



'HANG IN THERE'





'HANG IN THERE'



AN

ESSAY ON

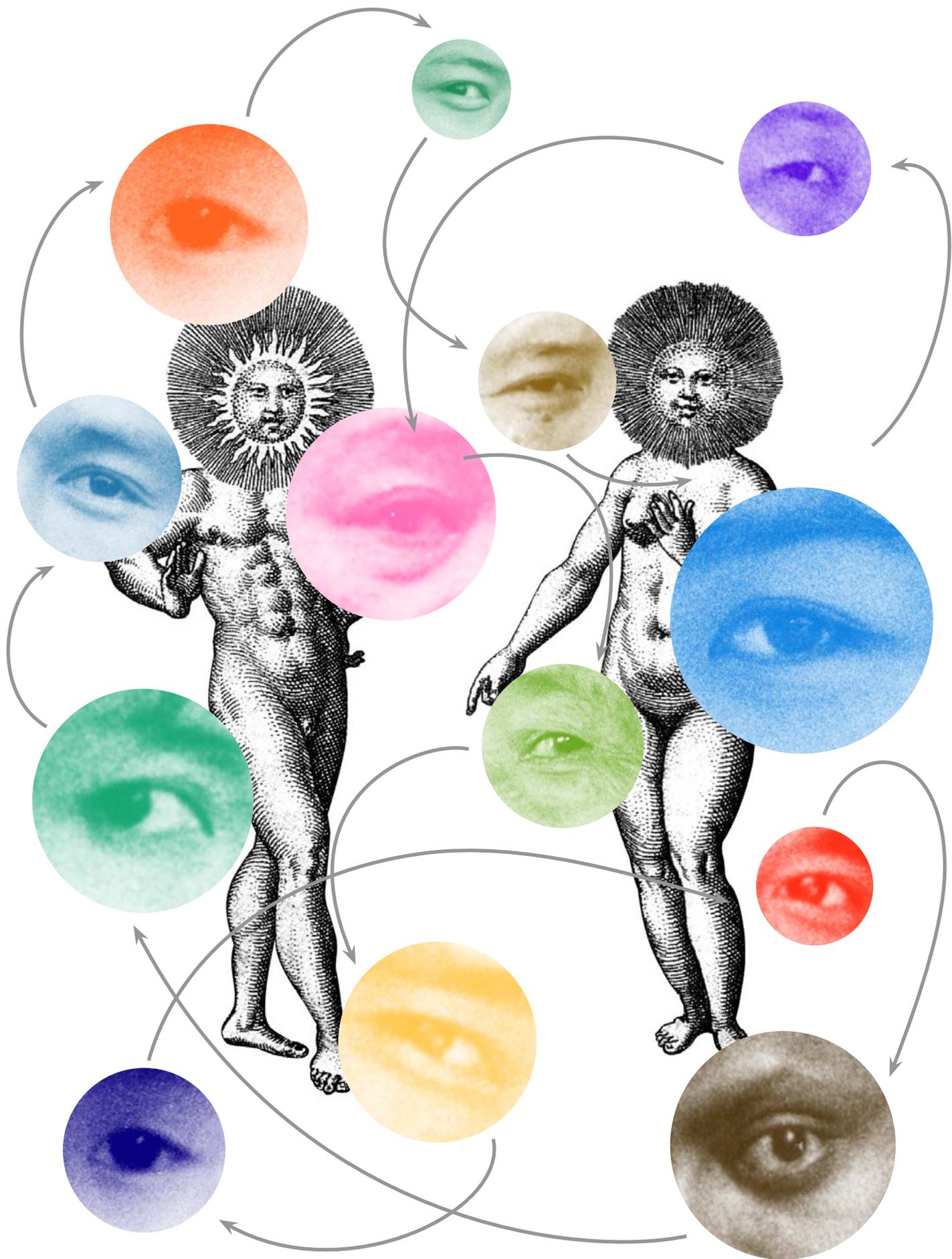
PHOTOGRAPHY

BY

SOMEBODY

WHO HAPPENED TO BE THERE

(i.e. Gilles Massot)



In The Beginning.

The mystery of photography begins in outer space. Somewhere from the depth of darkness, somewhere out of the universal void, something happens that creates **light**.

All kinds of reasons have been given to explain this phenomenon, some scientific and some not so scientific. And while the 'How' may be understood intellectually, the 'Why' remains beyond reason's reach.

Light is associated with heat and movement, which are in turn associated with **life**. And down the bottom line, all we know is that they just 'are', for if they were not, there would be nothing. That would certainly cut the conversation short but not get to the point since this very point wouldn't exist, the point in space that produces light.

Of course, it is all relative since that 'point' is actually quite huge and massive. Plus there are many of them, so many that one shouldn't even think of beginning to count them.

Yet, according to some theory, there was actually at the beginning one single tiny point that did contain them all. So, the point IS and light DOES exist. And it travels, because light IS movement. It even has its own speed, 'The speed of light', that nothing else can match, well at least in this dimension of perception.

It travels through silence and emptiness and while travelling, it is yet again as if it didn't exist. This time not so much because of some fundamental question that leaves its very existence pending, simply because nothing comes across its way to give it **reality**.

But travelling eventually takes it to places and there, the most wondrous things happen. It falls, it rises, it caresses, it casts, it shines, it washes, it envelops, it brings out the forms of the place it has travelled so long to visit. For it is only a visit, since as soon as it reaches its destination, it bounces off and leaves for new horizons. It has exposed what was there and once the job is done, it resumes the silent journey that keeps on **revealing** the world to itself.



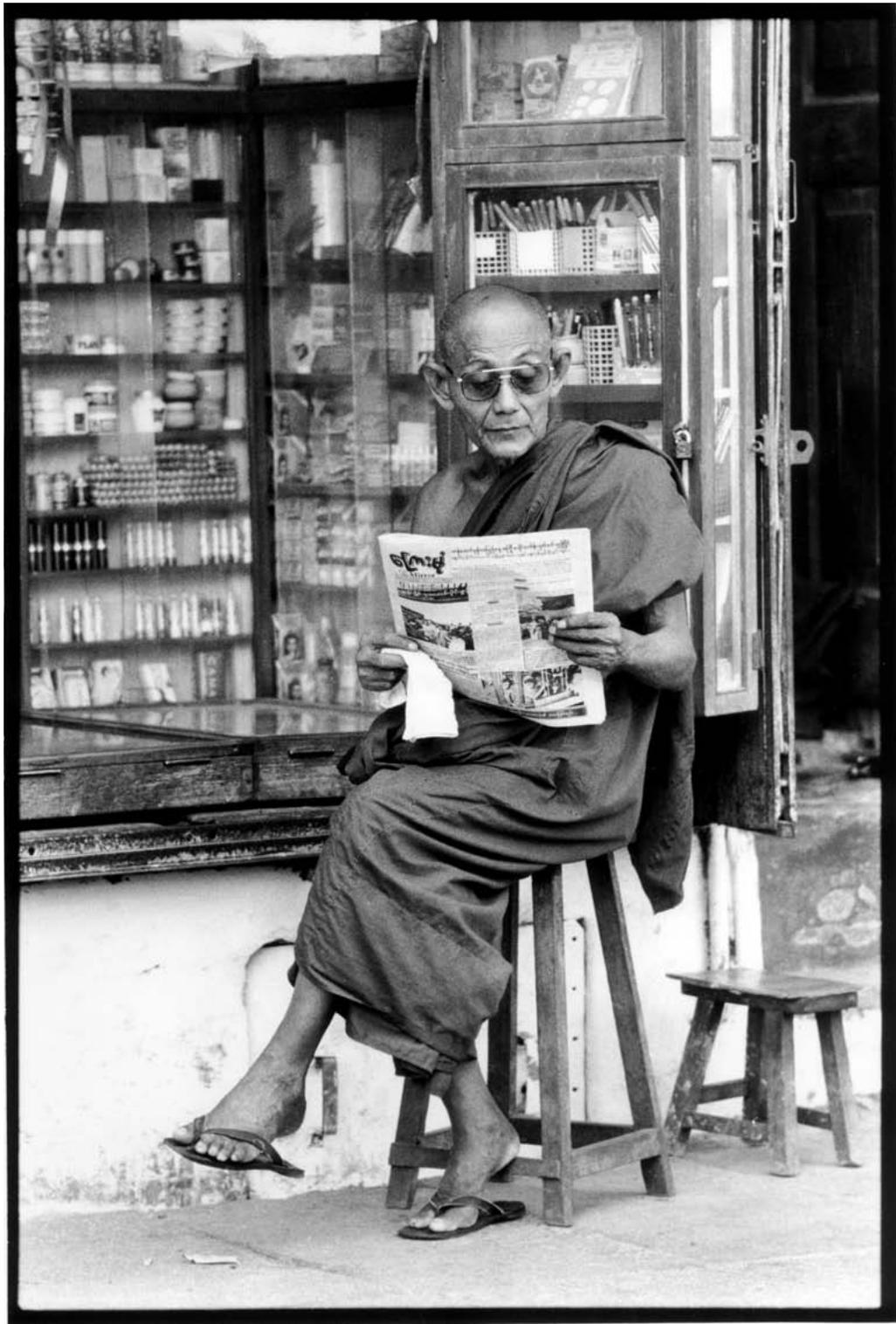
Thus goes on the story of light, the one that makes us see things, things we eventually come to wish to represent. Because through its travelling, light has revealed space, and in so doing it has induced time. With the two of them, the scene is about to unfold. "Action", calls the director. The action happens to be a **process**, a process as volatile as light itself, which called for a fixative as a cure for us to feel secure.

