

CALLUSES ON THE SOUL?

US Troops, Iraq © Teun Voeten

Teun Voeten — War

DEBAT / DÉBAT / DEBATE + TENTOONSTELLING / EXPOSITION / EXHIBITION

25.1 > 16.3.2007 Di/ma/Tu > vr/ve/Fr 11 > 18.00 — gratis/gratuit/free (debat/débat/debate: res. verpl./obl.)

Identity and conflict in the global village (EN) 24.1.2007 20.00

Oologsfotografie: over engagement en onvermogen (NL) 1.2.2007 20.00

VLAAMS-NEDERLANDS HUIS DEBUREN Leopoldstraat 6 rue Léopold, Brussel/Bruelles, 02-212.19.30, info@deburen.eu, www.deburen.eu

TOM ZONDERMAN

EN "MY PHOTOS DO HAVE AN INFLUENCE," SAYS TEUN VOETEN. ON WEDNESDAY, IN DEBUREN (THE CITY-CENTRE DUTCH-FLEMISH CULTURAL CENTRE), THE DUTCH WAR PHOTOGRAPHER WILL DEBATE THE GROWTH IN FUNDAMENTALISM AND MUTUAL INCOMPREHENSION IN THE 21ST CENTURY. THE NEXT DAY, A RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION OPENS WITH SOME OF HIS MOST MOVING PHOTOGRAPHS. ON 1 FEBRUARY HE WILL TALK ABOUT THE DILEMMAS FACED BY WAR PHOTOGRAPHERS.

While the Palestinians are slaughtering each other, I'm having a cosy chat with Teun Voeten (1961) in De Markten, in the heart of Brussels. When he breezes in, Voeten is apologetic: "Sorry, I don't have much time. I have to go to New York tomorrow and I still have to arrange all sorts of things." An Arafat shawl, lighting one cigarette after another, just a cup of coffee for lunch...as with so many war reporters, he is restless by nature. Teun Voeten was born in the Netherlands in 1961, but has lived in Belgium since 1992. "Brussels is the perfect base of operations. It's close to all the major European cities; you have all the embassies; life is not expensive here, and it's relaxed too. When you come back from a tough journey, you don't want too much stress. You want to live in a city that is also a secure village. I never have any problems with culture shock either. I live in Molenbeek. So if, like me, you come back from the Middle East (Voeten is just back from Gaza - TZ), you feel at home straight away (laughs)."

Over the last few years Voeten has worked in one trouble spot after another: Colombia, Chechnya, the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Iraq...

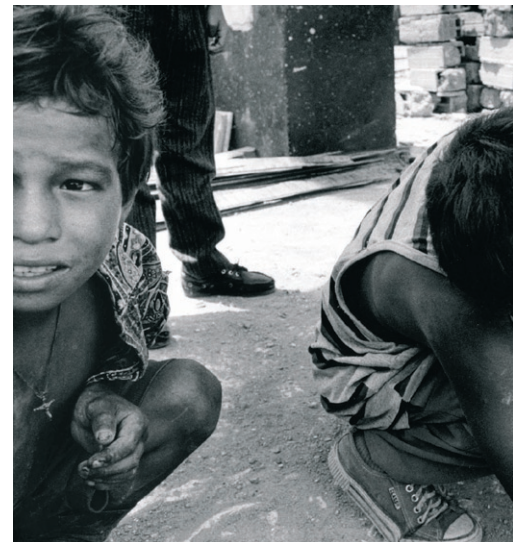
the list, sadly, is a long one. The results of his coverage have been published in, among others, *Vanity Fair*, *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, *National Geographic*, *Vrij Nederland*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, and *De Standaard*. At the same time, he has also done work for UNICEF, Amnesty International, the Red Cross, and Médecins Sans Frontières. Voeten has written two fascinating books, *Tunnelmensen* (1996, about homeless people in New York) and *How De Body* (2002, about his experiences when risking his life in Sierra Leone). At deBuren some 40 photos will offer you a look at the world as seen through the eyes of Teun Voeten - and it doesn't look good.

