophers, authors and other public figures for *Vrij Nederland*. What went on abroad was important to him. In 1975 he and his reporter colleague Gerard van Westerloo, with their families, went to the newly independent Surinam. From the end of the 1970s onwards he travelled to Africa on several occasions to take pictures in the Sahel countries. In the nineteen-eighties, charity work for Médecins Sans Frontières resulted in series about Sudan, Uganda and Nicaragua. In 1988 his photographic career at the magazine came to an end with a very personal weekly column in the form of a single colour photograph over an entire spread in colour.

It is interesting to see how shrewdly Diepraam managed to sidestep the obstacles of the time in his photographic work. That 'heavily politicized' era, as he described it, was compelling and dominant, and there were many incidents of social unrest. Like other European countries, the Netherlands experienced student revolts, but in a light-hearted – frivolous – form. This was the point at which Diepraam

began his career in 1968, as a student of medicine and sociology, taking pictures for *Student* magazine. In other parts of Europe things were more difficult. Portugal, Greece and Spain were still living under dictatorships and the press followed the fall of these regimes with intense interest. Further afield, there was the war in Vietnam, while the independence of its colony of Surinam had an impact on the Netherlands in the mid-1970s. In the years that followed – the early 1980s – there was much economic unrest with factory closures and job losses. As a consequence the political arena was characterized by a polarization between left and right. But Diepraam always detached himself from it. 'In demonstrations I couldn't bring myself to shout "Johnson murderer", although there was a lot to be said for it as a rallying cry. I walked alongside the crowds or on the fringes, never in the midst of them. My camera often legitimized my presence and could also act as a shield between me and the others.'²

Working for the politically engaged magazine *Vrij Nederland* with its left-wing views might have meant that the social involvement in his photography was taken to exaggerated viewpoints and harsh – possibly too harsh – contrasts. But the photographer was not trapped in the movements of his time, although it could easily have happened because of the compelling rhythm of weekly journalism when the public's demands had to be met week after week. The project that culminated in *Frimangron* (1975), the book on Surinam, was a turning point. Diepraam wanted to take photographs that made lasting impressions as images and compositions, whereas his colleague Van Westerloo was concerned with getting the story. This led to some friction during their stay in Surinam – it came down to the fact that Diepraam was occupied with photography that was becoming increasingly personal, while Van Westerloo wanted to con-

centrate on what was going on in the country. Nevertheless the two have always remained great friends. It was only later – on a visit to a photographic exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in New York – that Van Westerloo, himself an outstanding stylist, understood what Diepraam had actually meant with image and composition and that there was such a thing as photographic art.

This concentration on the form had begun as early as 1973, when Diepraam was invited to exhibit in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven with the German photographer August Sander in a *Konfrontatie* (the title of the series exhibitions curated by Jean Leering). It came as a great shock; you could also take good photographs by leaving things out. 'What Sander did was almost nothing; absolute peace, something that looked like complete control. The stylistic simplicity with which he took portraits, made a huge impression on me. I found it exciting; in a situation in which the obvious meaning was not there he made something from nothing and thus gave it a specific meaning after all.'³ It was actually a question of letting go of the action or the narrative element in the photograph, a release from the constraint that the public expected something from him. A picture could be built up and speak from its own associations. In point of fact it was about looking slowly and with concentration. Diepraam became the photographer of the *longue durée*. 'The camera goes along with me like an extra instrument in my head.'⁴

In his personal life he suffered a tragedy that undoubtedly contributed to the fusion of personal life and photography. He lost his wife and two of his children in a plane crash on Tenerife in 1977. That meant the final letting go and another way of approaching photography: focusing on the power – and not the powerlessness – of life. In the photographic album *Sahel*,

which he made shortly after that, he did not manage to show Africa and the Sahel region at their worst. He could not – nor did he want to – avoid joy and family relationships. He wanted to capture life as it really was in circumstances totally different from those in the rich West. To do otherwise would be to produce the stereotypical images of Africa that were common currency at the time. This was expressed again in the 1989 series about life in the slums of Lima.⁵ Even in a tormented existence, life can still be worth living in spite of everything.