If most of the light pouring out from the countless stars keeps on travelling in a never-ending momentum, a portion of it happens to move onto a different state, to transform itself and serve a different purpose or rather an extended purpose. The eye is another point in time and space, a point meant to capture the elusive thing with no substance that renders matter perceptible. Not surprisingly, this point is like the negative of the very source of what it is meant to be the trap of, a spherical void within matter versus spherical matter within the void.

What happens to the light within the eye is by now well known on the point of view of 'how'. But the reason why sheer movement should transform itself into electric impulse generative of reactive actions and eventually thoughts and emotions remains beyond rational grasp. The light is like everything we absorb, it feeds us, it keeps us alive. It does so physically when absorbed through the skin and it does it mentally when absorbed through the eye to be **transmuted** into the psychic realm.

It comes from matter, bounces off matter to be processed by matter, but remains all the while beyond matter. It is as if it existed on its own, like the light we see in dreams, the images of dreams. For in the end that is the main if not the only resource we have to identify 'the light': images, whether 'real' or 'unreal', allow us to perceive them and in so doing to describe the world and ourselves in relation to the **world**.







The Unfolding Imagery.

Images. They are by now everywhere. In the streets; on the walls of our homes; in cyberspace; on the food we eat, in books, newspapers and magazines; on the clothes we wear; in the beds we sleep in; on money and credit cards.

We live by them, work with them, love by them, and communicate with them. They look at us looking at them. They are the witnesses of our success and failure. They speak out loud in the landscape or whisper in some hidden corner of our privacy. They spread themselves thin over the entire scope of our urban reality, pervading every layer of the environment created by mankind for mankind.

Yet, in the earliest days of humanity, their presence was restricted to specific uses that mostly concerned the 'sacred'. They were 'signs', 'symbols', that signified the **presence** of a dimension beyond material reach, a dimension that could not be explained, only experienced, maybe the dimension of light itself as it was then perceived: a daily miracle. They were nothing but lines at first, including the symbolic thin line between existence and nothingness, the outline of what was meant.

In time, the form drawn by the line also called on the substance it implied and with its colours. Painting turned the graphic symbols into tinted forms. With civilisation, the decorative use of images became increasingly important. They began to tell **stories** that could pertain to nothing more than appearances. Prettiness was invented and with it, the concern for visual credibility only grew more consequential. The hand became an expressive extension of the eye. Things had to be represented as they were seen and be convincing at it.

The search for the perfect image took on the form of virtuosity. Not that meaning was altogether obliterated, far from it. The skilfulness acquired in the quest for realistic rendering also gave a new depth to the original concern for the intangible dimension that gives life to true works of art. But it is also a **fact** that the more sophisticated a civilisation is, the more mundane generally its images are. Skills kept on improving and techniques kept on widening their scope.





And then, just at the time when new heights were reached in the rendition of light and its effect over the world of forms, just when paintings were beginning to look more than ever like reality itself, a new mean of visual representation of the world was invented that used light itself as a tool.

The human beings who chanced upon the very first photograph must have felt like they were meeting with some sort of **oddity**, which couldn't be referred to anything known until then. An oddity it was indeed, and to some extent a space oddity since the light that had impressed the chemicals was coming from outer space.

Confronted with a silent and motionless image that not only looked like reality but WAS reality, they thought that the search for the perfect mean of representation had come to an end. The hand was left with purely mechanical tasks, the eye ruled the game. The viewer could see what had been seen in real time. Or so it seemed. For in truth, beneath the surface realistic impression, **photographs** were more than ever images that addressed a hidden dimension.

Just as light itself, they were supported by matter but stood beyond matter, since what was framed there between the edges of the piece of paper that supported the photographic emulsion, was actually a piece of time. And most disturbing of all, a piece of time that stood still, the very **impossible** thing that had been searched for so long: the perfect image turned real, the moment transcended to eternity.

Something
happened to our vision
and understanding of the world
when photography was invented,
something strange and deep which we haven't
fully understood yet and which is only beginning to
show the full extent of its effect on our reality. It has
been in existence for a little more than a 150 years and
by historical standards, this is nothing more than the
fraction of an instant in the grander scheme of **time**. But
within that little time, it has become so much a part of our
lives that we can't fully realise how strange the medium is
anymore. It quickly became so necessary to our
understanding of what we are that we had no choice but
take it for granted. And yet, if we just let things quiet
down for a while and allow the subtlest sensations
to rise to the surface of our being, then within
that space of timeless quality,
photographs start to speak...





The Displaced Continuum.

SOLO - 1993

Photographs of course at first tell things about time and space since that's what light is about. Paradoxically, they tell things about those fundamental components of reality by simply annulling them.

Of course, the very piece of paper that supports the image is undoubtedly subjected to the necessities of life. It can be lost, thrown away, disappear forever. The nature of its content however exists on a different level.

Photographs record events that are indubitably linked to specific times and places. But once those events are recorded on paper, they can be seen and interacted with any time, any place. The child pictured in the previous photograph is probably by the time of this writing a grown up boy happily going to school and waiting for recess time to have a good game with his friends. Still, within the space of that image, he remains a toddler, will remain so forever, and chances are that this will be the only aspect we will ever know of him. For him, as we see him, **time** doesn't exist anymore.

In the same way, this image was taken in Solo, Central Java, reflecting the light that happened to be cast over that piece of land on the surface of planet earth. And yet the reality of this light has now come to us and the image of that piece of land can travel the world to eventually even reach another planet, as if **space** didn't really matter to it anymore.

In fact, it is as if part of the photographic process, beyond the physical and chemical reactions that allow its process to unfold, was to switch elements of both dimensions to allow the resulting image to almost 'float' at the **surface** of the space and time continuum. From the original three dimensions upon which the photographed objects rested, only two are left in the resulting image, although the illusion of depth remains as part of the photographic trick. What happened then to the third? Could it be that it switched its level of action and went to mingle with time, giving to the very instant reflected in the image the depth allowing its own independent expansion?

Similarly, the light captured within the camera is forever stopped, absorbed by the chemicals and its energy used to transmute them. What happened then to the essence of its kinetic nature, the perpetual movement that makes it what it is? Could it have been transposed to the image of that scene and imbues it with the possibility of a motion independent of the original elements represented? Indeed, the strangest things seem to happen through photography behind the deceivingly harmless veil of banality.







The Silent Dialogue

Not surprisingly, the popularity of photography with the public at large was first established in the fields of portraiture and travel photography.

The photographic image perfectly answered the need for a realistic representation of the personality and its comparatively low cost of production quickly made it accessible to almost any one. At long last, the answer to the social and psychological need for image **recognition** wasn't reserved for only the aristocratic elite.

Photographic portraits were enhanced with techniques that made them look like paintings, framed elaborately and hung on the walls of the homes. The image of what the person had been was transfixed for every one to see and could be passed on to the next generation. The body could go still and decay. The image of it would remain as proof of its existence and it would confront whoever would see it in the **future**.

As for travel photography, it obviously met with the other dimension of the medium, space. Although the equipment used in the earliest days was rather heavy and cumbersome, photographers quickly embarked onto photo expeditions with the aim of bringing back images of far away countries. Suddenly, the Pyramids, the Eiffel Tower or the Great Wall of China could be perceived by eyes that would hardly ever have a chance to meet with the real things. The whole world could be visited from one's own birthplace through the many portfolios that became the fashion of that time.

The world was still wide but could now be flipped through and this radical change might be regarded as one of the first **sign** and materialisation of what came to be termed as the 'global village'. One not simply 'knew of' those faraway countries for reading about them but actually 'knew' them for having 'seen' the actual light that was cast upon them on the day the photograph was taken.



