

Jacques Sonck – Portraits 1977-2019 - 25th January - 31st May 2024 at the Fondation A Stichting, Brussels  
'Foundation A Stichting : Jacques Sonck : Portraits 1977-2019' on May 27th 2024 in The Eye of Photography

# THE EYE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

## Foundation A Stichting : Jacques Sonck : Portraits 1977-2019

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John Devos, March 27, 2024

**Jacques Sonck** (1949) is one of those who have shaped 'street photography', and more specifically street portrait. Sonck prefers to blend discreetly into the crowd – and one doesn't expect grand theories or social commitment from him. He is one of Belgium's unsung treasures and certainly deserves wider international attention and recognition.

He studied at Narafi, now part of the Luca School of Arts, which gave him an in-depth knowledge of the photographic medium and a penchant for the analogue process.



Jacques Sonck (1949) himself refers to the influence of icons such as Sander, Avedon, Penn and Arbus on his work. A glance at the exhibition at the Fondation A Stichting will certainly allow you to associate them visually, like the child with the box on his head recalls Irving Penn's portrait in "Saul Steinberg in Nose Mask, New York 1966", just as the gogo girl inevitably transports you to Avedon's American West, and the woman with the veil, the man with the American flag and the two girls in polka-dot dresses inevitably evoke memories of Arbus.

But the comparison doesn't hold completely. There is neither the sociological documentary approach of Sander or Avedon, nor Penn's impressive collection of notorious citizens of the world, nor the psychological intensity and social critique of Diane Arbus (1923-1971).

But what does characterise his style? He opts for neutral expression, background and pose. Sometimes, very occasionally, there is a dialogue when other figures are in the picture. Like the man with the tattoo of 'Marie Louise' on his chest, where you can wonder if the woman in the background bears that name. It is a depiction of the world, his world. A small area in the North of Belgium, bordered by Brussels, Ghent and Antwerp – with the occasional chance trip to the coast or all the way to the South of France or Crete. With him, look for neither the documentary-style "fly on the wall", nor the stolen "hit & run" image.

With Sonck, images are the result of chance encounters with passers-by, a brief dialogue: 'may I photograph you'. After shooting, each goes his or her way again. He chooses subjects with individuality, with a distinctive external feature. His images make you think about 'normal' by introducing the word you accept 'abnormal' at the same time what is deviating from the norm. And that is precisely what Jacques Sonck's photography goes against, it is a subtle manifesto to respect every human being, he stands up for the right to eccentricity, for diversity, and that long before it became fashionable.

To me, Sonck's photography has more parallels with the compassionate gaze of Vivian Maier, who looked at people on the fringes of society with understanding, and with the street photography of Lisette Model (1901-1983) (Arbus' teacher and friend of Weegee) and with images without frills by Irving Penn.

Sonck just adds a location and year as caption, but in the Fondation A Stichting, the photos are presented without captions, No names, no context, the less information we add the better, in the author's own opinion. "In my opinion, my photos don't need too much information. It is more interesting to me when the viewer uses his or her imagination, and fills in his or her own story to the picture." The images are jumbled up – no chronology, no locations. If you look carefully, you can see the sign of time, e.g. in the details that show the fashion, such as the punks or in the changing views on gender.

The exhibition, curated by Roger Szmulewicz of Gallery Fifty One, spans almost 50 years (from the late 1970s to today) and it is striking that it is an oeuvre with a remarkable stylistic and thematic unity. This first exhibition in Brussels (the artist has already had exhibitions in New York, Palencia, Vichy (France) and Palais de Tokyo, Paris) shows 100 street portraits and about 20 studio images.

The founder of the Fondation A Stichting, Mrs Astrid Ullens de Schooten Whettnall, praised Sonck “for his consistent and unique oeuvre where he not only shows a certain zeitgeist but also a certain Belgitude”. Belgitude without beer, comics, French fries or chocolate. And above all, worth seeing, until March 31st at Fondation A Stichting, and hopefully soon after that elsewhere – if possible.

**John Devos**

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**Jacques Sonck / Portraits 1977-2019, until 31 March at the Fondation A Stichting, Brussels.**

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