

Memories Return When Least Expected
Bente Geving in Conversation with Antonio Cataldo

A T What I think you have in mind here is what happened in the early 1990s, when so-called photo-based art had its breakthrough, which led to many representatives from an older generation of the classic black and white photography ending up in the background. Today, though, one can see that these various traditions have come together and exist alongside each other in a different way.

A C E It varies so much. Some make their mark, and do 'great' work, with photographs that I think aren't particularly interesting, and then there are others who work more traditionally – Monica Englund and Joanna Helander, for example.

A T But isn't it true that present-day photographers are working a bit more like you and Monica do? With the new digital technology, there are so many possibilities and challenges for contemporary photographers. In your job at the Ethnographic Museum, you worked just as much with historical collections of photography and historical images.

A C E I developed the technique of working with a large-format camera via my work as a museum photographer, and I even used that technique in my landscape photographs. I also got the opportunity to do a certain amount of historical research into photography, in connection with the photographs of Roald Amundsen and Carl Lumholtz.

A T I feel we could go on talking for a very long time about photography and its history and all those you've met during your long career as a photographer, but we must stop here. Thank you, Ann Christine.

A C E Thank you!

Bente Geving is a Norwegian Sámi photographer and artist, born in the northern town of Kirkenes, but raised in the southern city of Asker. After living for many years in Maastricht, Berlin and Hamburg, she exhibited the project Anna, Inga and Ellen at Fotogalleriet in 1988. The exhibition was a result of her investigation of her Sámi identity and roots, and time spent with her family in Kirkenes. Geving's work is represented in several collections including the Preus Museum – the National Museum, the Northern Norway Art Museum, the Sámi Art Collection and the Berlinische Galerie, and numerous private collections.

Artistic Director of Fotogalleriet Antonio Cataldo and Geving met on 29 May 2019 in Enebakk, a community an hour away from Oslo where she currently resides, to speak about how her photography helped her to get closer to her Sáminess.



Antonio Cataldo Can you describe this picture?

Bente Geving It's a mysterious photo of a man hiding under a leopard's skin. I was participating in Anders Petersen's workshop. We were given a task to make portrait of a stranger. And this man was an artist. I remember one of his sculptures: a man with an animal's head.

A C Where did you first meet Anders Petersen?

B G In his workshop in Malmö, 1983.

A C He exhibited at Fotogalleriet in 1980, and he's been quite a reference for Scandinavian photography.

B G Yes. The first photography exhibition I ever saw was *Café Lehmitz* at Oslo Kunstforening. I was eighteen or nineteen years old. That was long before Fotogalleriet – around 1970, it must have been. My interest in photography came through that exhibition. *Café Lehmitz* went directly in to me; I was really touched by that exhibition.

A C So then you went on to study art. Was it art in general or photography?

B G It wasn't possible to study photography as art in Norway at that time. But I went to Westerdals School of Communication in 1972, and there we had a photography course where I learned to work in the darkroom. In 1973, I had a summer job at Philips Design Center in Eindhoven, and then I met a Czech man on the boat on the way to Kristiansand, and he had a Nikkormat camera. That was the first time I looked through a SLR-camera, and I immediately felt I'd found something that was special to me. I was at an age when I was trying to find out what I was going to do in life. After that experience, I bought a Nikkormat with an 85 mm lens. It was so exciting, and I photographed everything around me: the grass, the sky, doors, the roof and friends. I still have my first film, which was a diapositive film. At that time, Fotogalleriet didn't exist, nor any exhibition space for photography.

On the last day of Petersen's workshop, he told us to go out and photograph ourselves. I was looking at a shop window, and wondering how to make a photo of myself. Then I heard a baby cry, and I felt a reaction inside myself like a reflex, and I immediately thought of my sons. My two sons were home with my parents and I missed them terribly. I still breast-fed the smallest one sometimes, and felt it in my breasts. When I turned around, I saw a couple with a baby wagon, and went to

talk to them. Una and Peter were their names. I told them I was in this workshop and asked if I could follow them and photograph them, and they invited me home.