The focus on the photographic image was reinforced by a growing awareness of a stand-alone 'artistic' history of photography. After the photographic work by August Sander at the joint exhibition in 1973 had made such a deep impression on Diepraam, he hungered for more. 'I became painfully aware of the constraints of my work. I began to see everything that it was not about.' A period of examining and comparing photography intently followed. 'Like a man possessed I began to collect photo albums, photographs and actually all photographic materials. At that time it was easy because no one was interested in it.'⁶ Diepraam started to collect photographs, not confining himself to Dutch photography. He bought photographs by William Henry Fox Talbot, Julia Margaret Cameron, Peter Henry Emerson, Eva Besnyö, Cas Oorthuys, Robert Frank and André Kertész. 'What remained was a passion. If I have ever been a true collector it was in the late seventies and early eighties. Collecting had become a fascinating hobby.'⁷ As early as 1978 he had considered approaching Til Gardiniers, the then Dutch minister of culture, with a bold plan to systematically buy international photography for the Dutch State.⁸ It did not happen immediately, but by a roundabout route it did eventually come to pass. Diepraam continued to buy photo-

graphy, and along the way he diverted a lot of work to the institutions in the Netherlands that collect and look after photographs. His discoveries and purchases now make up a significant part of the public collections in the Netherlands, particularly where the fine art aspect of photography is concerned. In 1987 the collection of twentieth-century photography (around four hundred photographs) went to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the nineteenth-century collection (504 photographs) went to the Rijksmuseum. In 2005 the Rijksmuseum acquired a second collection (525 photographs); this time the collection that he had amassed with his present wife Shamanee Kempadoo, with a strong emphasis on the twentieth century.

On many occasions Diepraam has said that taking photographs is easy and that anyone who practises it can do it – ‘the people’s art par excellence’. But he himself devoted a great deal of time and effort to looking intently in order to get to the heart of the matter. At a certain point, the photographer had a clear idea of what he could and could not express with the camera – and in the darkroom. Taking a picture is actually not so simple. Photography is wandering around and searching. ‘I never had the idea that I had to take a particular kind of photograph. When I came across something that seemed photographically interesting, I tried it out and made the best I could of it. For me it was actually always the same regardless of whether I was standing up to my knees in mud or in a studio environment, whether the situation was chaotic or calm. I always tried more or less consciously to bring together elements of reality that yielded interesting associations. These associations give the picture meaning.’ In the darkroom he focused on the expressive possibilities of the print to make the photograph even better. Every square centimetre counts and is thought through. There is grain,

contrast, composition, movement, and somewhere the contact with the people or situations in the photographs is expressed too. The chemistry of the shot has to come together perfectly in the arrangement of the print – through shade, light, in the visible structure of the nuances, all that held together in a solid composition. Now and then something is accentuated or held back. It is that synergy of all these factors that makes a photograph good. It was no different with colour – there has to be balance there, too. Diepraam’s work is anything but easy or superficial.

The photographer is sixty-seven now; he looks back and discovers and rediscovers some of his own works – work in colour that has a totally different dynamic from the black-and-white work. ‘All in all, photography was a great voyage of discovery for me. The art market was not yet so restricted – I was not a portrait photographer, or a foreign or domestic photographer. Now photographers like Koos Breukel or Rineke Dijkstra have to stick much more to their genre; it is as if they are locked up in their niches. These days it is far more difficult to delve into other genres – in my day I was actually able to try everything. And I do not see any difference or hierarchy in the kinds of subjects’. The photographer is always ‘editing’, making strict selections in his own work. He knows without question whether the photograph conveys what it should convey. And the knowledge of one hundred and seventy years of photographic tradition is always there in the background. Diepraam knows all of the photographs from Fox Talbot up to and including those by Wessing, Koudelka and Salgado down to the finest detail. He knows how they organized their images and how they made their prints. He has a clear view about what is happening today. He never stops revisiting and chewing over his own work. At the moment he is reconsidering the nudes, which make up an individual group – selecting, printing