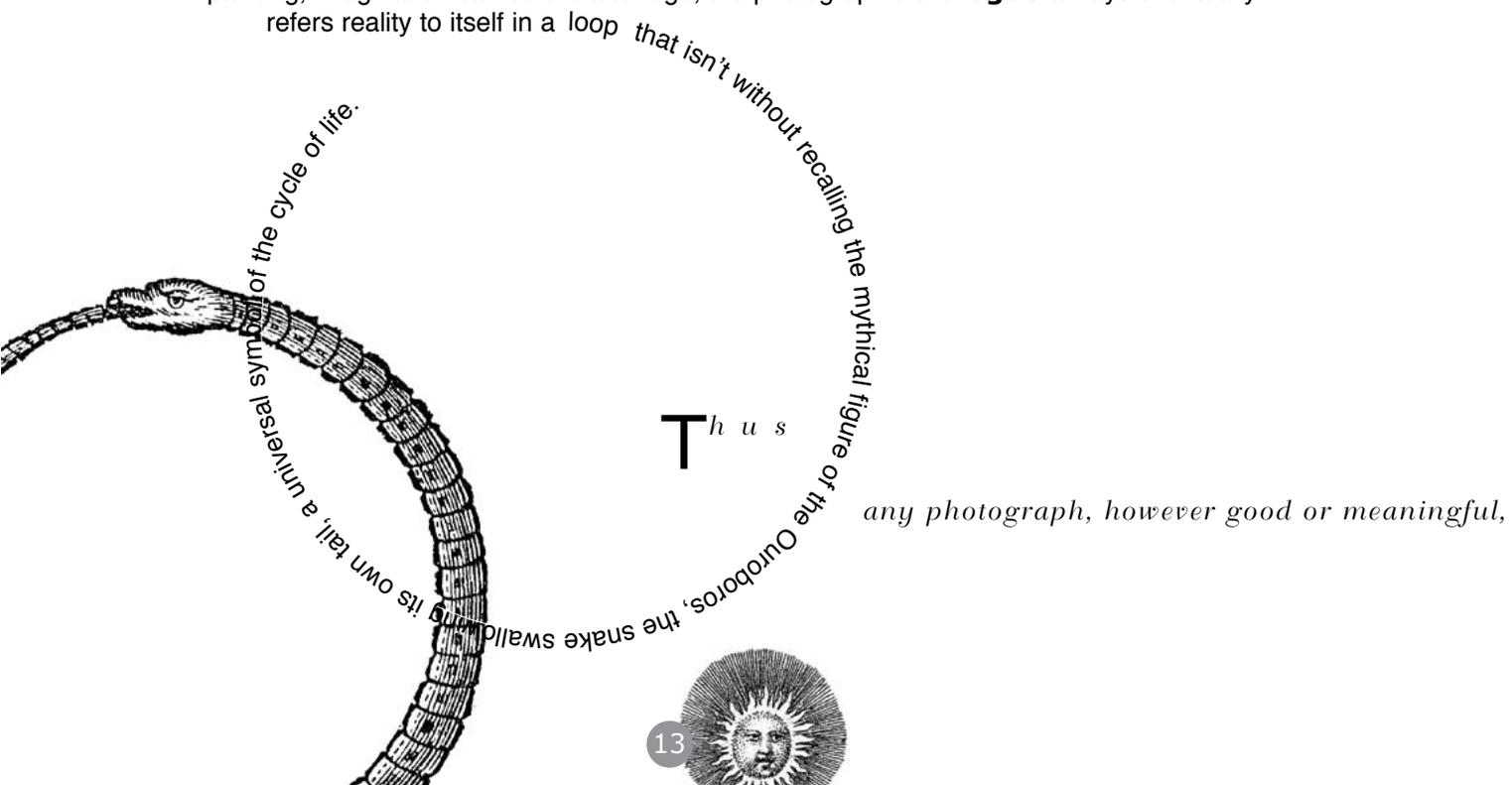
In comparison to the pictorial approach to photography in which the scenes are artificially 'staged', both subjects, portraiture and travel, are obviously concerned with the most immediate use of the medium: the representation of the world 'as it is'. Of course, the photographic trick remains always active, allowing manipulation, magnification, and negation. Things might not be as '**real**' as they seem to be.

Yet, in its simplest approach, photography is always a dialogue between the complex and ever changing world of forms and its **perception** as sensations by an individual. This leads the photographer into making some choices that will freeze time with the shutter's release.

The resulting image will then later expand that frozen moment, engaging the viewer in a new dialogue that builds onto the photographer's own. Of course, the inner questions asked by the photographer or the viewer to the existing world or the photograph have indeed little chances to be answered formally or their observations to interfere with the reality of the subject. Nonetheless, the answers exist, but of a totally different nature from that of the questions. If the questions can be phrased and their meanings clearly established, the answers are to be found in the shift of perception triggered by the questions.

As the photographer observes the world, as the viewer deciphers the image confronting him, their interrogation leads them to see new things into what was already there, things that will in turn provoke new remarks, a **change** of point of view whether symbolical or physical, and so on. The nature of this dialogue is in many ways similar to that experienced when looking at a painting. It is based on the impressions we receive and process when looking at any form of image or even words.

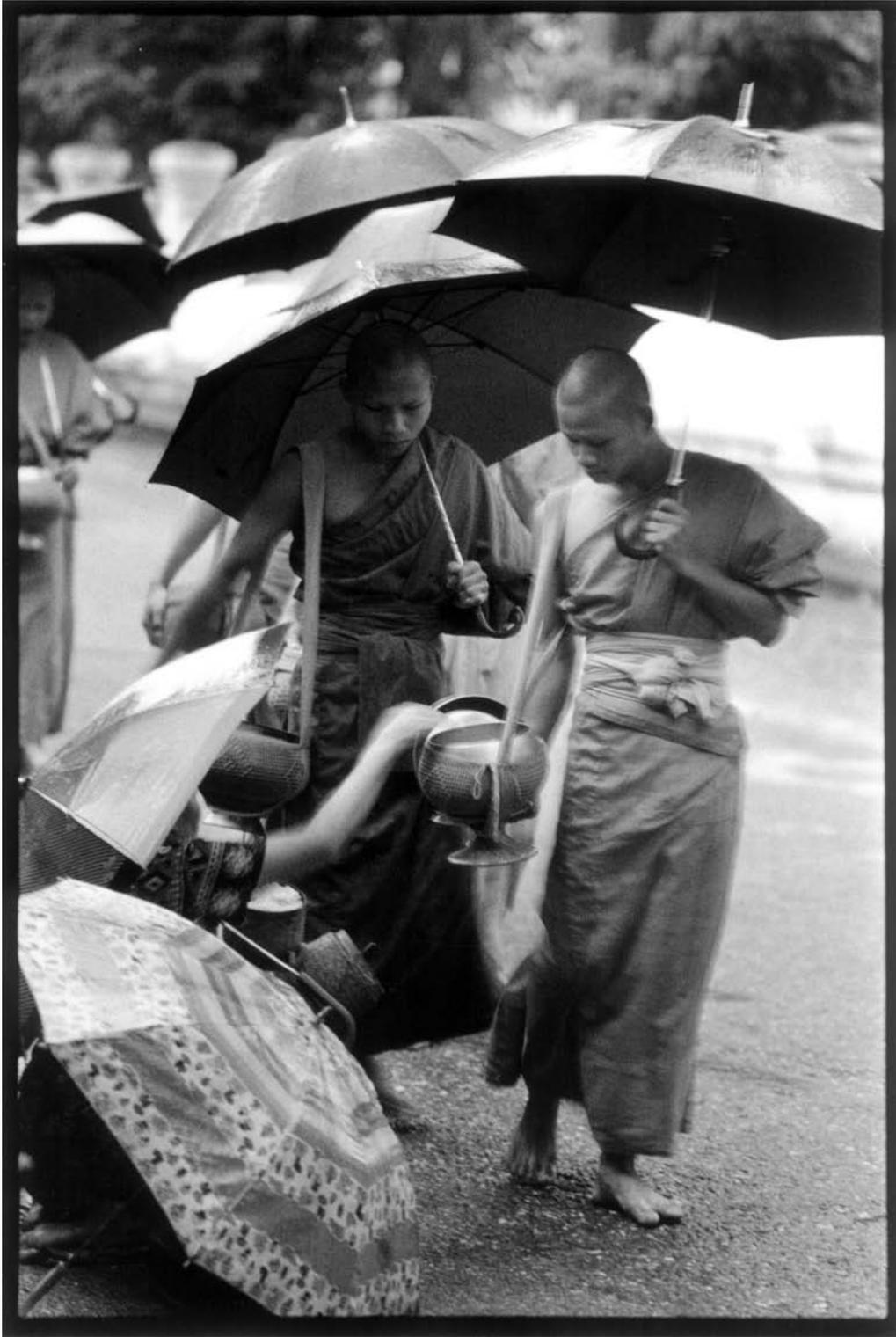
However, an important difference lies in the fact that at ALL times the **nature** of a photograph implies that what is seen has truly existed. It is therefore an exchange that cannot but follow a specific 4-step process (reality-photographer-image-viewer) as opposed to the graphic process which may do with or without the first 'real' stage (imagination-artist-image-viewer). If with painting, imagination can be the alter-ego, the photographic **dialogue** always eventually refers reality to itself in a loop





adds a new element to the on-going evolution that sees reality looking at its own self with an ever growing complexity,





LUANG PRABANG





TAUNGOO





BALI

*a course of action which had remained metaphorical
while fulfilled by the only traditional graphic means of representation.*





