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o n e h u n d r e d

# SHOTS

*a collection of photographs*

**Helge Denker**

Wild Heart Journeys

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p r o l o g u e

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t h e   f i r s t   s h o t s

15  
' h e ' s   n o t   a   p h o t o g r a p h e r ! '

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' p h o t o g r a p h y   i s   n o t   a r t '

23  
' t h e   c a m e r a   n e v e r   l i e s '

27  
t h e   s e a r c h   f o r   m e a n i n g

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a m o n g s t   t h e   i m a g e s

35  
' i f   y o u   c a n ' t   t a k e   g o o d   p h o t o s   w i t h   t h a t ,  
y o u ' r e   s t u f f e d ! '

## c o n t e n t s

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h e l g e   d e n k e r



Checking the dyed wool. **Central Namibia, 1998**

*I want to see everything —  
the whole planet,  
the good and the bad —  
and document it  
so that hopefully there can be some understanding.*

*That's what I am, what I do.*

Steve McCurry

# p r o l o g u e

## S o m a n y p h o t o g r a p h s

have been published, are being published every single day, that one must wonder: Does anybody need another book of photographs? In all of this visual avalanche sliding daily down on us, of bright and glaring images (both good and bad) of people and animals and landscapes and buildings and machines and FASHION, in magazines and newspapers and brochures and books and calendars, advertising, documenting, beguiling, soothing, screaming, lying — can we still take any of it in?

So many words have been said and written, are being written and rewritten, and regurgitated and quoted out of context again and again — can I still say anything new, or different? Do I need to? Does anybody want to know? Does anybody care?

And yet...

**One hundred shots** is a selection of images from my travels, my assignments and my life.

Why?

Maybe there will be some understanding.

Zoo giraffe. **Adelaide, Australia 1983**



I n a half-dark room of soft red light, a crisp white sheet of paper, submersed in a tray of liquid, rocks gently back and forth. Within seconds, an image appears, magically, on the paper – soft shades at first, darkening rapidly to become a striking monochromatic print. An artist's vision materialised, transferred from mind and memory onto paper without the single stroke of a brush or pencil.

My first real experience of photography was a revelation. I was converted, a disciple. I was thirteen years old and in my second year of high school in Australia. One of my first photographic outings was to the Adelaide Zoo. The photographs I took there, and developed in the school darkroom, of a giraffe reaching with an outstretched tongue across the sky for an unseen green leaf, were the first whispers of my calling.

## t h e f i r s t s h o t s

To me, no other medium rivals the attractiveness of photography in its strange mixture of immediacy and uncertainty. The pressing of the shutter release button on an important image triggers an impatient anticipation and hope, which is relieved suddenly – although often a long time after the picture was taken – by the striking immediacy of the final image on film or paper. The fact that it may take weeks, or sometimes months, before a film can be developed, adds a growing, almost unsettling tension: Did I get the shot?

Photography is addictive. There is an irresistible attraction in being able to visually capture actual events 'with the push of a button'. It has made the camera one of the most popular inventions ever, worldwide. Almost every tourist carries a camera, every household that can afford one, has one. But the longing to take photos of *everything* is often dampened by the cost of film and development (which is finally being removed by digital photography) and by countless snapshots piling up in cupboards and drawers.

My father bought my first camera for me when I was fifteen – a Minolta X-300. It was my faithful companion through high school and college and remained my favourite camera for the first ten years of my professional life as an artist, guide and consultant. I still use it occasionally today.

After high school, I enrolled in a four-year degree course in visual art at Underdale Art School. Photography was my predetermined major, but I also wanted to acquire skills in other media. I have always enjoyed drawing and painting, and I hoped to improve and broaden my skills. I was also influenced by the popular notion that such 'traditional' media perhaps presented a more noble artistic pursuit than photography. But my studies were mostly unsatisfying. I learned frustratingly few of the technical skills I was looking for in all the media. The emphasis of the entire course seemed always to be on a very particular perception of art (to me, art for art's sake). I had my own ideas, but these were apparently too mundane to be considered truly worthy.