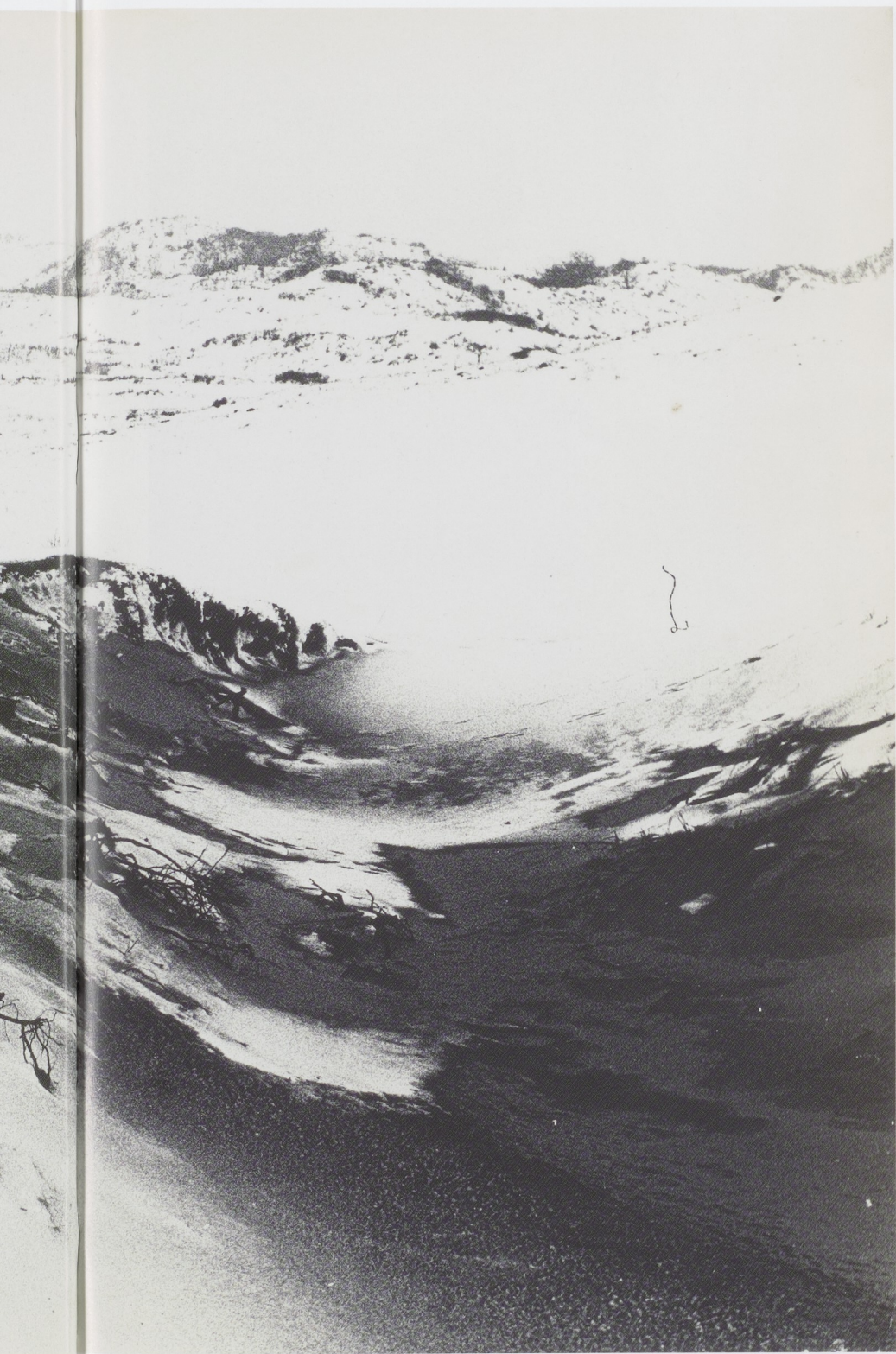
proofs and eventually putting them on paper on a large scale in his dark room. The power of the work ultimately lies in the print. Everything in it – observation and execution – must come together perfectly. With most photographers there is a world of difference between a print they made in 1975 and one they made yesterday, and their prints come in many different variations, but not in Diepraam's case. We always see the same signature and the same look: hard graft on baryta paper from the dark room: print, hold back, burn in and retouch endlessly. A print in grey (Sahel), a print in white (Lima), a print in black (Hoogovens). He is the master of every facet of this technique. It is telling that Diepraam's style was already unmistakably present in the early work, for instance in the graphic landscape of IJmuiden dating from 1960 and in a thoughtful portrait of a Greek family from 1963. Even then, everything in the photograph had to come together perfectly: the (big) story, a point, gentle comment and superior craft. 'When it's good it becomes art,' says the photographer, 'but photography is a small art, not to be compared with a great art like music.'