You're a direct witness to intolerance. At deBuren you'll be debating the growth of fundamentalism in the 21st century...

VOETEN: It's really more about the disintegration of nation states and the increasing chaos. The idea comes from the book *The End of History* (by Francis Fukuyama, 1992 - TZ). Everybody thought that, with the collapse of the Soviet empire, global peace would arrive and that, thanks to technological developments like the Internet, a sort of

global village would emerge. What you see instead is an ever greater hardening of attitudes, nationalism, and fundamentalism. Not just in the Middle East, but also here in Belgium, for example, with Flemish extremism.

What I'm worried about is that there seems



to be less and less room for moderate voices. Maybe moderation is a bit boring, but people who see everything with a sense of perspective and who look for compromises risk being overwhelmed by radicals for whom everything is black and white. Reasonable debate has disappeared.

What makes you head off again and again for regions where things get too hot for ordinary mortals?

VOETEN: I started, with photos of ghettos in New York, in 1988. In 1990 I went to Nicaragua for the elections. Then there was the revolution in Romania and, not long after, the First Gulf War broke out and I just had to get there. It's a sort of compulsion, but where it comes from, I don't know. I had always been interested in foreign affairs, but I also wanted to show the world what was going on in those places.

Has your motivation changed over time?

VOETEN: Most people in our line start off pretty idealistic - not that we think that our photos are going to change the world. Over the years you become a bit more realistic about what you can achieve with your work. I still think it's important that certain regions don't get forgotten about. Pricking people's consciences sounds too moralistic to me. I just take photos of the situation in the world. How people interpret those photos is not my business.

Is your job not incredibly draining, both physically and mentally?

VOETEN: After a while you develop a sort of knack for it. Some conflicts are very grueling. In Sarajevo you had lots of districts with snipers. So you had to study the whole map of the city and the contour lines on the hills around it, so as to know exactly where the enemy was. "Enemy", of course, is a relative

NL

Het Vlaams-Nederlands Huis deBuren organiseert de komende weken twee debatten met de vanuit Brussel opererende Nederlandse oorlogsfotograaf Teun Voeten, over het groeiend fundamentalisme in de 21ste eeuw, en over de dilemma's van de oorlogsfotograaf. Een veertigtal van zijn meest aangrijpende foto's zijn te zien in de overzichtstentoonstelling *War*. (Originele Nederlandse tekst: www.brusselnieuws.be/agenda)

FR

deBuren, la Maison de Flandre et des Pays-Bas, organise deux débats en compagnie de Teun Voeten, le photographe de guerre hollandais qui vit à Molenbeek. Le premier examinera la croissance du fondamentalisme au XXI^e siècle et le second, l'engagement des photographes de guerre. Une quarantaine de ses photos les plus poignantes sont en ce moment exposées chez deBuren. L'exposition s'appelle *War*.

term, but someone who is shooting at me is my enemy at that moment.

"If you're picture isn't good enough, you're not close enough," was Robert Capa's verdict. How far will you go for a good picture?

VOETEN: You could also put it the other way around: if you get too close to your subject, you mightn't come back. So that's one consideration. I've been wounded once and kidnapped once, that's enough. I go about things in a fairly relaxed way. I try to judge whether the photo is worth it to me.

What do you want people to see in your photos? Information, sensation, art?

VOETEN: You want to convey information; but you want to present that information in an aesthetically pleasing package. The one thing you hope for, really, is to hold people's attention for a particular moment. Best of all is when people look at a photo and forget that they're looking at a still photo - when they're immediately transported to another world. The photo then becomes, in a manner of speaking, transparent. Just as with a good film, when you forget that you're in the cinema. That moment doesn't last very long, of course. But if people remember your photos that's a really great honour.