A C So you photographed this couple from the street?

B G Yes. In the workshop, I learned to follow and trust my body's intuitions and to use that as a 'helper' to decide what I was going to follow or not follow, what I wanted to photograph or just walk past. It was special that a cry on the street could lead me to take a photograph like this, and that this photo is now in the Robert Meyer Collection, at the National Museum, Oslo. You know, pictures live their own life, or have their own story in a way.

A C What do you think that document says to other people? What do you think the photograph in itself becomes? Is it for you a trace of something, or is it something else?

B G I think that if I remain honest to myself, then the pictures will also touch other people.

A C Were you already a practicing photographer at the time?

B G I was already taking pictures, and my first exhibition was in Maastricht at Bella Ciao Photogallery in 1982. But before moving to the Netherlands, I lived in Hausmannsgate in Oslo, on the first floor, under Gro Jarto's apartment. She was friends with Ann Christine Eek, and she'd seen my café photo series that I took in Liege (1979). Eek asked me if I'd like to work with her in the dark room and learn something more about developing, and we borrowed the dark room of Robert Meyer. That way, I came onto the photography scene in Oslo. I'd already been to Fotogalleriet and seen Dag Alveng's exhibition *Vegger* (1977).

A C When you saw Alveng's exhibition, what did you think of it? I mean, it was very different from Anders Petersen's works, being more Conceptual.

B G

It was very different from Petersen, but I was very open. It wasn't the way I wanted to work, but it was interesting. At that time, I was married to Viggo Andersen, one of the few Conceptual artists in Norway. Through Viggo, and also through discussions with his architect colleagues in the Czech exile milieu in Oslo, I came into the art world and I started to see art in a different way. Ole Henrik Moe at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter invited Viggo to take part in the Youth Artist Biennale in Paris 1977, and we travelled with our son Lars, who was only three months old. Later, we spent two years in Maastricht, where he went to the Jan van Eyck Academie. Our second son Terje was born there. There I had a real art 'wake-up' when I saw my first Fluxus exhibition. I was very taken by the humour and the playfulness. Then in Ravenna in 1982 I was deeply touched by the mosaics and the atmosphere there. Photography was how I connected to these very different art forms. At that time, photography wasn't looked at as art, and not accepted as an art, even by many artists.

A C You seem closer to Petersen in your practice. What do you think you took from him? What did he give you?

B G

In this workshop, he taught me how to trust in myself – how to look through the camera from my own angle. In 1983, I got divorced, and I was alone with two children. Petersen liked my images, and he said that if I had to steal film to continue, I should do that, and that convinced me that I should be a photographer. I didn't have a job, and when I arrived home I went to NAV [Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration] and told them I was a photographer: 'That's what I am, and that's what I'm going to do.'

A C So Petersen really gave you courage?

B G

Yes, he gave me courage and the confidence to follow my intuition. One task he gave us was to photograph something that we feared. I thought that I should photograph Petersen himself. But when I walked onto the street, I met the photographer Gary Winogrand,

and I was quite nervous when I asked him if I could take a portrait of him. He said 'I'm going to eat, will you come with me?', so I went with him and took a few portraits of him while he was eating. He told me that he had a real fear of flying, that he was afraid the plane would crash, so he always took with him a pair of socks that his daughter had knitted. And I photographed him with these socks.

A C Because the socks gave him some kind of relief or safety?

B G Yes, they meant luck. It was a very special meeting, and I took many portraits of him. Unfortunately, he never got to see them. Eventually, I exhibited in the Spring Exhibition in 1988 with this image of a woman I also met on the street, standing with her keys. For these I made textile frames, sometimes with very strong, lime green colours.

A C Were they colours that you associated with something? Why did you start bringing textile on to the frames?

B G It started as an experiment, I think, and because I had some textiles that I liked, which were the right colour to match the pictures. Then I used a gleaming, light green textile. I associated the colour or the pattern with the motif in the black and white photos.