A life spent taking photographs: what do you have at the end of it, and what does a photographic legacy actually consist of? Generally it is many thousands of prints, on all kinds of paper and in all kinds of sizes. Where most photographers are concerned, there is little form or structure. The basis of these people's work is tucked away in negative files and in contact books. That still leaves a mass of prints (from all sorts of periods) on baryta paper and on polyethylene paper, as well as numerous slides. The work that will survive over time is still hidden in this mass. However this is not the case with Diepraam; the 'oeuvre' has already more or less crept out: it is a small set of severely edited – and in the eyes of the photographer – successful photographs, which he had

previously published in monographic or thematic photograph books.⁹ He has a clear opinion about them: every photograph is one in its own right, the picture stands for an observed situation. One photograph has to tell the story perfectly, whether it is journalism, personal or politically charged. A little like Henri Cartier-Bresson's 'decisive moment' – but different. Eight hundred photographs will eventually end up in the Rijksmuseum's 'Diepraam' boxes. The photographer himself thinks that one hundred and fifty at the most will withstand the test of time.

The photo-journalist who ultimately became more of an artist may never have intended it to be like this. But from the Rijksmuseum's perspective, the series reflects the historical development and interests of the Netherlands in the last quarter of the twentieth century. He took stock of what others did not see and photographed it. The Dutch landscape in the rain, the bad feelings during the coronation in 1980, a respectful portrait of anti-abortion demonstrators. His 'slow journalism' shows us the Netherlands in the late twentieth century in a very different way and a very different light. Because Diepraam looked much further afield than his own country, the Rijksmuseum will acquire interesting series showing the development of South European countries approaching the twenty-first century, and the period of decolonization. The latter provides a sizable photographic record of people and life in the West. The extensive series of photographs from Africa is a completely new addition to the Rijksmuseum's collection. And finally, one last aspect of Diepraam's oeuvre cannot remain unmentioned here – the extraordinary documentation of his own family life over a period of forty years. These are all – without exception – series from a consistent oeuvre that are in keeping with the Rijksmuseum's collecting policy and the collections on which it focuses.





IJmuiden, 1960.
Gelatin silver print,
435 x 597 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum.





*Kymon Rigouli,
Greece, 1963.
Gelatin silver print,
400 x 297 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum.*

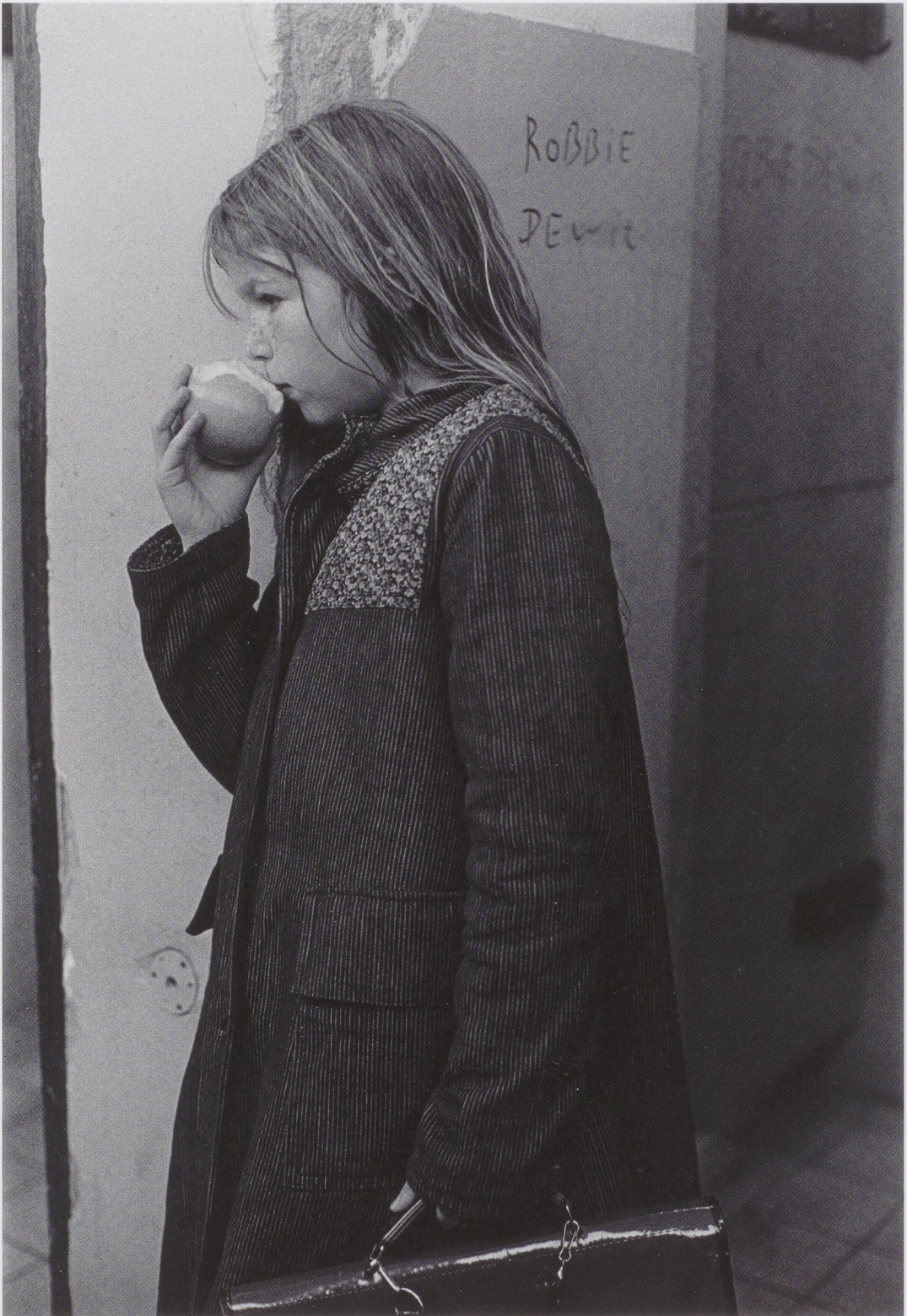
*Schilderswijk,
The Hague, 1972.
Gelatin silver print,
234 x 284 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum.*