"You can't focus with tears in your eyes," says the famous war photographer Philip Jones Griffiths. After all those years of harrowing

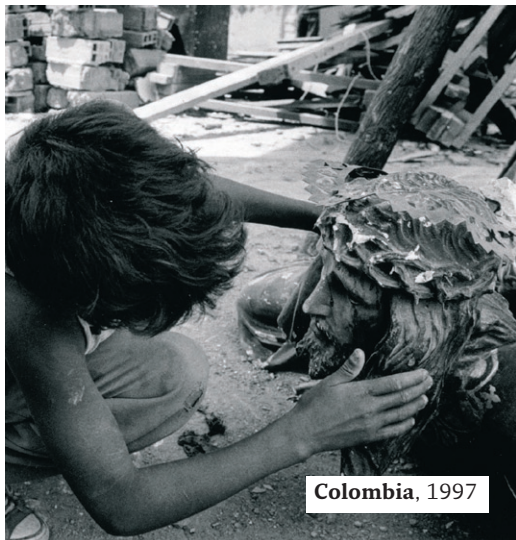
scenes, do you have calluses on your soul?

VOETEN: You do get a bit harder, I can't deny that. You're left with few illusions about people as human beings. But it still gets to you, you know. In Gaza, for example, the situation is very distressing. After all the trouble between the Palestinians and the Israelis, the Palestinians are now killing each other. That made me depressed for two weeks.

When you're on the spot you just have to be very hard and take your pictures. Later, when you select your photos, you have the time to think about everything you've seen. In the refugee camps in Rwanda people were falling down dead. There were photographers who put down their cameras and started helping. That is very noble, but then you should go and work for Médecins Sans Frontières. You can help individuals, OK - I always have a first-aid kit with me - but you're not a medicine man who can help out the whole village.

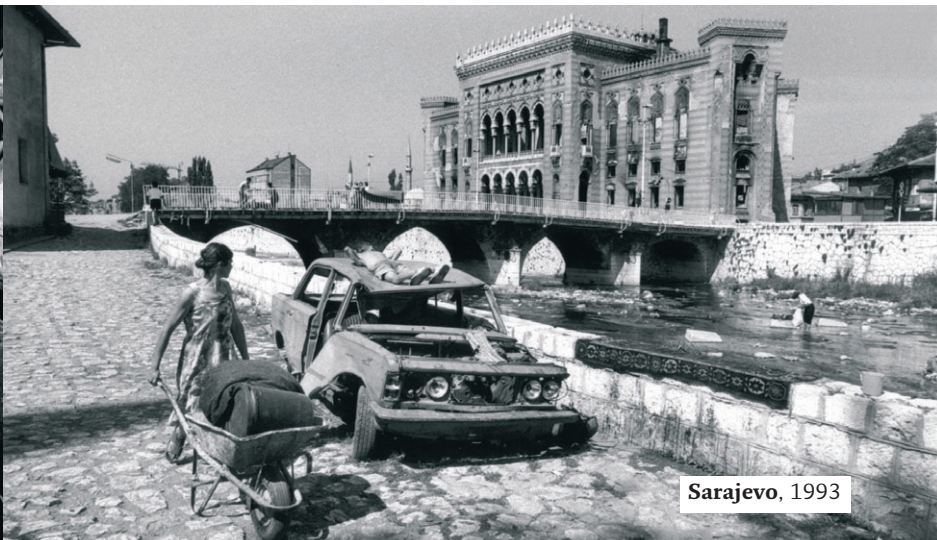
Do you think your photos change anything?

VOETEN: You create a sort of consciousness, but that doesn't mean that everyone springs into action straight away. People like Bill Gates and Angelina Jolie have a clear interest in what goes on in the Third World, for example. That's partly due to the fact that they are informed and they get that information from us journalists. So it does actually have an influence.



Colombia, 1997

© Teun Voeten



Sarajevo, 1993

© Teun Voeten