HOI AN





KUALA LUMPUR



CALCUTTA

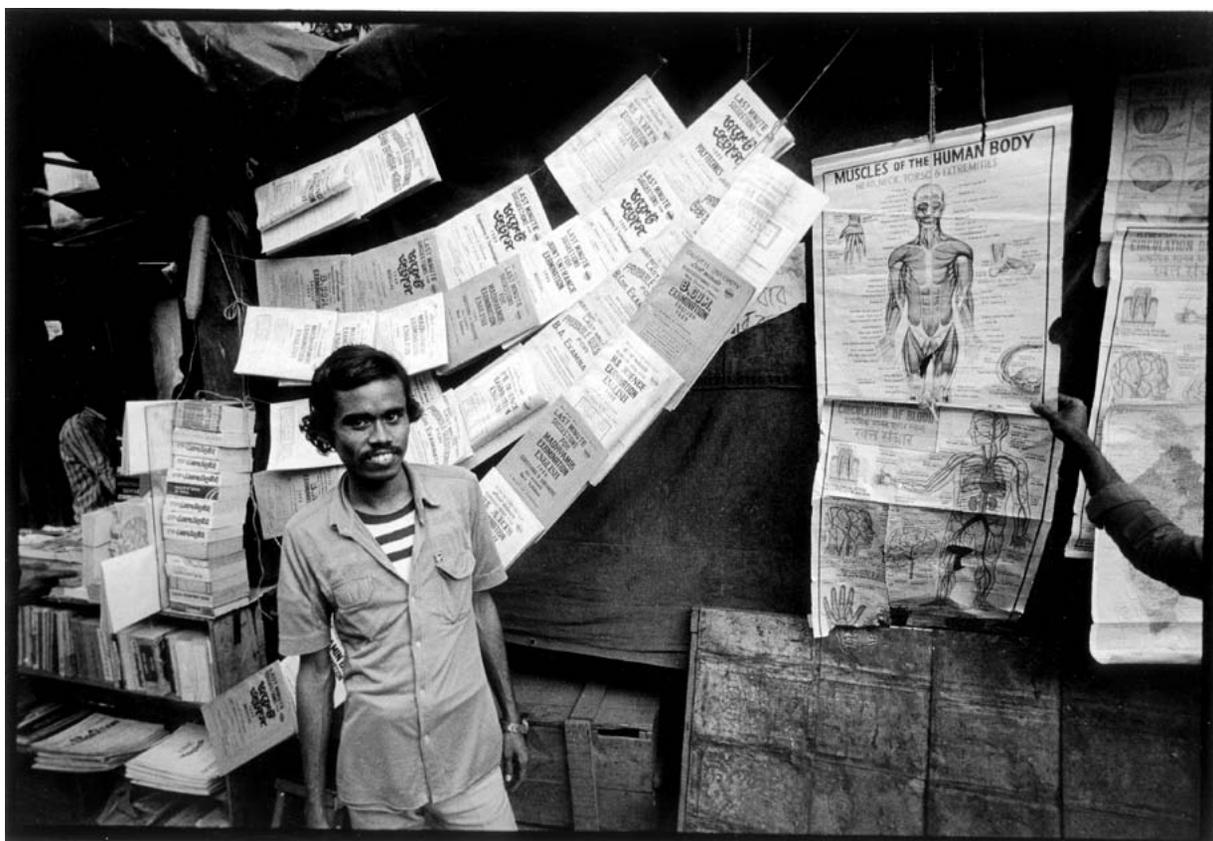


'Hang in There'

The photographic process unfolds through a series of silent dialogues that see reality perceived, transfixed, processed and perceived again.

Those dialogues are all the while supported by a complex sequence of transformations of the light, which is repeatedly materialised, transcended to emotion, chemically transmuted and turned into its negative. The light thus fluctuates between different operational modes that alternate physical and sensitive actions to successively bring about the form of the subjects and stimulate the **emotions** of the viewers.

It 'moves' from one 'body' to another (whether human or not) to convey forms which will be given meaning. Whether considering the couple 'Subject-Photographer or the couple 'Photograph-Viewer', the form of the subject implies a **sensation** in turn supported by the form of the viewer. In between as well as within the individual forms, the shared sensations '**hang in there**'.



They 'hang' because they vacillate between intuitive understanding and formal recognition. They 'hang' because of the **unavoidable** stillness of photography, which cannot but evoke the moment before and the moment after, while always eluding a decisive grasp.

They 'hang' because they reflect at once the reality of the moment and the **insubstantiality** of light.

Photographs seem at first to rest on solid ground only to reveal on a deeper probe that they are in fact a head without feet. They indeed don't go anywhere. They simply forever 'hang' where they were. In there.

Where

any

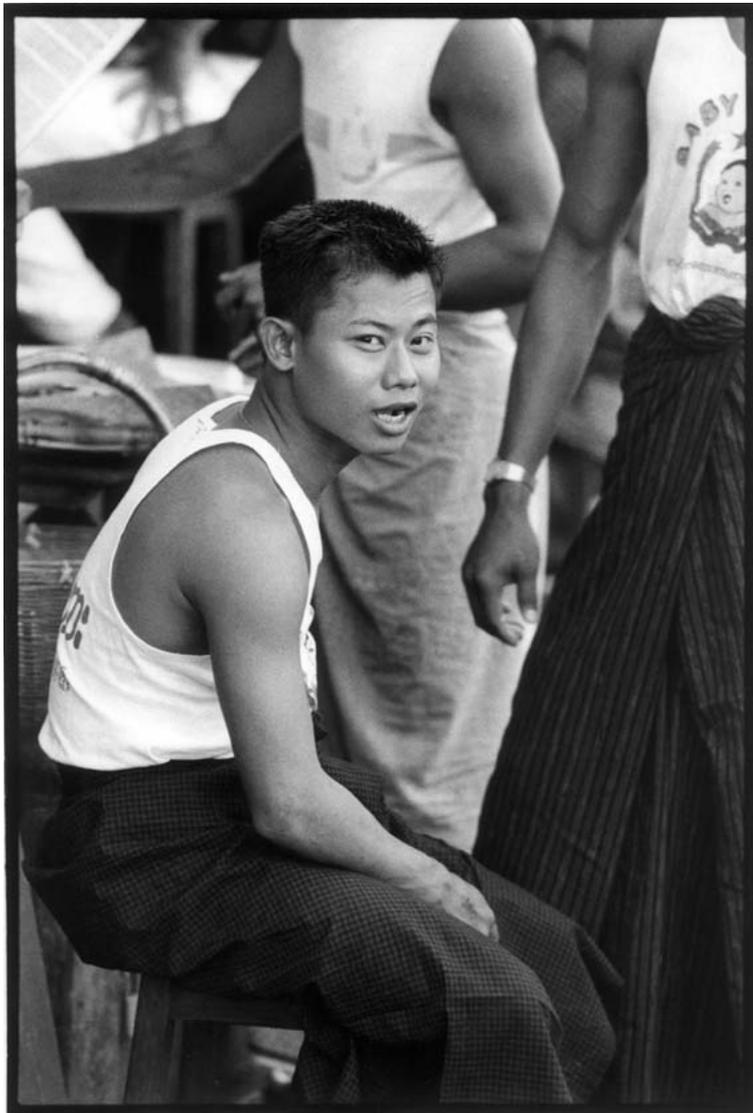
perception



begins.



