

The Magic in Youth

Sunil Shah, 2022

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The photographs in *Teen Spirit* can be interpreted in a few different ways. On first glance, I am curious - how do I read them? However, a sense of visual layers soon becomes apparent. As is often the case with images, unless positioned to adhere to a text forcibly, they operate as what Claude Lévi-Strauss termed *floating signifiers*. If untethered from their textual anchors, we can allow them the freedom to move in and out of possible meanings. Some artists play with these possibilities, as does Vincen Beeckman in the preceding images.

In Vincen's series of photographs, taken from a social practice project and a specific engagement with youth from Charleroi in Belgium, we see layers of visual and contextual information. We see the documentation of a project, now built up as an archive from which this edited selection is made. We see a representation of the young people involved in the project as they act out situations, aspirations, and moments of ordinary playfulness as well as quotidian and almost mundane reality. Above all, we see Vincen's vision as a photographer, his own aesthetic sensibilities realised through his commitment to the project and its participants.

Social engagement has perhaps gained a greater profile in the work of photographic artists in recent times. Partly, this comes from a greater emphasis placed by institutions and funding bodies on audience and public engagement. Partly, it comes out of a renewed need to address the politics of representation in photographic practice where power relations typically biased towards the photographer or editor, can be addressed through processes of full or partial collaboration with those featured in the resulting images. Neither of these two reasons are necessarily related but find themselves currently enmeshed as strategies which to some degree relinquish a one-sided narrative and view of the world.

Nevertheless, conversations around the way in which artists relate to their subjects have now broadened as well as, hopefully, the way programmes and projects now have aims towards placing the needs of the participants before those of the programmers and the commissioned artists. When we evaluate projects like this one in Charleroi, naturally questions arise around the intentions of the project and commission, the benefits to the participants and the future of the engagement. In terms of this project, in conversation with the artist, it became apparent that the engagement was one of mutual learning, growth and opportunity. This is something that does not necessarily have tangible, measurable outcomes but is made possible in the quality of the relationship that is nurtured between those involved. This cannot be underestimated - creativity, understanding and opportunities for realising personal growth and transformation are the most valuable of life experiences that we can take from one another. Vincen, tells me, *he* is still learning and has no intention of abandoning this project or the people he has worked with in the course of the past two years.

So, what then of the situations which unfold before Vincen's lens? Unlike some anthropological problem, there is no requirement in this project for him so assume a 'fly on the wall' relationship to its focus of attention. There is no strict reportage element sought here. In fact, I would argue there is little traditional photographer-subject dynamic at play here but in the practicalities of production. Vincen and the individuals he works with are one and the same, a consciousness, an ebb and flow of human interaction. The images are a result of proximity and the intimacy it allows. There are conversations, vocal *and* silent. An understanding, a trust, and a knowing collaboration in which

those that are depicted in the images, accept their complicity in the creative photographic documentation of situations that reveal themselves in the act of being together. Far from needing direction, young people are the architects of their own visual identities today. In possession of a high degree of social media literacy, these individuals realise the possibilities available to them when someone around them wields a phone or a camera. There is a readiness to perform and create a happening, astute to the cinematic and narrative possibilities. A makeshift theatre is created in the presence of Vincen - a production in the making.

The result as seen in the exhibition and in these pages, is a combination of various scenes of activity and co-production. These may be group or individual decisions because when an instance of meaning becomes apparent for the camera, Vincen shoots. An understanding of Charleroi and its people, the development of friendships with these young people and his own experience of youth provide the photographer with all the necessary information needed to identify when certain moments resonate pictorially or cinematically with his co-creators. There are "straight" poses, like for instance, the beautiful young woman, leaning gently on the car, the braids of her hair as carefully arranged as the learned pose, clearly connoting an aspiration towards fashion. There are scenes of work, young men in what appears as an auto-workshop, in training, perhaps to become mechanics. Also, the capture of more impulsive scenes, like a walk or time spent exploring in what looks like nature, the rural surroundings of Charleroi, spaces which function as places of freedom and play, perhaps an escape from more urban or domestic environments.

These young people, on the cusp of adulthood, are on the threshold between recent school education and the prospect of work. It is at this liminal stage of life that dreams are imagined and if the right conditions allow, these dreams might be fulfilled. Despite all the hurdles, exclusion, lack of opportunities that will be met every day, at this stage of life they exude a magic which will sustain them, inhabiting their own ecosystem and relying heavily on each other for support. It is a passion for life, for friends, for desires, for the present, unburdened by the weight of the past or the anxieties of the future.

For Vincen, it must be so energising to be amongst these wonderful souls. Perhaps this experience helps recall that time when he, himself was that age, an age full of possibilities. It may be a cliché to speak of the joy of youth and the time of our lives filled with careless abandon. However, I think this patronises and underplays the purity of experience that is youth. The quotes that float alongside these often metaphorically loaded images, speak of some basic truths. As adults, remote from our own youth, these insights are a reminder of the clarity that often eludes us as we live our overly complicated lives. These images in *Teen Spirit* will hopefully fill us with an urge to support our youth and help nurture their passion and energy in positive directions, without which we know can lead to disillusionment and despair. At the same time, they might just help remind us of a spirit that exists in us all, and that sometimes we ought to rekindle it, if nothing else, but to help *us* experience some magic again.