Karolien, Amsterdam, 1976. Gelatin silver print, 403 x 311 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

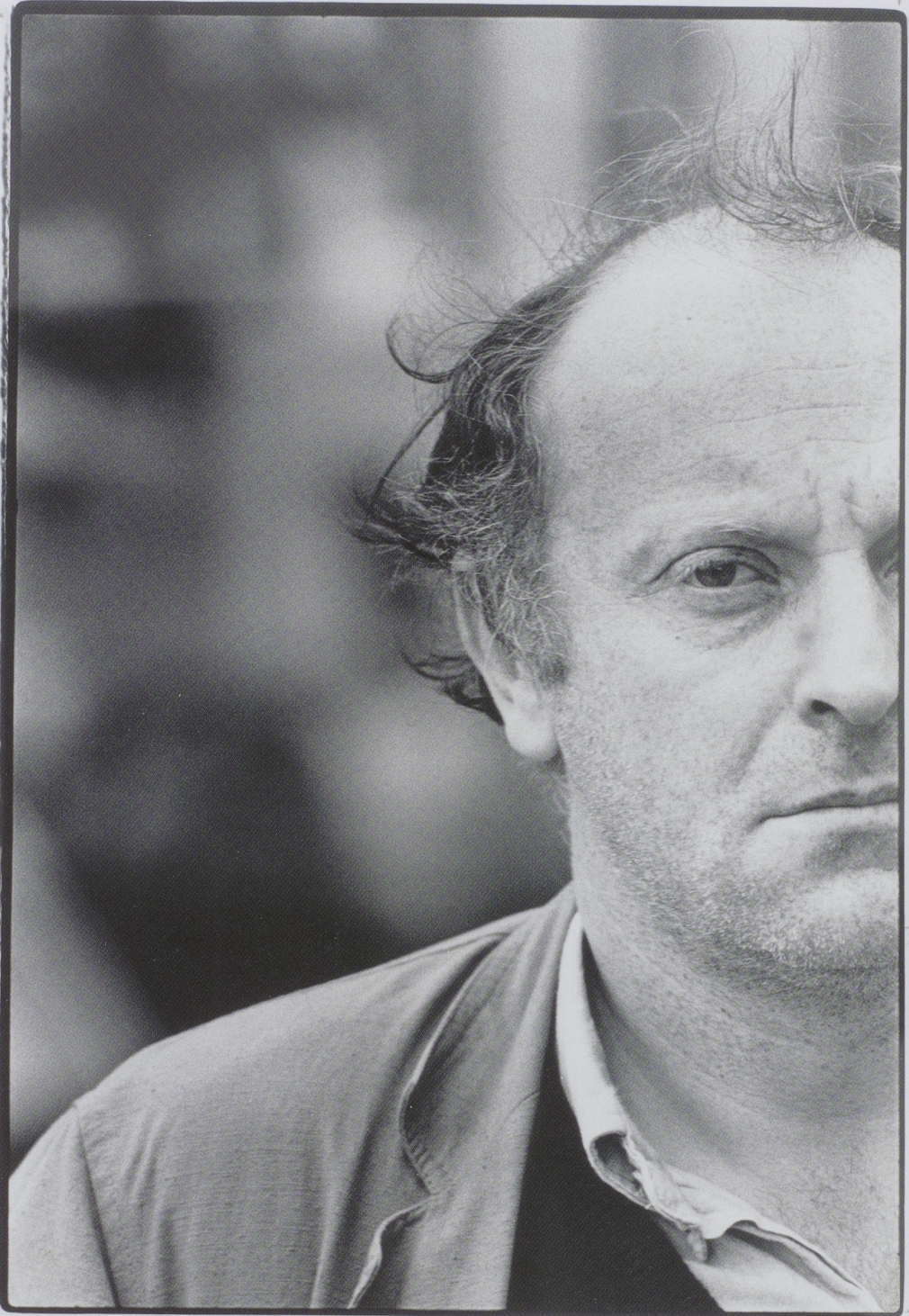
Paramaribo, Poptjii-Djari (Surinam), 1975. Gelatin silver print, 565 x 432 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, RP-F-2009-203.

