

## **ARTIST STATEMENT**

In 2018 I met Alexey Shifman at a photography festival where we were both exhibiting. We struck up a conversation and he told me about his gallery 'RAW Streetphoto Gallery' specialising in promoting young, upcoming, photographers. Being no longer that young and having been around a while we found nonetheless a way to collaborate: showing the 'young' work of an established photographer. And that is how my current show 'Rome, 1969, An Homage to Italian Neo-Realism' came to Rotterdam.

The images in this exhibition are practically the first photographs I ever took and date back to when I was 12 or 13 years old. It seems early but the times were different then and Rome was a large village where it was safe to roam even as a teenager –particularly if you lied so well about your age that even your distracted artist parents believed you...

My father, a journalist, in the time when photographs accompanied articles and these were printed on paper and in daily newspaper and weekly magazines, was also an avid photographer --most journalists then, had a camera. My father began with a Pentax and moved onto a Nikon –which is when he gave me his Pentax with a 50mm lens and taught me the basics. And off I went, roaming Rome, after school, on the weekends and whenever I had time. I loved it. No one yelled at you about the 'right to privacy' or the 'right to their image'. They were happy to pose for you (which I did not like) and ignored you most of the time. Today that is practically impossible as Social Media has changed all that.

That is not all that has changed...

1969 was 21 years after the end of WWII. In the USA President Kennedy had come and gone, killed. Martin Luther King had come and gone, killed. The United States was in the middle of the Vietnam war. In Holland, in the mid 60's the Netherlands were in a particularly unstable period with new political parties that demanded drastic changes and the Provo Movement (1966) set the stage for the 1968 Student (and labour revolt) in France called 'May 1968'. And, in 1969 General De Gaul would throw the Americans out of France.

But Italy was slower to catch up; it was still recovering from Fascism and the destruction of the war. There existed only one, later two, TV channels –black and white. I remember an afternoon TV programme, 'Non E Mai Troppo Tardi' / 'It Is Never Too Late' ( that taught the viewers how to write...yes, calligraphy as well how to spell! One could eat in a local restaurant for a few lira and everyone *loved* life. Everyone felt alive because they had survived the war! And the wounds of the war were still felt –not only in their memories or daily lives but also in the knowledge that they were free to speak, to be and to live life (voting, speaking their opinions, declaring their religious beliefs, their loves etc.) as they wished.

This is the setting for the photographs you are seeing in this show.

I believe an artist's work should speak for itself however, as I decided to title the show: 'An Homage to Italian Neo-Realism Cinema' I believe this might warrant a few words of explanation.

Prior to WWII and Mussolini, Italy was technically *avant-garde* in Cinema. The quality of filming was first rate and the films had 'sync sound' –meaning that the actors' words were recorded directly as was done in the USA (first done with the film: 'The Jazz Singer', 1927, directed by Alan Crosland). But Mussolini and the Fascist regime changed that –the best

technicians fled the country leaving it barren and films became propaganda tools and exclusively shot in film studios, on stage sets, with actors who were the 'dubbed' –meaning their words were recorded after the films' editing was completed.

And then, after Mussolini was executed (1945) and the Nazis were eradicated from Italy, a new style of filming (influenced by the great French filmmaker, Jean Renoir) called Neo-Realism was developed by directors such as Visconti, Zavattini, De Santis. What they did was similar to what Monet, Renoir, Sisley and Bazille did in painting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the filmmakers went from using studio sets to filming directly and entirely on 'location' –in the countryside and in the streets adding reality and realism to their work making it more tangible and credible and 'closer' in feeling to their audience. Prior to these filmmakers (as with earlier painters –beginning with Tassi and Lorrian and later the Baribizon School) some scenes might have been shot outdoors but the greater part of the film (as with the paintings) was done in the 'studio'.

However the Neo-Realist filmmakers went further: they filmed *exclusively* on location (bombed out cities, rural areas, working class neighbourhoods etc), often with non-professional actors (buttressed by a few professionals) and often featuring stories that revolved around the poor, the working class and children –notable example is 'Bicycle Thief' (1948, De Sica) where the story revolves around the child but the main protagonist is the father. Neo-Realism (often spelt as neorealism, but I prefer my spelling as it accents the *neo* (new) *realism* (reality) which fits in perfectly with the atmosphere in Italy during its post war Fascist period) was the beginning of a new form of filmmaking that was later embraced by the American filmmakers Scorsese and Coppola etc.

The first Neo-Realist film recognised as such is ' Ossessione' by Visconti (1943). But the film that brought the movement global recognition was Rossellini's film: 'Roma, Città Aperta' (Rome, Open City 1946) that won the *Grand Prix* at the Cannes Film Festival.

This style of filmmaking, not unlike the afternoon TV programme that taught the viewers how to write that I mentioned earlier, brought *reality* and *truthfulness* and *social consciousness* into homes and to a wider, more comfortable and bourgeois audience.

The photographs in this show stem directly from this tradition. Of course they also stem from Henri Cartier Bresson and the photographers of his generation who taught me and influenced me. However, most important, in each and every image in this collection, there is a direct correlation to the objective, goals and ambitions of the Italian Neo-Realist authors. Did I think of this when I was shooting? Of course not. Was I influenced by these films (and their directors) that I was exposed to during my childhood? Of course, yes.

And, last but not least, these photographs you are looking at, 40 years later, were all taken in the Trastevere and in La Garbatella --working class neighbourhoods of Rome-- where I felt at most at home. As in Proust's *madeleine*, I can transport myself there as I write these notes. I can see, smell and relish in the beauty of these men and women and children. I hope they speak to you as well.

Palermo, September 2019