

# HARRY GRUYAERT

## A FREUDIAN PERSPECTIVE

### RETROSPECTIVE

29 September 2020 - 28 February 2021

Kunsthal Helmond

Museum Helmond proudly presents the first retrospective exhibition in the Netherlands, of the Belgian photographer Harry Gruyaert.

### HARRY GRUYAERT

Gruyaert was born in Antwerp in 1941 and is considered to be one of the most important European pioneers of colour photography. In his work he captures both the hectic street life as the silence of the coastal landscape. Gruyaert has been a member of the Magnum Photos agency since 1982.



Harry Gruyaert is an exceptional photographer, able to capture in his photographs his pure emotions and at the same time the true essence of human identity.

### WHAT IS PHOTOGRAPHY TO HARRY GRUYAERT?

Let's step back in time and picture Freud - it's a warm september evening in 1907 and he is standing in Rome in the Piazza Colonna watching a lantern slide show - still slides and short films that are projected on the roofs of the buildings in the square. He documented this particular experience in much detail in his journal. He richly describes how every time he tries to turn away, a certain tension in the attending crowd keeps him gazing at the lights projections.

## COLOUR SPEAKS FOR ITSELF

Gruyaert discovered the kingdom of colour during the 70s decade of the last century. Until that point, colour photography was mostly reserved for advertising photography. His photographs are full of colour and significance - containing striking accents of red, green or blue. As Harry Gruyaert mentions himself:

*"The colour is a means, a way of sculpting what I see. The colour does not illustrate a subject or a scene, but is a value in itself".*



## OWN PERSONAL PLEASURE

*"I have no message, I don't want to tell a story through my photographs. I am not a journalist photographer. I am not looking for meaning; I only work for myself, for my own personal pleasure, my own discoveries. I am always looking for sensuality, both in light and colour [...] And for the rest, everyone can have his or her own interpretation."*

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We cannot compare the media back then with the development in the media that we are experiencing nowadays, but we can get a grasp of the addictive influence it already had even though it did not even reached its peak of engagement.

Why this remark? Harry Gruyaert has a very close connection if not an addictive relationship with his fotocamera. In his documentary *Harry Gruyaert - Fotograaf - Close Up*, he states in fact that he would not know what to do with his life if he would have to stop taking photographs. His camera is his companion in life, acting almost as an extension of his own body.



In his personality theory, Freud considered the human psyche to be structured into three parts: the id, ego and the superego.

According to Freud psychoanalytic theory, the id is the primitive and instinctive component of our personality. It is through this impulsive part of our psyche that we respond directly and immediately to our basic urges, needs, and desires. The id operates on the pleasure principle, as such we feel the urge

to satisfy our wishful impulses almost immediately, regardless of the consequences. If we act with the intention to satisfy the demands of the id we experience immediate pleasure, on the other hand, if we deny these wishful impulses then we experience tension and frustration.

The urge to take photographs experienced by Harry could be compared to the wishful impulses of the id. In his documentary Harry describes in a very vivid way the emotions that he experiences during the process of taking photographs as well as his frustrations during the moments in which his desire to take photographs is being denied.



It seems as if in the course of time, photography has become to Harry a kind of a basic, primordial instinct without which he cannot live. In some circumstances this urge for photography acts as a form of emotional relieve, as a form of catharsis.

Catharsis comes from the Greek (κάθαρσις) *Katharsis* - meaning purgation or clarification of emotions. This term has been used by Plato and Aristoteles as to describe the arousal of emotions

## THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ID

*"Traveling together with my family is no good idea because I always want to stop and take photos. If we can meet in the evening that is fine"*

*"But if we sit together in the car and I see interesting things, and I want to take pictures but I cannot, then I get frustrated."*

HARRY GRUYAERT

## EMOTION IN PHOTOGRAPHY

*"For me, it is essential that the pleasure I feel in taking my photographs comes across to whoever is looking at them [...]  
For me, visual art is about emotion."*

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## CATHARSIS

*"In 1966, I was losing my girlfriend to her new lover. So, I decided to make a movie about her and him, hoping that, when she saw the result, she would understand how much I loved her."*

*"Filming her, I was able to create distance. I was able to set myself free. I understood her and myself better. I was able to let her go. This became an important thing in my photography, to be less there and more there at the same time."*

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through theatrical drama, particularly pity and fear, as to accomplish a Katharsis of such emotions.

Later on, in the twentieth century, this term was adopted by Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer. In their psychoanalytic theory catharsis is described as the act of emotional release through a physical activity or another stress-relieving activity.

Gruyaert states that photography for him is all about emotions. In fact, he suggests that in 1966 he used photography as a means to process his break up with his girlfriend, affirming that the mere physical act of photographing his ex-partner offered him closure and helped him process his emotions. If catharsis is the emotional relief of emotions through a physical act then it could be argued that Gruyaert uses photography as a means of processing his emotions, therefore photography becoming a cathartic act in itself.

Driven by his id Harry achieves through photography an emotional relief that functions as a pleasurable drive that cannot be constrained. In other terms, he is able to achieve a state of ataraxia. According to the Epicurean theory, ataraxia being the most desirable state of pleasure in organic life - a lucid state of equanimity (psychological stability), free from distress and worry.

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