The photography darkroom became my sanctuary. I spent hours and hours there, often alone, in the early mornings or late into the evenings, when few others were around. I was uninterested in ‘art’ – I laboured over prints of seascapes and dolphins, images of the beauty of the natural world, which captivated and inspired me, and became my focus in life. I moved on the periphery of college life, oscillating between the darkroom and the print-making department (my second major) and disappeared, whenever the wind was right, to the beach and, with a sailboard, out onto the ocean to ride with dolphins.

After two years of visual art I switched to graphic design. My hope that I would find this a more satisfying discipline was not realised. Although I received acceptable marks (as I had in visual art), I still felt unfulfilled. I drifted between the rigidity of the graphic design principles being taught and those uncertain concepts of ‘fine art’. After another year, I dropped out of college completely and headed home. I returned to Africa.

In Namibia, I tried to find my place as an independent artist. I held exhibitions of my paintings, drawings, silk-screen prints and photographs, and sold occasional works through various galleries. But in order to make a living, I soon turned more to graphic design and illustration, and then also to other professions entirely, such as tour guiding, professional hunting and later consultancies in the tourism industry. I continued to do art and design work and still pursued photography with passion, but for a long time it remained my private documentation of life.

I had no access to a darkroom, and I was continually and intensely disappointed in the quality of developing and printing provided by local photo shops. I soon switched from black-and-white to colour negative film. But only when I finally turned to slide film, which is less susceptible to the capricious work of disinterested technicians, did I find real joy in photography again. I love the crispness and vibrant colours of slide film; the immediacy of being able see the final image already on the film (rather than having to produce prints from negatives). But somewhere deep inside I will always long to develop black-and-white prints in the cool, dark sanctity of my own darkroom.



Bottlenosed dolphins. **Gulf St Vincent, Australia 1987**



**R i d i n g** the Metro through the maize of tunnels beneath Paris, walking the streets of Barcelona, Sydney or Berlin, driving along the rutted roads of Windhoek's informal settlements and shanty towns, walking with Himba along the footpaths of Kaoko, or sitting at a smoky fire in Nyae Nyae, watching San dance – I see and hear, and taste and smell and touch, I think and wonder, and write and draw and photograph, trying to grasp the complexities of our existence.

*Homo sapiens* has not walked across the face of Earth for very long (at least not long, in terms of the history of the planet). Sixty million years ago, the only sign of man-to-be was a little shrew-like creature, scurrying along the high branches of the forests that covered the world. The evolutionary split between the great apes and hominids is estimated to have occurred around six million years ago (even today, our DNA is ninety-nine percent identical to that of chimpanzees, our closest living relatives). Modern humans have existed for perhaps one hundred thousand years, and thirty thousand years ago, *Homo sapiens* was the only member of the genus *Homo* left on Earth. In these thirty thousand years, we have come a long, long way, from a scavenger, a hunter and gatherer living in caves and making use of the simplest tools, to the technological wizard building spacecraft with which to fly out and explore the universe.

## f a c i n g o u r s e l v e s

Mankind has evolved in a wonderful diversity of features and colours, of cultures, languages and traditions. We are incredibly adaptable, able to live almost anywhere, from the arid heat of deserts to frozen arctic tundra. And we are endlessly inventive. The development of agriculture, which allows small numbers of people to produce food for a large population, has left an increasing part of mankind free to study and explore, to invent and create. The industrial revolution and the technological hurricane of the last century have been the result. But technology has not been our only achievement. We have created music and visual arts, with the ability to reach depths of ourselves far beyond words. We play sports and games that satisfy our competitive instincts, that inspire and unite. And we have created the wonderful, wonderful world of writing and books.