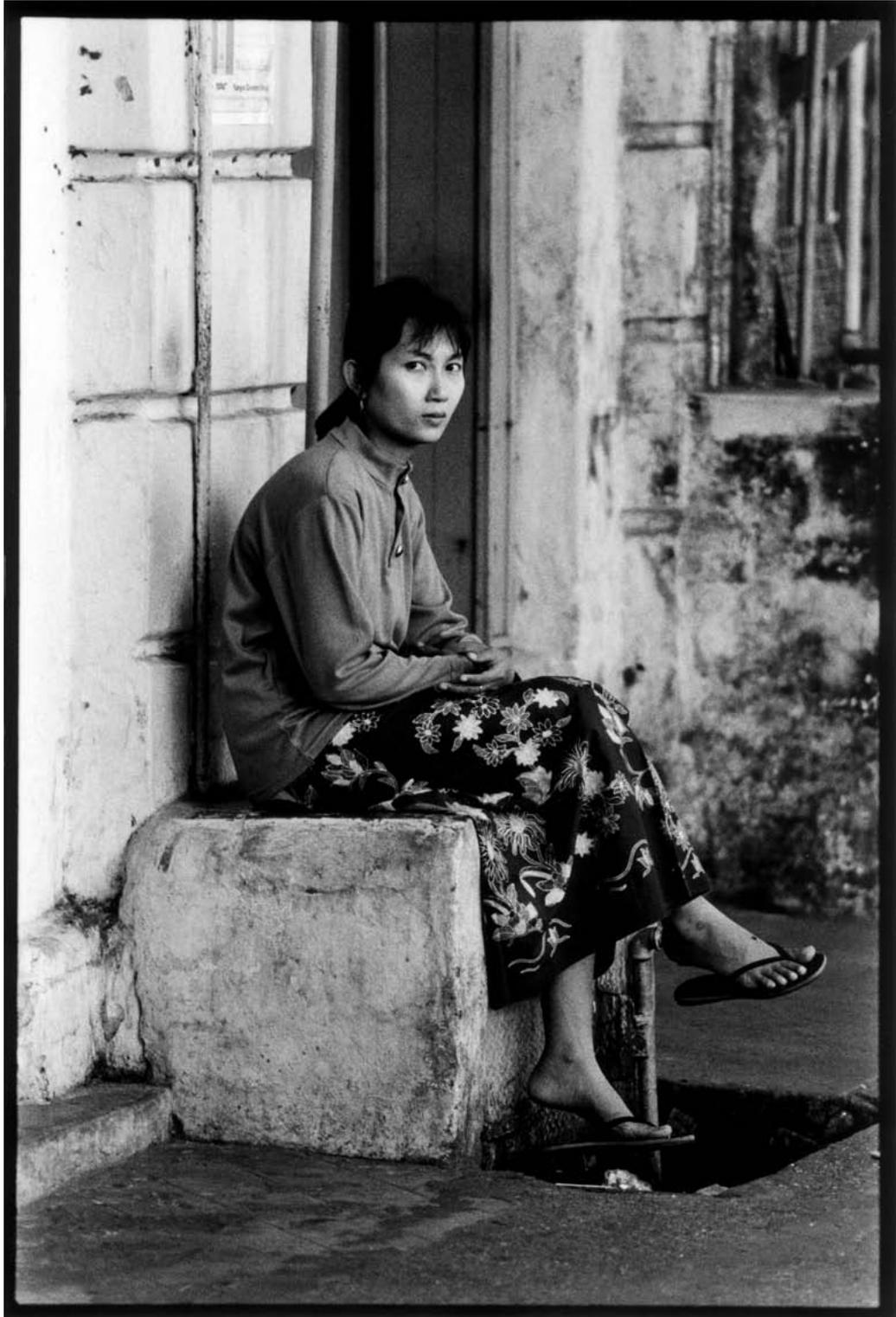
The shared sensations might not necessarily **be** the same at each step of the process as their transmission through the different components of the chain inevitably evokes subjectivity and distortion. Since the photographer and his photograph stand as an intermediate step that allows the connection between the original subject and the **final** act of deciphering accomplished by the viewer, an important question for example is how much of the photographer is present in the image.



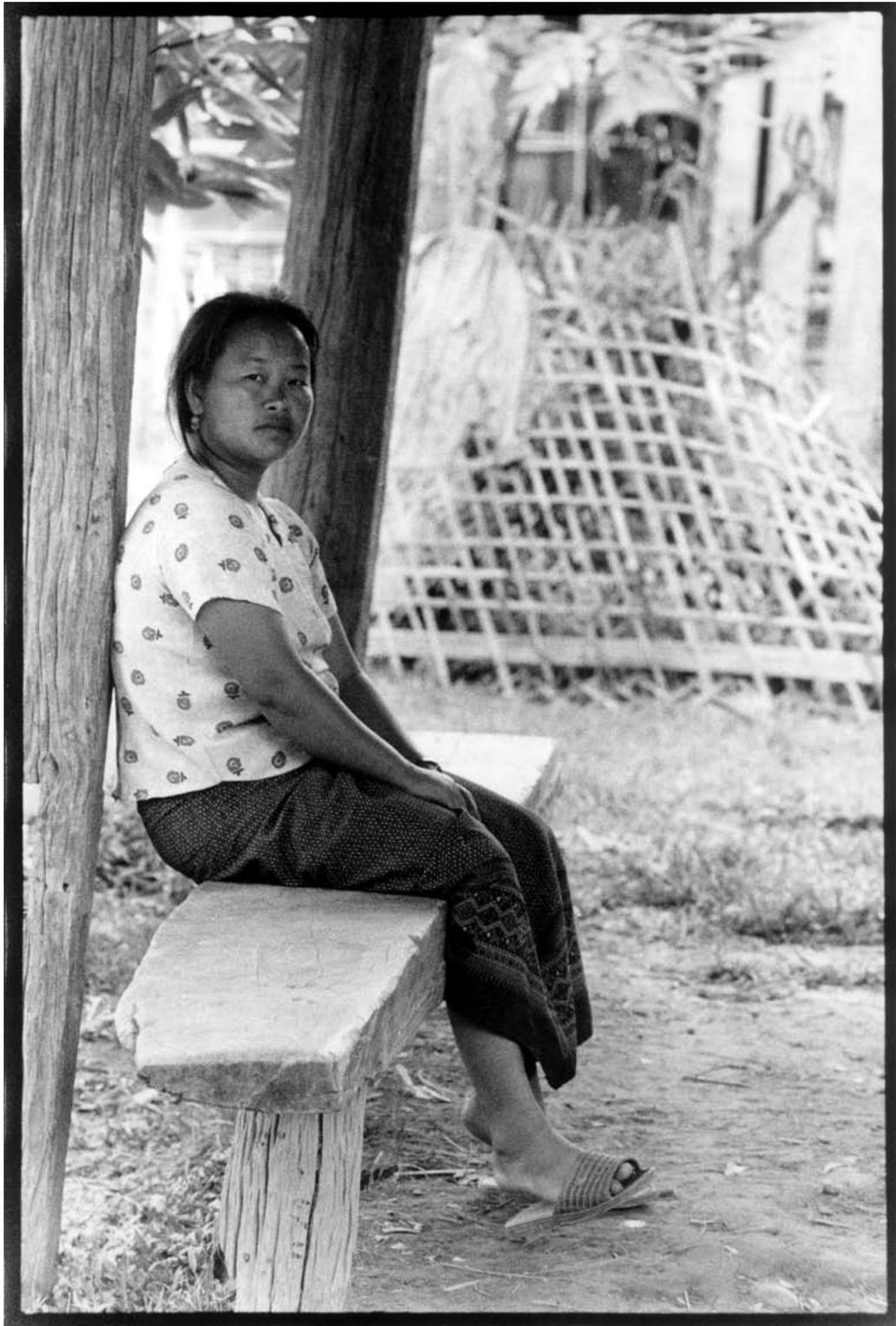
Undoubtedly,
the 'eye' of the photographer is the **tool**
that frames reality to turn it into a more or less interesting and evocative picture.
It is after all 'his' or 'her' personal vision of the world that we look at as much as reality itself.

In the
case of the
photographs presented together
with this text, it is the **universal**
sensation of being sustained by the form that
matters, rather than the social content of the form
taken as the reason of existence of both the subject and
the picture. The people in those photographs aren't looked
upon as 'objects' although their **bodies** certainly are. It is
hoped that they are seen as '*being*' rather than '*doing*'. Their
form and sensation are intrinsically **linked** as a mutual
expression of one another. They too are seen as 'hanging in
there' as much as their
photographs are.

