Revealing the Hearts and Minds of 14-Year-Old Girls Living in Brussels, Palestine and Congo

By **Sukruti Anah Staneley** on June 7, 2017

Through her project, *I AM 14*, that materialised over three years and across three countries, Bénédicte Vanderreydt invites us into the lives of three 14-year-old girls. Fascinated by what transpires about adolescence through their compulsive picture-making for social media, Vanderreydt sets out to investigate what she sees as "a complex set of mirrors in which we no longer know who is looking and who is being looked at."

Vanderreydt, a Belgian photographer, who spent her teenage years growing up in Brussels, became transfixed when she found herself hovering over the Facebook profile of a 14-year-old Belgian girl and the hundreds of photographs of herself in this public-private online diary. She wondered, what went on before the pictures were clicked. To explore this, she began with Valentine in Brussels, where she photographed this 14-year-old with her friends in their private and public environments.

From Belgium, Vanderreydt took her project to Palestine, where she met her second 14-year-old, Ru'a, who lives in the refugee camp of Dheisheh. This was a teenager living amidst the conflicts of a war-torn country, Vanderreydt wanted to understand how this impacted her adolescence and what Ru'a's response was to a web of social media that provided a form of momentary escape.

The third place and what Vanderreydt found to be the most challenging was Lubumbashi in Congo. Here permissions from families proved to be an ordeal. After attempting to connect with one family in Lubumbashi, Vanderreydt was refused permission and had to begin the search once again for a new family. During her one-month stay in Congo, she finally met Loraine who lives in Lubumbashi, Katanga. It took a lot more time to build trust and gain access into the life of this 14-year-old.

Through this series, we find a thread that connects the three girls spread across three different continents: the mobile phone – their access to the world of social media. These are the pictures they don't make, the images that they do not frame, the ones that are still portraits, but of an adolescence obsessed with the self-image and their daily construction of this identity, irrespective of the country they live in or belong to.

Valentine's Mum: *Do I have to drive you home?*

Valentine: *No, my friends spend the night here!*

Valentine's Mum: *Great! Great but…I don't know. You have to talk to me and explain things to me!*

Valentine: *Well, mum, my friends are staying overnight!*

Valentine: *The party is this evening. It means having fun madly and not caring about anything. We enjoy the here and now, we don't give a damn about anything but the party.*

Valentine's Answering machine*: Hello, it is Val. I am not there for the moment. Please call me back later.*

Valentine: *When I look at myself in a mirror, I see a Belgian girl who's enjoying her youth but at the same time hiding a bit her sadness.*

Loraine: *When I look at myself in a mirror, I see a Congolese girl, pretty, intelligent, sometimes unhappy because her parents can't* realise *all her desires.*

Ru'a: *When I look at myself in a mirror, I see a Palestinian girl who is suffering, I see a girl who likes to study, who likes to be strong in all situations.*

Loraine: *I 'd like to have a black man, Congolese with an average height, rich, a Christian also, to be happy.*

Valentine: *I think one can fall in love but not find the person. Considering we are 8 billion, it is rather difficult to find one's soul mate. So, I think it's impossible.*

Ru'a: *I can have a lover and tell my parents but only if this relationship will lead to marriage.*

Ru'a: *I thought of wearing the veil but I realised it would not fit with my personality. The wearing of the veil is a burden because it represents a lot of beliefs. It does change a lot in a woman's life: Her behaviour, her personality, her way of talking.*

Valentine: *I drink and I smoke because it is part of our culture. Everybody does it so you just follow suit. Even if it is forbidden under 16, I still do it.*

Loraine: *Congolese people don't give their opinion because they are very proud. They believe they will be humiliated. Poor people always like to imitate the rich people.*

Ru'a: *We do not know what is behind the wall. The wall is not only visual, it stops the dream. It reminds us every moment we live in an open-air prison.*

Valentine: *People have the impression my life is perfect. It is not the case at all. Some days, I can't stand it anymore. I feel like screaming. I want everything stops. But I can't. I have to pretend it is all fine. As if life was perfect.*

Loraine: *Congo is a very rich country. There are lots of minerals. But the Congolese do not really know how to exploit its natural resource. Only foreigners are investing in the exploitation in order to sell it back to the country. Congo needs people who love their*

country. It is the lack of money of my family that prevents me from realising my dreams. But education will help me to find a job. I think about studying in Europe to see if life is brighter over there.

Valentine: *I feel I want to die for a few minutes but the feeling goes away quickly. It is just because at that instance, I have had enough and I can't take it anymore.*

Ru'a: *I believe in the Koran, I like to read it and listen to it. You can find anything in the Koran. It is a guide for everyone, to choose the right path.*

Valentine: *I don't believe in God. I don't believe that someone is monitoring it all, up above, and I don't believe in miracles.*

Loraine: *SONG: I don't see God as Jesus does. He pulled me out of misery. He protects me in his grace.*

Ru'a: *It is really hard to hear it when someone gets killed or kidnapped. He becomes a martyr and on trial for years and years. It's sad, especially if we know the person. Yesterday the person was there, today he is gone.*

Valentine: *For me, violence is the psychological harassment when you put someone down all the time.*

