

Siegal Nina, 'Anton Corbijn: Capturing the Mood of the Music'. www.nytimes.com, 19 May 2015.

Anton Corbijn: Capturing the Mood of the Music

By NINA SIEGAL MAY 19, 2015

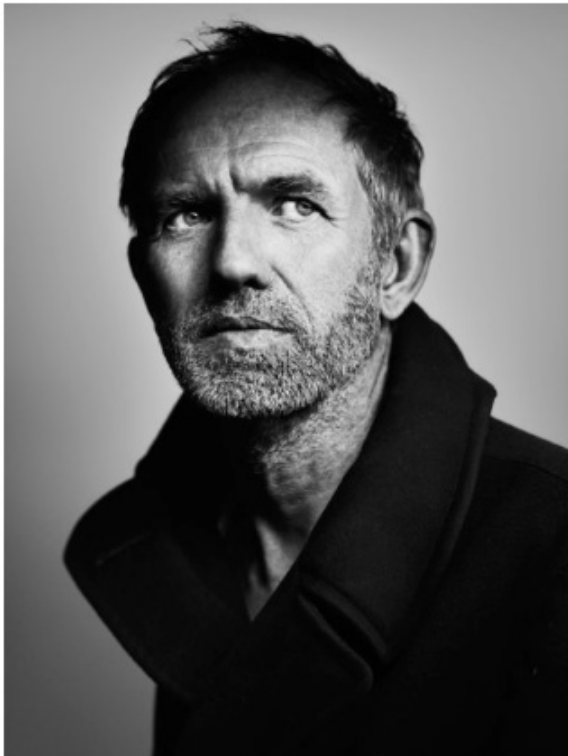


"A. Lennon, Strijen, Holland 2001," by Anton Corbijn from the self-portrait series "A. Somebody."
Anton Corbijn

THE HAGUE — For 40 years, the Dutch photographer and filmmaker [Anton Corbijn](#) has captured some of the most iconic rock musicians and other artists of our era — Bono, Mick Jagger, Björk, William S. Burroughs, Clint Eastwood — for magazines and books. So at first glance his conceptual series, "A. Somebody," featuring what appear to be images of his personal musical heroes, doesn't seem like a major departure.

What is unusual, however, is that all of the portraits – including images of Jimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain, John Lennon and Janis Joplin – were shot in Mr. Corbijn's hometown, the remote village of Strijen, with a population of about 9,000 on the island of Hoeksche Waard, about an hour's drive south of The Hague. What's more, these celebrities had never set foot there. And they were all already dead.

For this series, Mr. Corbijn did something he almost never does: He turned the camera on himself, staging self-portraits in which he dressed himself in wigs, glasses and clothes of these famous ghosts, and mimicked not just their outward appearance, but also their stage personas and facial expressions. In essence, he captured them in self-portrait as he might have photographed them if they were still alive.



The photographer Anton Corbijn. "Some of my most famous pictures were taken in five or 10 minutes," he said. Stephan Vanfleteren

The photographs are part of "Hollands Deep," a Corbijn retrospective that is at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague and running concurrently with a survey exhibition of Mr. Corbijn's music photography, "1-2-3-4," at the Fotomuseum next door. "Hollands Deep" runs until June 21, while "1-2-3-4" has been extended to Aug. 16. These two shows, mounted in celebration of Mr. Corbijn's 60th birthday on Wednesday, suggest the power of the photographer's work in defining a generation of musical stars. At the same time, they explore his complex relationship with the creation of celebrity.

"Anton Corbijn made portrait photography become an art again," the South African artist Marlene Dumas, who is based in Amsterdam, said in an email message.

She collaborated with Mr. Corbijn on their 2000 book "Strippinggirls," with photos and painting of dancers in striptease bars, and has admired his work since.

"After years of light-hearted stuff and pretty pictures of stars all around, here comes this guy that showed photography as a dark art," Ms. Dumas added. "Both his medium and his subjects are seen as being created out of deep shadows and accidental light."

Mr. Corbijn didn't merely shoot images of pop musicians and other artists. He often created a band's entire visual identity, conceiving album covers including graphic design, directing music videos and designing the look and feel of stage tours for bands like Depeche Mode and U2 since the early 1980s.

Mr. Corbijn's images of U2 from the early 1980s to about 2004 are part of "1-2-3-4," as are images of the Rolling Stones from 1980 to 1995, and pictures of newer bands he's taken on, like Arcade Fire.

"His photography was what defined the look of a generation of music," said Kristen Lubben, curator at the International Center of Photography in New York. Ms. Lubben described his look as "disheveled glamour."

The “Hollands Deep” show includes some of Mr. Corbijn’s more iconic images: David Bowie, in a contemplative moment backstage while performing in “The Elephant Man” dressed in nothing but a white loincloth, Elvis Costello flat on his back on a beat-up dressing room couch, his electric guitar lying across his chest; Miles Davis with his eyes wide open and all 10 fingers pressed into his face; Henry Rollins tinged by red paint, screaming right into the camera.



"U2, Tangier 1991"
by Anton Corbijn.
Anton Corbijn

"Some of my most famous pictures were taken in five or 10 minutes," Mr. Corbijn said in a recent interview, sitting on a stool in his studio in The Hague. (It functions mostly as an archive for this vast collection of negatives and prints, since he doesn't really do studio photography.) "I just come on my own with my camera, no assistant, there's no setting up to do, and I'm quickly done," he added. "I don't want to become professional photographer in that sense."

The son of a Protestant parson who grew up in a very religious family in Strijen, Mr. Corbijn said music was his passion growing up, and the link he had to the outside world was through rock magazines and album covers.

"There was a promise of a much more interesting life that came to me from the other side of the water," he said, referring to the mainland across an estuary of the Rhine called Hollands Diep. The Gemeentemuseum show takes its title from the English name of that body of water.

Mr. Corbijn started carrying a camera as a way to get near the stage at concerts. His lack of technical polish was a result, he said, of being largely self-taught, and this led to the rough quality lauded by his admirers. (He said he was rejected by every art school in the Netherlands.)

“He changed the idea that you shoot a rock star as a rock star,” said Benno Tempel, director of the Gemeentemuseum and the Fotomuseum. “By making a photo of the artist, he also made a photo of the music. He understood the mood of the music and he put that mood into his photographs.”

After several years making his name in music magazines like *New Music Express* and *The Face*, by the end of the 1980s Mr. Corbijn was looking for a way to move beyond his own commercial music work. Starting in 1989 with the book “Famouz” and following up in 1996 with “Star Trak,” he created powerful images of other “people in the public eye,” like Christy Turlington crouched naked on a suspension bridge and Clint Eastwood pointing a finger directly at the camera as if to say, “Scram!”

These days, Mr. Corbijn focuses on directing films, such as “A Most Wanted Man” (Philip Seymour Hoffman’s last film) and “The American” with George Clooney, in 2014 and 2010, respectively. The “1-2-3-4” show gave him an opportunity to go back through his personal photo archives. He did this mostly on his own, without the help of Wim van Sinderen, curator at the Fotomuseum.

“A curator couldn’t possibly go through 25,000 films,” Mr. Corbijn said.

He had just finished shooting “Life,” which had its premiere in February at the 65th Berlin International Film Festival. Mr. Corbijn rented an office in Berlin where he edited the footage and, after spending his days in the studio spent his evenings sorting through negatives. This went on for about a year.

“It’s exciting when you find new photographs” he said. “Thirty or 40 years down the line, you look at photographs very differently. You look purely at an image that has some kind of power.”