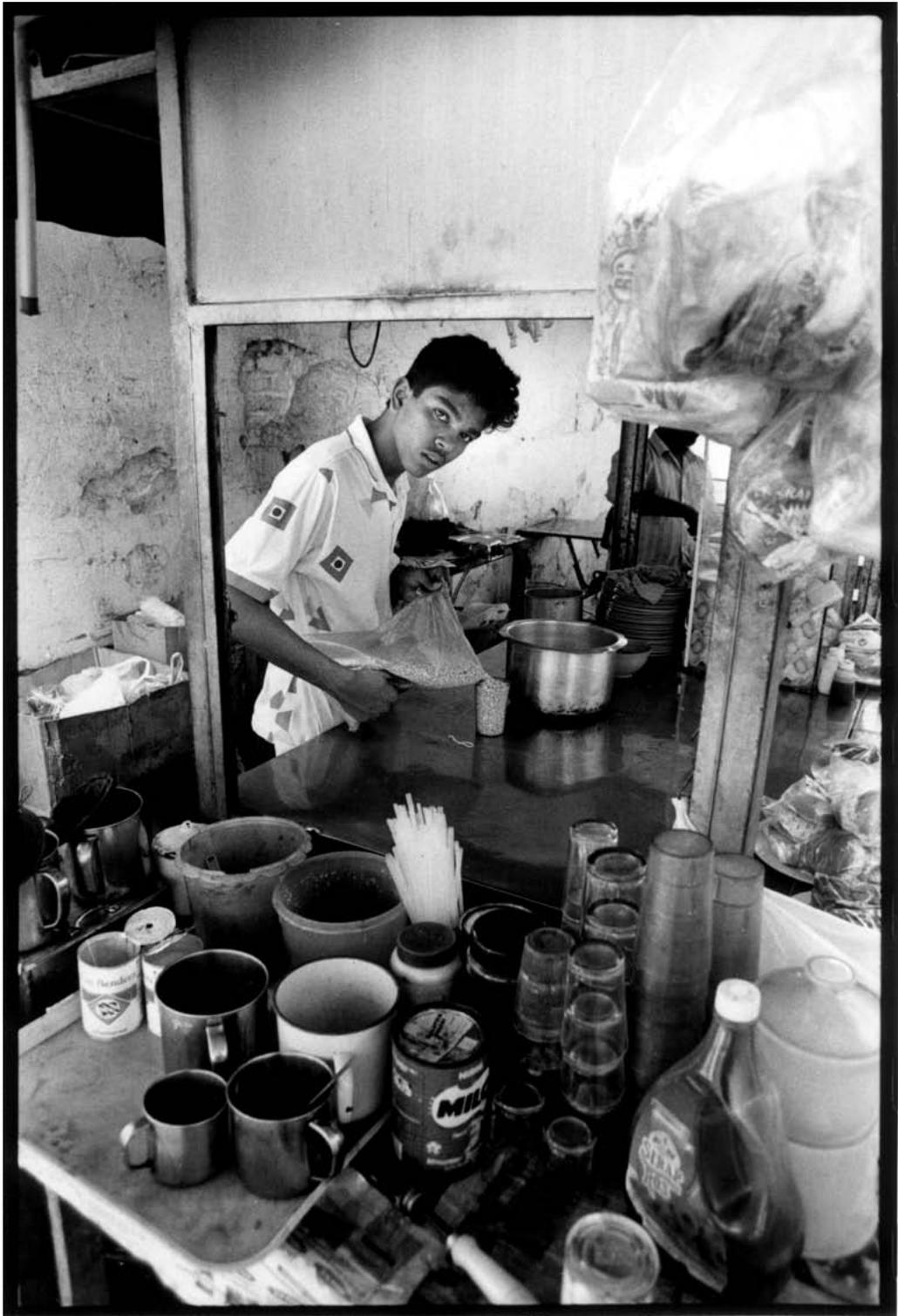


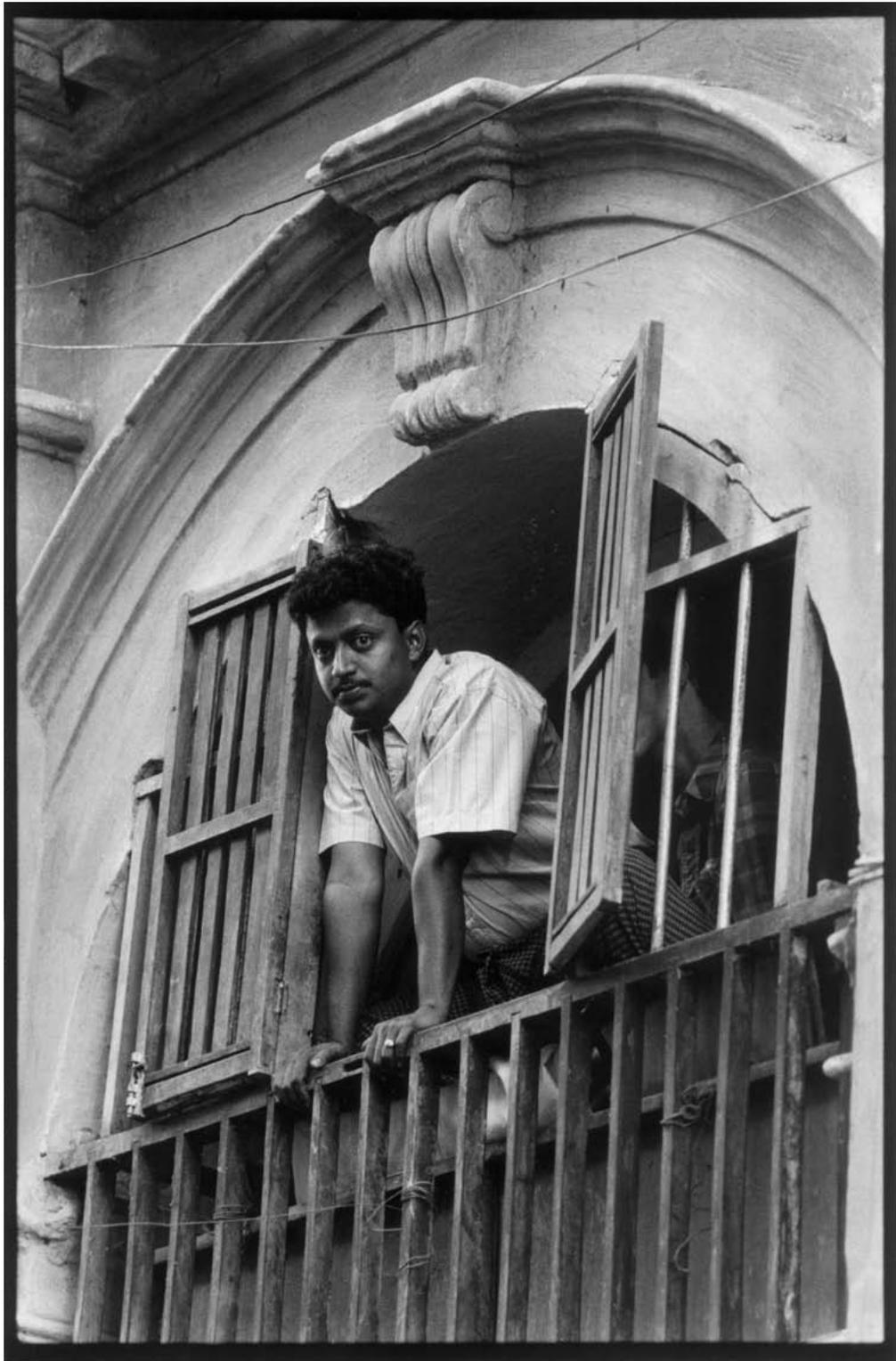


















The Black and the White.

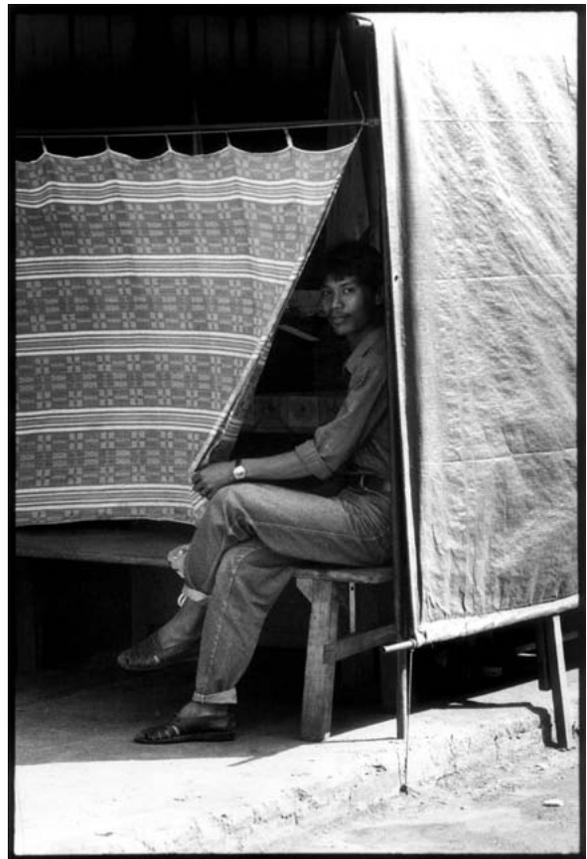
Another way in which photography greatly influenced our vision and **understanding** of the world is to be found in the fact that it was invented in black and white.

What would have been the situation had it been invented in colour is left open to speculation but things might have been somehow different.

After all, beside space and time, colour is also an aspect by which light is intrinsically defined. Light IS colour, well at least as perceived by the eye within the limits of the visible spectrum, for beyond the wave length of infrared and ultraviolet lie a dimension yet to be explored.

The fact that photography was invented in black and white might be purely accidental, it holds however some determinant **consequences**.

The obvious effect of black and white imaging is that it dramatises reality to the extent of giving it an almost symbolic dimension. Although things are seen 'as they are', they are also perceived through the filter of the most basic and quintessential understanding of the world: the duality between light and dark, good and bad and so forth. This is maybe where the misunderstanding on the true nature of photography was at first established. The form of things represented in the images was so obviously matching in their reality that people probably neglected the **abstract** dimension the black and white aspect was adding to it.



The image looked more than ever 'real', and that seems to have been what people chose to see in it at first. It was also more than ever a symbol of how we see the world, through the filter of **duality**. We maybe then came to understand more or less consciously that the image, no matter how real it could look would always remain as a symbol.