pages 404-05 North Holland, 1976. Gelatin silver print, 320 x 479 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, RP-F-2006-105.











Coronation Day,
Amsterdam, 1980.
Gelatin silver print,
459 x 590 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
RP-F-2009-211.

Portrait of Joseph
Brodsky, 1982.
Gelatin silver print,
405 x 309 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum.



*Portrait of the
Photographer
Ed van der Elsken,
1988.
Later inkjet print,
431 x 632 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum.*



*Villa El Salvador,
7th sector, 1989.
Later inkjet print,
431 x 632 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum.*





Shamane, Spain,
c. 1986.
Gelatin silver print,
430 x 635 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum.



Nude, c. 1987.
Gelatin silver
print, 416 x 541 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum.

*Industrial landscape
at the Hoogovens
factory near IJmuiden,
1995.*
Gelatin silver print,
407 x 577 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum.



NOTES

- 1 The monograph by A. Wanaverbecq and C. van Esterik, *Willem Diepraam*, Amsterdam 2001, contains an excellent and comprehensive biography by van Chris van Esterik, pp. 30-165.
- 2 'Bij demonstraties kon ik de kreet "Johnson moordenaar" niet uit mijn strot krijgen, hoewel er voor die leus toch veel te zeggen viel. Ik liep naast of aan de rand van mensen-massa's, nooit ertussenin. Mijn camera was vaak de legitimatie van mijn aanwezigheid en kon ook dienen als schild tussen mij en de anderen.' W. Diepraam, 'Van fotograaf naar verzamelaar en verder', *Jong Holland* (1999) 4, p. 6.
- 3 'Wat Sander deed was haast niets: volstrekte rust, iets dat leek op volstrekte beheersing. Die stilistische eenvoud waarmee hij die portretten maakte, maakte heel veel indruk op me. Ik vond dat spannend: in een situatie waarin de overduidelijke betekenis er niet was, maakte hij iets uit het niets en gaf het zo toch een bepaalde betekenis.' Esterik, op. cit. (note 1), p. 81.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 7. 'De camera is bij me gaan horen als een extra instrument in mijn hoofd.'
- 5 This resulted in Willem Diepraam's photo book (design by Jan van Toorn), *Lima*, Amsterdam/The Hague 1991.
- 6 'Ik werd me pijnlijk bewust van de beperkingen van mijn werk. Ik begon te zien wat het allemaal niet was. Ik begon als een bezetene fotoboeken, foto's en eigenlijk alle beeld dragers van fotografie te verzamelen. Dat was in die tijd eenvoudig, want niemand was daarin geïnteresseerd.' Diepraam, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 6-11; W. Diepraam, 'Uit de handel. Het verzamelen van foto's', *Jong Holland* (1998) 1, pp. 4-7.
- 7 'Wat bleef was een passie. Als ik ooit een echte verzamelaar ben geweest dan was dat eind jaren zeventig, tot begin jaren tachtig. Verzamelen was een interessante hobby geworden.' Diepraam, op. cit. (note 2), p. 9.
- 8 Martin Schouten, 'De plannen van Willem Diepraam: "Vijf miljoen en je hebt de toppen van de fotografie"', *Haagse Post*, 2 December 1978, pp. 84-85.
- 9 To begin with Gerard van Westerloo (intr.), *Willem Diepraam Foto's/Photographs*, Amsterdam 1988.