A C That's something that comes back later on in your work. You bring this interior material, which belongs to the intimate sphere, into the 'purified' space of exhibition. The white cube is very clean and anaesthetised, so the black and white photograph – in its first years of entering the museum space – should be as 'pure' as possible. But then you introduced this element that kind of disturbed that.



B G Yes, it can be disturbing. And it's kind of a little protest, maybe? To make something more – yes – maybe disturbing is the right word. Or more a supplement to the motif.

A C Do you think it's a feminist act in that sense?

B G No, I don't think it is a feminist act. It was more an act of finding my own language as an artist. And I imagined that there were no rules in making art. My mother was a seamstress. She was very good with textiles, but I never was, and as a daughter it could be difficult. I was photographing and playing music. In retrospect, I can see that it was perhaps a way to connect with my own tradition. So in that sense it was in fact a feminist act. Then in 1988, I had my first solo exhibition in Norway, at Fotogalleriet, called *Anna, Inga and Ellen*.

A C Why does it say 'photo, yoik and psalm song' on the poster for that exhibition? Did someone *yoik* for the opening?

B G It was the headline in the Sør-Varanger paper, for which I gave an interview. But yes, I included a soundtrack of Anders Skum from Kautokeino performing *yoik*. One evening in Kirkenes, I went out with my cousin and met Skum. I asked him if he could *yoik* and

he said yes – although *yoik* was forbidden, it had survived in his family. He made me a tape that evening, which he gave me. On the tape he also *yoiked* me, and that was a way to find out about my history. You could say this project really started my quest to find out about my Sámi identity.

Anders Petersen said to me, ‘Now Bente, you have to do a project that’s really close to your heart.’ Right away, I thought of my children, who were the closest to me, but it didn’t feel right to make an art project of them. Then I decided to go north to photograph my Sámi grandmother Ellen and her two sisters Anna and Inga.

In 1986 I moved to Berlin, and then it felt even more important to go up north. The Cold War was so close. I was living in Kreuzberg 36, and the darkroom I was working in was just by the Spree, the river that was the border to East Berlin. We were surrounded by the wall, and my children were playing just beside the wall. It influenced me greatly. These signs by the Spree said it was forbidden to go down to the shore because you could be shot. It was depressing. And children had drowned there because nobody dared to swim out and save them. That was terrible. I never heard stories like this in Sør-Varanger. Norway has a 200-km-long border with Russia. Although there’s no wall in Sør-Varanger, you were forbidden to walk over or fish in the part of the river that belongs to Russia. You could be shot. So suddenly I saw this connection between Kirkenes and Berlin. Kirkenes is different today because of the neighbour passport, which allows people who live 30 km on either side of the border to pass without a visa. But during the Cold War, it was very difficult to cross that border. It was like being closed in. So to come to Berlin made me understand much more of my past. I lived in Berlin until 1995, and it was good to travel from Berlin to Kirkenes.

A C Because when you went to the north, you experienced the same borders that you were experiencing in Berlin. You’re really close to the border in Kirkenes. It’s very present.

B G In Kirkenes, as in Berlin, you’re close to Europe and to European history. I grew up with my mother’s stories about the war, when she and her family had to evacuate. That was one of the last stories that she remembered.

A C And it was in 1985 that you went to photograph Anna, Inga and Ellen in Kirkenes?

B G Yes, I got a grant from the Norwegian Photographic Fund to go north and photograph my family members in 1985. Then I went back again to do more photographs in 1988. I was very proud to have got that grant. It was an acceptance for my work as a photographic artist.

Ellen was my grandmother, Anna was her younger and Inga her older sister. They talked Sámi together and they had a strong Sámi identity. They’d lived a Sámi life – which means speaking the language, eating the food and wearing the clothes. Their mother couldn’t speak Norwegian. When my mother, Margit Ellinor, grew up, she was taught by society that she had to be a Norwegian and forget about her Sámi roots. She grew up during the time of race research, when they tried to prove that the Sámi people were primitive and childish. Norwegian politics against the Sámi culture were very strong, and it was done without dignity. You weren’t allowed to speak Sámi at school, and all you learned was about the Norwegian culture. Near the coast, this politics was even stronger than in Karasjok. There were more Sámis living there.