It is
generally accepted
that the invention of photography gave the
opportunity to painting to free itself from the necessity
of formal representation, thus allowing it to evolve on the basis
of totally different concepts. *It might be that beside the resolve of the*



*question of the
'form' by the
photographic
medium, the drastic
visual
representation of
the world in black
and white also
greatly helped the
human mind to
envision those
concepts by
reinforcing the
symbolic dimension*

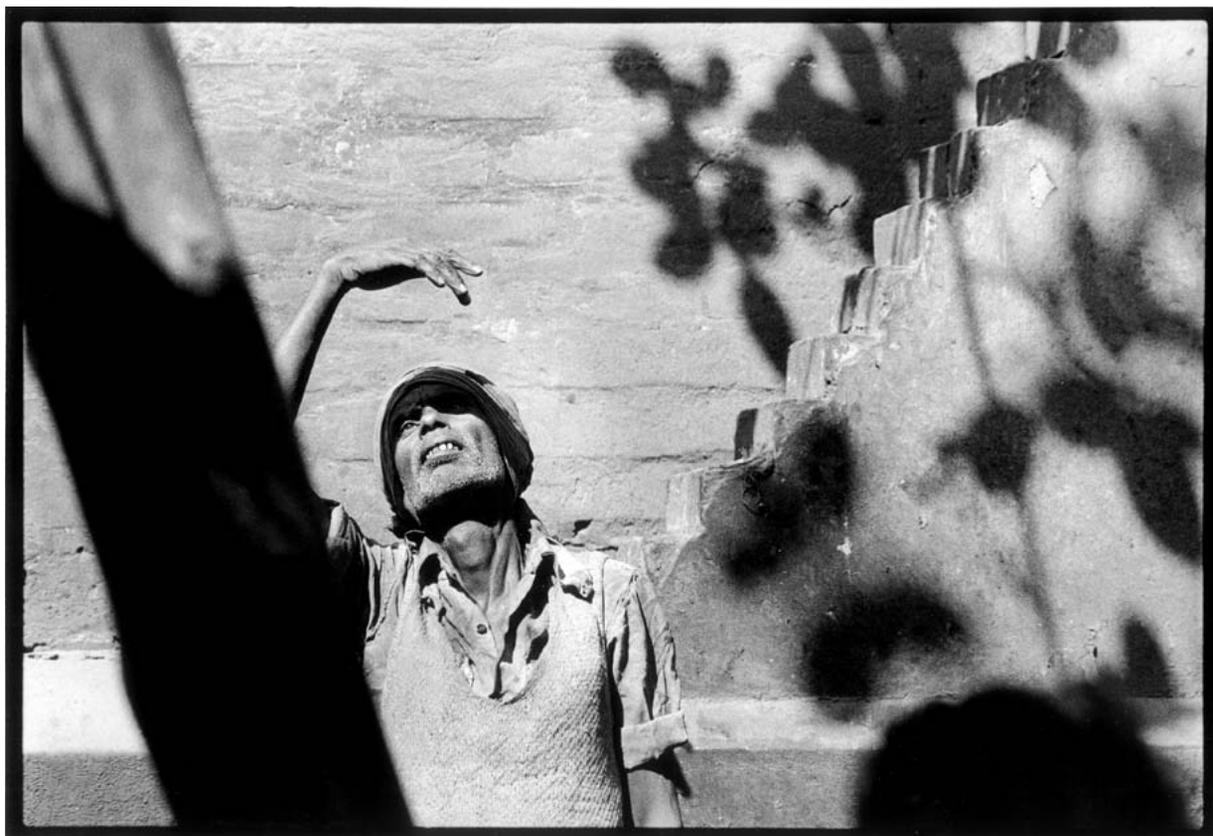


*found in the original
use of images.*

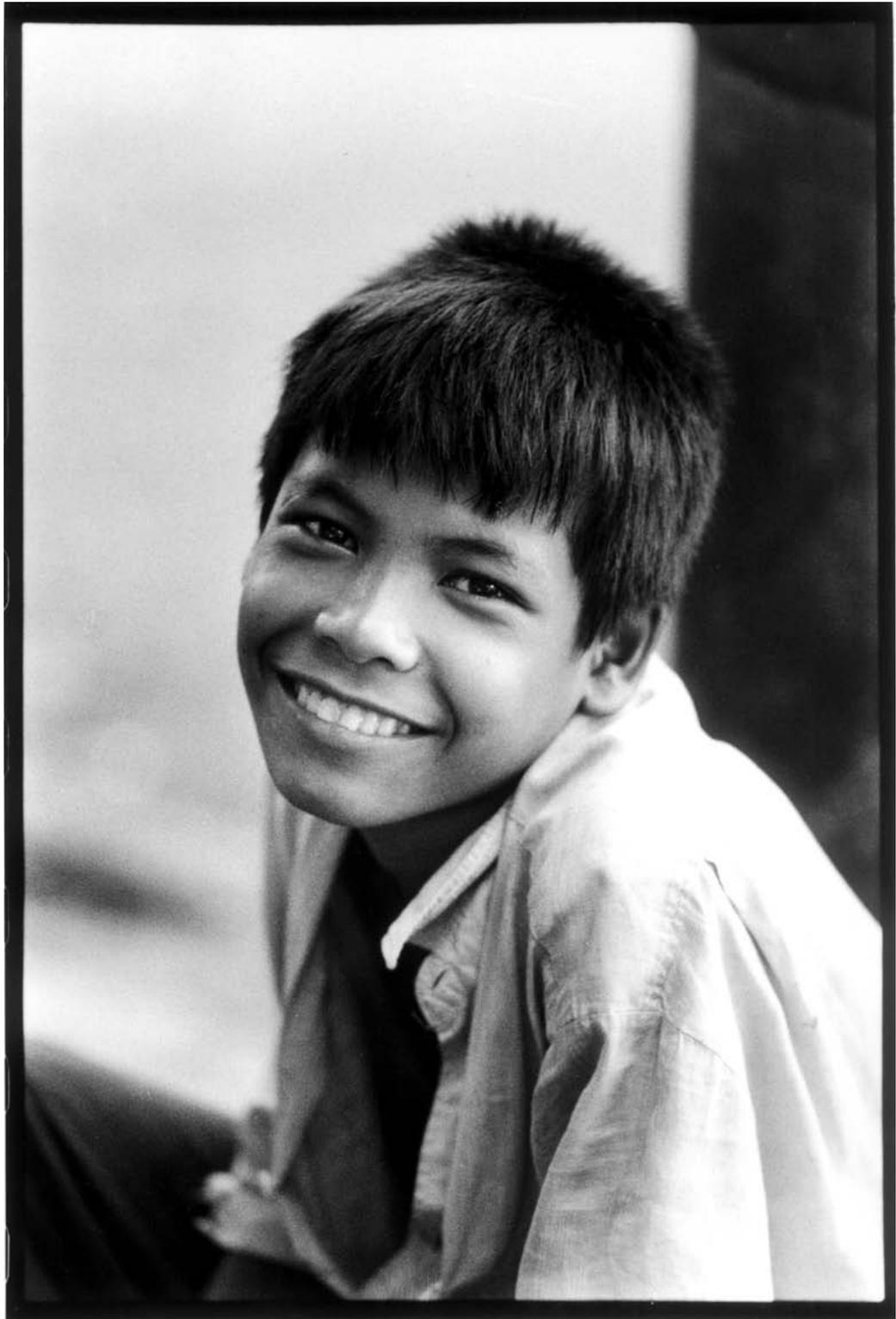










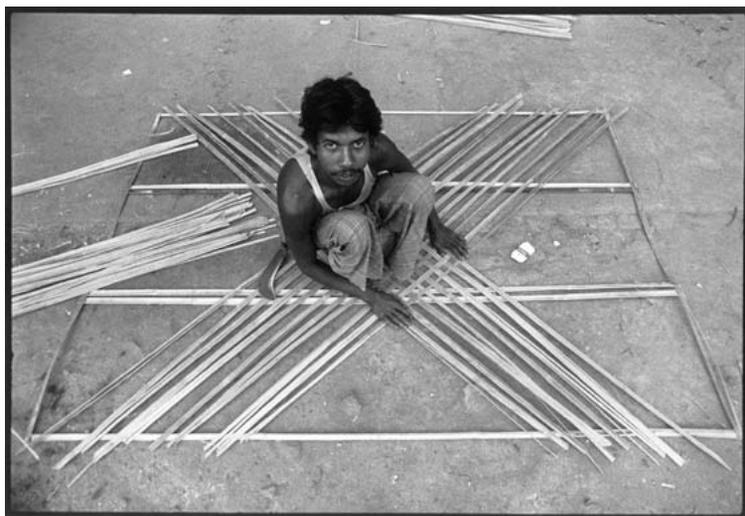




The Silent Dialogue.

Part 2

Calcutta - 1989



Photographs also talk to one another.