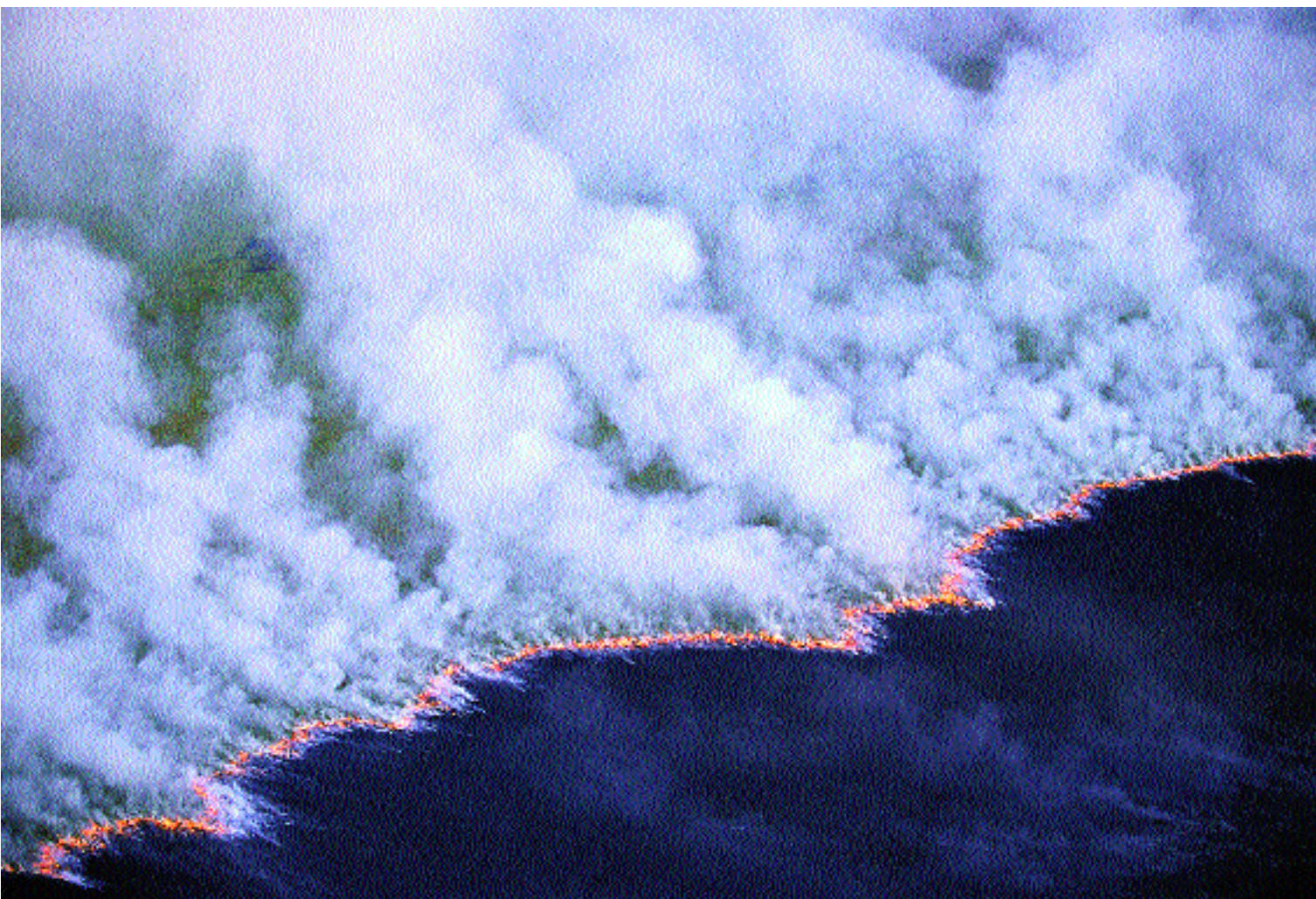
But we are also endlessly destructive. From ants to elephants, we have for centuries eradicated from our lives every creature that has posed a threat to our comfort or our safety. We have stripped vast parts of Earth of its blanket of vegetation. We have exploited and plundered, chasing animals and plants into extinction. We have scarred, smothered and polluted in our ceaseless quest for development and progress (or maybe just our quest to make more money).