A C And are Anna, Inga and Ellen wearing Sámi clothes in your pictures?

B G No, they wore ordinary dresses, but Anna and Inga had Sámi clothes that they used for special occasions and celebrations. Their parents always wore Sámi *kofte* or *pesk*, which are clothes made of reindeer skin. My great grandmother sewed all the clothes. I never saw my mother wearing Sámi clothes. When she was an adult, she wanted to get a national dress, but she bought a Finnmarksbunad, instead of traditional Sámi clothes. My mother never denied that she was Sámi – she had an inner loyalty and cut off friends who talked badly about the Sámis – but it was only when she got Alz-



heimers that she started to bring Sámi things into the living room, and told people that she was Sámi.

A C Yes, this is something very beautiful that you wrote in an email to me: that memories come back when you don't want them to, or when you don't expect them to.

B G Yes. What you displace and try to forget in your life, you'll remember when you start to forget. I think that an image will always be there, in your body and in your mind. And when you start to forget, like my mother did, it comes out. My grandmother forgot the Norwegian language when she became demented; she only talked Sámi then. The trouble was that nobody talked Sámi in the retirement home where she lived.

A C And do you think photography is about that as well: remembering something you're trying to forget?

B G Yes, it can be. It's an interesting thought. I made a series with some photographs I forgot I'd taken. I had a difficult period in my life with no possibility to work in a darkroom, so the films were never developed. When I developed them after many years, I'd forgotten where and when they were from. I picked out images that I was attracted to, and made the series called *Memory*, which I exhibited together with my series of colour photos about my mother, *Margit Ellinor*, in *Forgotten Images* at the Preus Museum 2005.

When I'm working with an idea or a new project, I never know what it's going to be. So what comes out of it is often unexpected. Before I decide to use it, I have to let the photographs stand and rest, and see after a period of time if they have something or not. I mostly work with series now, unlike in my first exhibition when I worked with single pictures. I can think 'That's a nice image', but then it means nothing more to me. It has to be combined with something else, like another image, or fit into a series.



A C Your exhibition *Anna, Inga and Ellen* at Fotogalleriet also had the theme of memory, of remembering.

B G Yes. When I arrived Kirkenes, I visited the culture office in Sør-Varanger municipality to tell them that I was going to photograph the three sisters, and that I intended to exhibit my work in town. Then I was told that the Sámi language was dead, and nobody spoke Sámi anymore in Sør-Varanger. But I knew that my grandmother and the sisters spoke Sámi. I remember as a child, my aunt Inga standing in the window, talking to my grandmother on the road in Sámi. If somebody walked past, they'd start to talk Norwegian. The Sámi language was so hidden. Because of this, I bought a cassette recorder, and I asked them if I could record them when they were talking. We were drinking coffee and speaking Norwegian together, and I asked if they could talk Sámi. But it wasn't possible: it was so built into their minds that if someone couldn't understand Sámi they wouldn't speak it. But as soon as I left the room, closed the door and

went into the kitchen, they'd start talking Sámi together. So I put on the recorder, went out, and I heard them talk in Sámi. I also recorded them singing Sámi psalms. *Yoik* wasn't allowed, because it was a sin. They were Christians, and especially aunt Inga was a very strong Læstadianer believer. Still today, Lars Levi Læstadius is very important for many Sámi people.

My friend Kjersti Martinsen helped me to put together the audio track with the *yoik* and the three sisters drinking coffee and singing psalms. It was made for Fotogalleriet as a part of the exhibition. And at that time they had to turn over the cassette, and put it on again manually when the exhibition space was open.

A C Had you seen other exhibitions where there was sound? Where did this idea come from?

B G Yes, I remember Anders Petersen used sounds in his exhibition *Café Lehmitz*. I decided to use the recordings in the exhibition because it became an important part of the story about my ancestors. It wasn't part of my plan when I went up north to do the project.