Loraine: *It hurts me a lot when people get killed in Congo. If they were part of my family, I do not know what to say... It hurts me a lot.*

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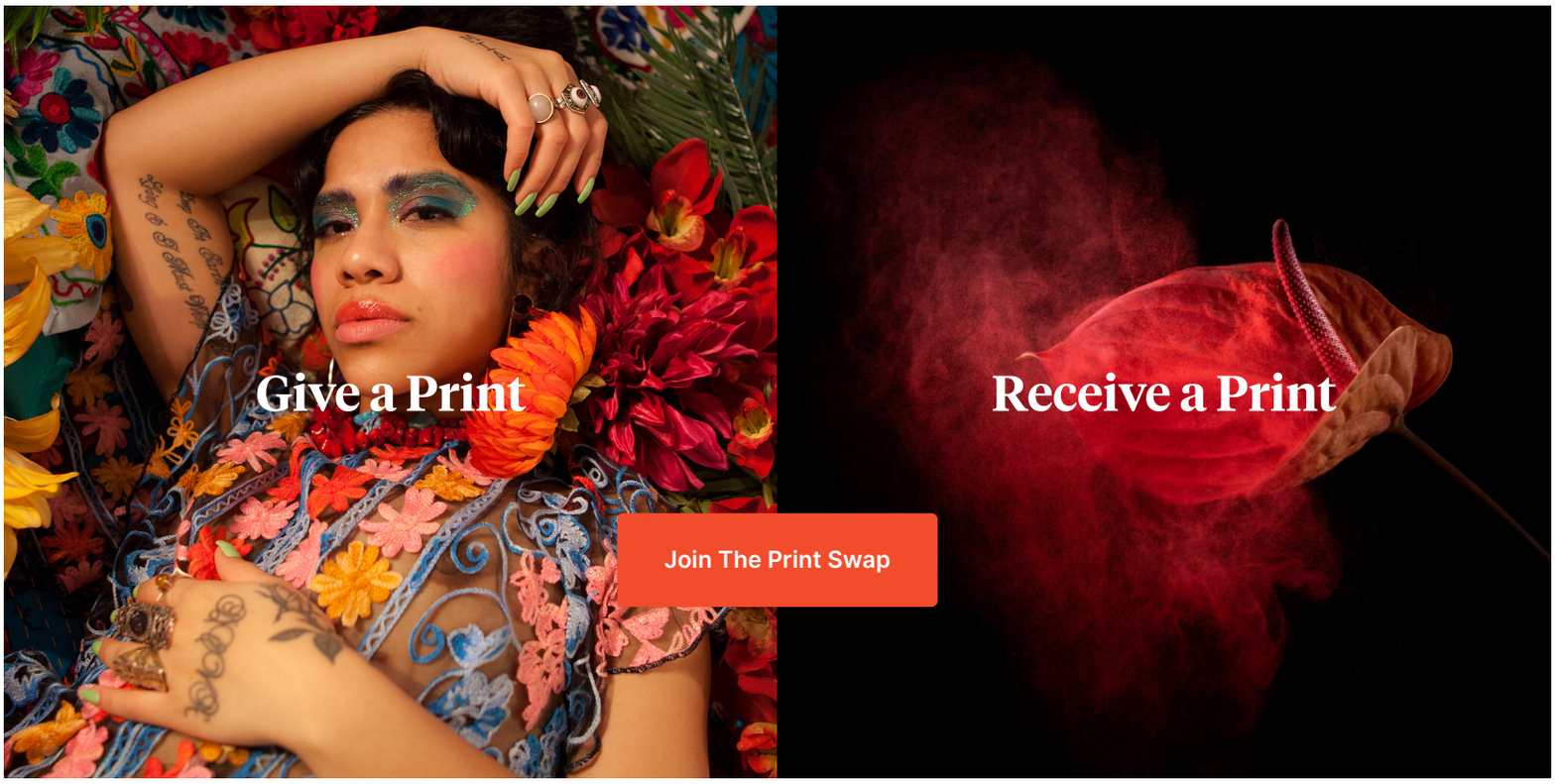

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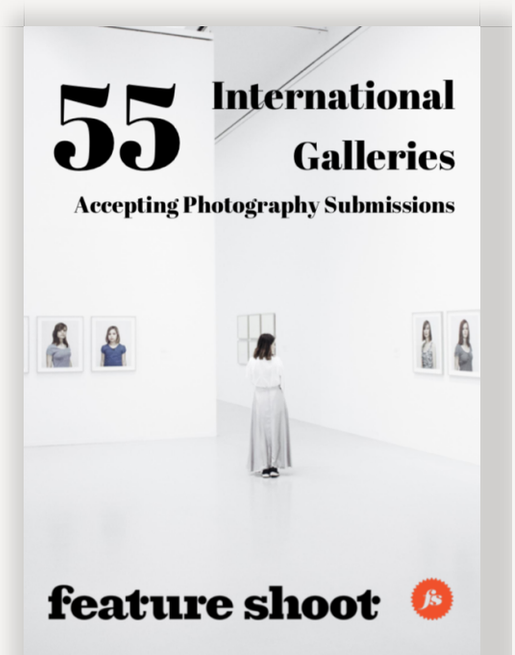

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