There can be no doubt that we have made great progress. Through technology, we have created ever-better living conditions for an ever-greater portion of the world's population. Most of us are physically healthier than ever, live safer, longer lives, mostly free from disease and suffering. In many societies, the equality and freedom of individuals has greatly improved. More and more people receive a formal education, and some understanding of the world in which we live. Yet, if we look at our world today, our progress somehow feels one-sided. There seems to be a need for a deeper understanding, which we are lacking.



Rural life. **Kavango Region, Namibia 1996**





Fires, set to clear vegetation for planting, shroud much of Africa in haze throughout the dry season.  
**Kuando Kubango Province, Angola 2003**

From the Great Wall of China to the Berlin Wall, and now the West Bank Barrier, we have everywhere erected borders and fences, and sliced up the world into our territories of autonomy and power (mostly ignoring all indigenous inhabitants). We have developed powerful, destructive weapons and aimed them at our neighbours, in case these may want to challenge us. But do we really need so much to protect ourselves from our own kind? It seems as though we do. Millions upon millions of people have been slaughtered in our ubiquitous wars of ideology, in our endless struggles for power, wealth and domination. It seems that deep inside we have not truly progressed so very far from the hunched and hairy beast that climbed down from the trees to roam wind-blown savannas.

Every day the press is filled with reports of terror, war and suffering, of rape, murder, robbery and family violence, disease, famine and oppression – from all across the world. Corruption infects governments everywhere, and industries ignore their responsibilities towards society and the environment. While many developing countries still grope for an understanding and practical application of democracy (and the rulers of others blatantly ignore all democratic principles and basic human rights during their dictatorial self-enrichment) the powers of the First World ruthlessly impose their vision of a ‘perfect world’ upon us all.

I get terribly frustrated at the disparities of our existence. Frustrated and angry to the point of despair, at our schizophrenic protection and simultaneous destruction of nature, our admiration and subsequent assimilation of traditional cultures, our ceaseless ability to cause demise all across the world, while at the same time denying our own inescapable death; at the ridiculous conflicts produced by the discord between our modern lifestyles, outdated religious dogma and the glaring facts of scientific knowledge. Have we become no more than slaves to our fashionable lifestyles? Slaves to the wonders of technology, which itself seems to be getting away from us? The greater part of mankind is still unable to grasp our dizzying advances, while far too many others have technology at their disposal like a toy, with which to manipulate or destroy, without realising (or wanting to realise) the consequences of their actions. The reckless child blowing himself to bits with his own home-made bomb – we may just have outsmarted ourselves.

But is it really *all* that bad? Or is part of all this negativity created by one-sided reporting on the ‘State of the World’, focussing forever on horror and misery (which make *the best* headlines)? Conflict is a part of life. But if we concentrated more on the good in life, would we be able to create a more *balanced* environment, lead by positive example and create a better world? There *is* so much good, so much beauty in our lives. *We have so much*. Our colourful diversity of cultures and traditions should be an asset, not a reason for conflict. We have invented more technology than we can ever use. Why is it *so difficult* to create equality within our societies (and families), or find real tolerance for one another?

In the end, it seems that we do not really know what it is that we actually want. Perhaps all we want is to live happy lives. And how simple that could be, if only we were not quite as intolerant or greedy, not quite as lazy, as easily bored with ourselves, if we did not seek quite as much comfort in our lifestyle; if only our egos did not require constant demonstrations of our own worth and power, and if perhaps we did not need our many gods to be quite as jealous of each other. If only we could find a way to live life with a little bit more dignity.

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