For the installation at Fotogalleriet, I got help from the photographer Guri Dahl. We worked well together. I didn't use frames, just glass fixed on to the wall with nails. The images were in three different sizes. I hung them in series, some high and some low. I used the whole exhibition space.

A C Why didn't you frame the images?

B G I think the photos have a better connection with one another without the frames. That's what I think today, but what I thought at the time, I don't know.

A C It seems quite courageous and uncommon. Through your decision, you take away the fact that when photography enters an exhibition space, it becomes a precious object. When you take away the frame, it's a more of an everyday object; it brings the familiar and the unfamiliar together. It's quite disquieting. Was this your intuition?

B G Yes, I think so.

A C And how did people react? I imagine this was quite different from what people had seen before.

B G At that time I was living in Berlin and I came to Oslo to install the exhibition and to be there for the opening. The exhibition got attention from the papers, and also many visitors. I rediscovered lately that it had reached Kirkenes and the Northern areas through the Sámi newspaper *Ságat* and *Sør-Varanger Avis*, in addition to being written about in *Arbeiderbladet*, *Morgenbladet*, *Aftenposten*, and *Friheten*. *Klassekampen* used the headline ‘Three women to fall in love with’. This was a pleasant surprise for me.

A C Why do you think that this project was important at the time both for you and in general?

B G I went north and asked questions about our Sámi ancestors, and I’m glad today that I made these photos. My grandmother and her sisters were proud. My mother was too, when she came to the exhibition. It did something to her. She and her family got dignity; we all got dignity.

A C So it was a statement of your Sámi identity? I can imagine there was a lot of resistance at the time towards Sámi people in the south, in the capital, and ‘coming out’ as Sámi?

B G What I didn’t know was that our Sámi identity was still a secret among some family members. So to make an exhibition about the sisters was to make it official that my relatives were Sámi, and that was quite hard for some. To be a Sámi was something to be ashamed of, it was hidden away. Every time I asked about the Sámi tradition or the language, I got the answer that it had no importance.

The Alta action [protest against the building of a dam on Sámi land] which took place at the beginning of the 1980s, began to change things. I was living in the Netherlands at that time, and it was the first time



I read anything about Norway in the papers abroad. It was very difficult to be so far away when this movement happened. It was so hard to get knowledge about it from my Sámi relatives.

Ellisif Wessel (1866–1949) photographed people in Sør-Varanger, and if it hadn’t been for her, we wouldn’t have known that there were so many Sámi people in the area. I think this heritage of shame was passed to my mother and then passed on to me. But I thought my children and my nephew should be proud of their background and their history. They are now, but it’s taken a long, long time, and I’m still searching and trying to figure out these memories. I think the body remembers – it remembers the repression and the grief of feeling worthless. And now they’ve also found out that this is genetically passed on to the next generation.

A C Do you think this is made visible in the images?

B G The project is more a documentation of three old Sámi women, of a generation that had been hidden and is now disappearing. It’s a tribute to my mother, my great

grandmother, grandmother and her sisters. It's important to take care of one's heritage, to ask questions, and not to hide it away. It was also a very personal project. In a way, it's the documentation of the beginnings of my travels, my photographic practice, and my life. But does this come through to the people looking at the photos? I hope so, but I don't know.

After it opened at Fotogalleriet, the exhibition, was shown in Kirkenes and at Tromsø Museum. In 2016 the pictures were shown again, in the exhibition *Ringene – fra Kirkenes til Kirkenes*. I showed the sisters along with new photos, the *Kosmos* and the *Rosegarden* series. Anna, Inga and Ellen were in a larger context. I made the black and white images as a projection on the wall, together with the sound of the women talking and singing. It made an impression on me to listen to their voices again and see the photos, and it also made an impression on the audience to see and remember what it was like over 30 years ago. Now my relatives are happy with what I did. It's become a circular story in search of our Sámi identity.

We've Got Pacifiers Instead of Culture in this Country
Robert Meyer in Conversation with Helle Siljeholm