Solo - 1995





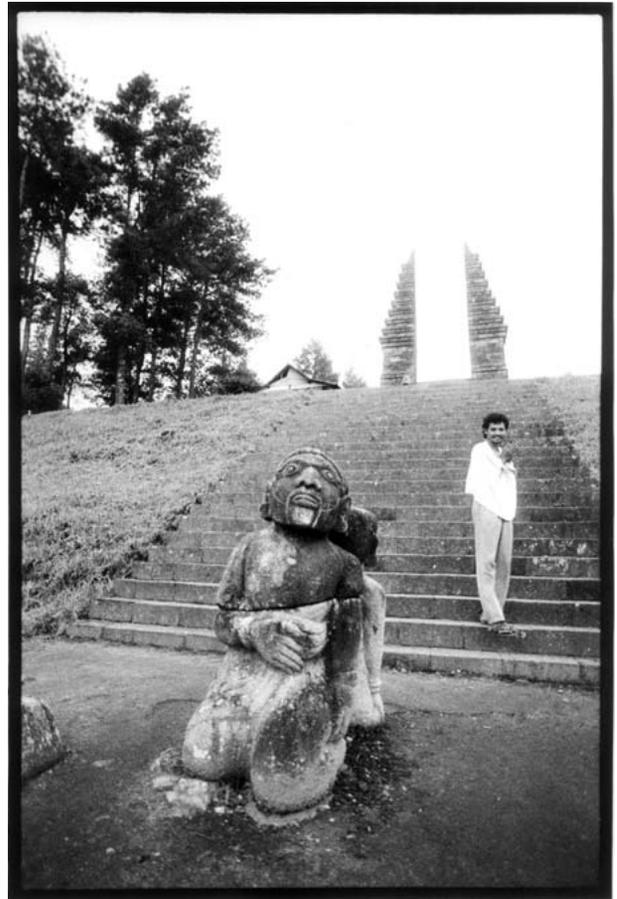
Kuala Lumpur - 1994



Solo - 1995



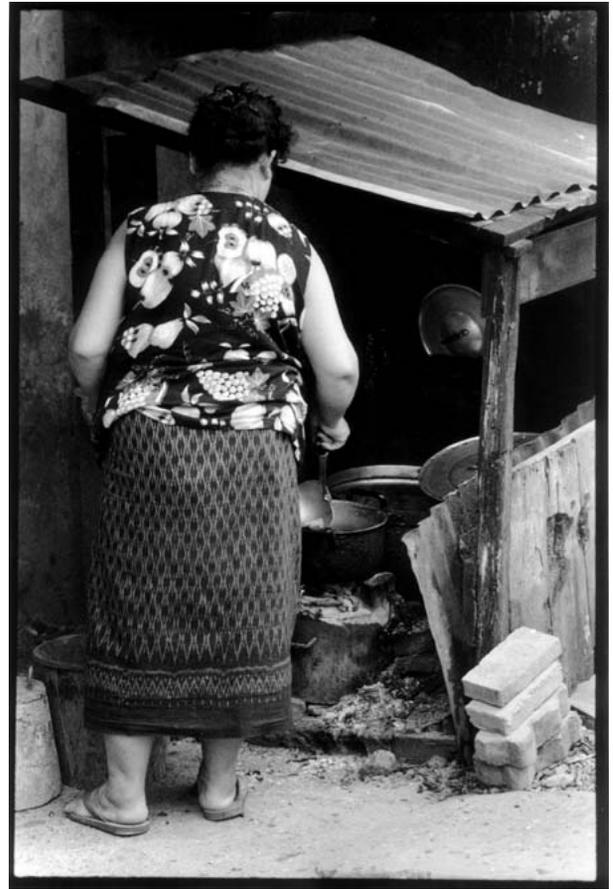
Kuala Lumpur - 1994



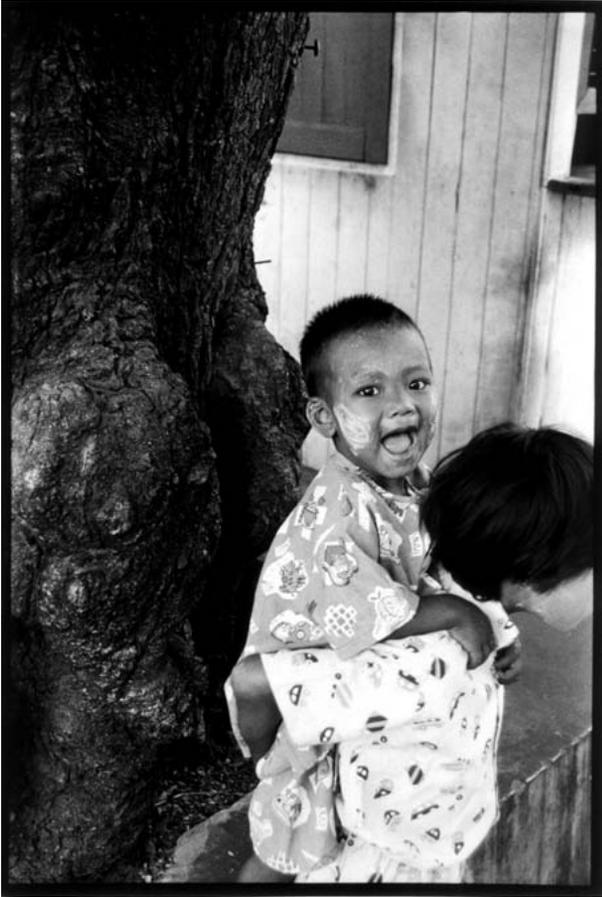
Solo - 1993



Yangon - 1994



Luang Prabang - 2000



Yangon - 1994



Solo - 1995



Yangon - 1994



Solo - 1995



Calcutta - 1989



Yangon - 1994





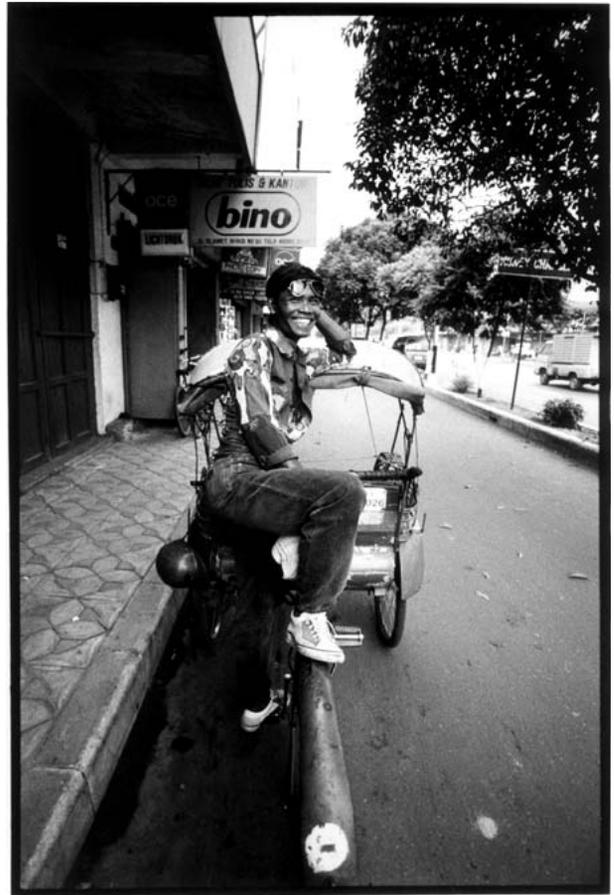
Solo -1993



Hanoi -1992



Taiping - 1995



Solo - 1993





Solo -1993



Hanoi -1992

Could that be a conclusion?

things to reality when it captures it, then what happens to us when we look at photographic images? For surely something of an **intangible** quality must happen too in that phase of the process. Already, the study of semiotics and the recognised effect of advertising images on social behaviour clearly state the fact that images interfere with our perception of the world.

But is that really all?

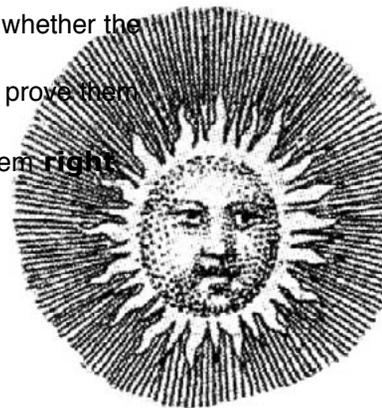
When photography first reached primitive people in remote corners of the planet, it was broaching men and women, whose understanding of the world was often based on an animist culture, where they were most afraid of that 'magical box' which they believed had the **power** of capturing their souls.

The scientists who led the materialist and fact-finding approach prevailing at that time could not but regard this belief as mere superstition.

Metaphysical subjects being by definition beyond the possibility of a formal demonstration, it is then

left to each individual to **choose** whether the important point is that nothing can prove them

wrong or nothing can prove them **right**.





















Where & When

Photographed

Laos - 2000

Luang Prabang: pg 11, 15, 32, 37, 47

Vang Vieng: pg 22, 27

Malaysia

Taiping - 1995: pg 28, 52

Kuala Lumpur - 1994: pg 14, 19, 29, 45, 46

Indonesia

Solo - 1995: pg 44, 45, 48, 49

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Myanmar - 1994

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Pyin Oo Lwin: pg 38

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Saigon: pg 1, 26, 41

Hue: pg 12

Hoi An: pg 18

Hanoi: pg 51, 53

India - 1989

Calcutta: pg 6, 20, 21, 35, 40, 44, 50

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Jilles Cassot

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N.

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