

Chapter 8

ON (FINALLY) SAYING YES TO *AMERICAN PICTURES*

I loved life on the road and never wanted to return home. Yet in September 1974, it suddenly became possible – and necessary. One day, after a five-hour hitchhiking trip from my former girlfriend Marly's wedding in Boston, and thus in a somewhat sad state, I walked into the Broome Street Bar in Soho and there sat a dazzlingly beautiful black woman. She was wooed by white guys, and soon she started flirting with me. That night I moved in with Annie Rush' in her shared flat on Vestry Street. "Let's just get the sexual stuff over with so I can see if you're worth collecting," the invitation read. I had never experienced this quick response from a black woman, just as her cultured British accent confused me. It came from the fact that she had just returned "home" to the United States after 10 years of sailing with a wealthy Englishman, Peter Crowther. Both her mother and stepfather had just been murdered in Chicago, and after a painful childhood in the Mississippi of racism, Annie hated America and was drawn to my European-ness and my work depicting racism.

After a week together, however, we agreed that "we weren't worth collecting," and I was on the road again. But when I the same day got a letter from Immigration saying I'd should be out of the US on September 21st, I went straight up to Annie - at her job with the tobacco company Philip Morris - and suggested we get married. Although we had "broken up" that same morning, she said yes, and we made a quick deal that if she helped me get the green card - and thus become an American - so I could finish my racism project, I would make her a Dane and rescue her from this country she hated so much.



Our crazy wedding in City Hall photographed by our witness, Kristen Godfrey, during her lunch break as a nanny in the South African consulate. It was bad enough back then with "interracial" weddings but getting married with the apartheid regime's white baby in your arms didn't make the cardinal sin any less. Not to mention spending our honeymoon in the consulate during the consul's return trip to South Africa.

But since we needed a witness, and my old Canadian girlfriend Kristen Godfrey was busy, we had to wait until two days later. And it was indeed a forced shotgun wedding, and ever since I have been advising people against getting married on Friday the 13th.

We were married in the huge City Hall in the shadow of the newly built World Trade Center during Annie's lunch break. We stood in a long line as the only mixed couple, along with two blacks, two browns, two yellows, etc. When it was finally our turn, the registrar rejected us because of Annie's jeans, so I had to rush home to find her a proper dress. Next, we were rejected because we had no rings, and then I had to run at full speed two miles to a pipe fitter on Canal Street, who sawed a brass pipe into two oversized rings. Finally, we were turned down because I wasn't wearing a suit, whereupon I found a Frenchman in the queue who was also getting married pro forma and borrowed his much-too-small jacket. Finally, shaking his head, the registrar gave up and threw us into hymen's shackles.

But on the subway on her way back to work, Annie dropped all the wedding papers, baptismal certificates, etc., between two train cars, so that subway workers had to spend all night searching the dark underground with flashlights the three miles from 42nd St. to City Hall while the Frenchman invited us to merge our wedding party with his. Our honeymoon we celebrated in the South African consulate, where Kristen worked while the consul was on vacation in South Africa. So, Annie was truly married to a vagabond who hadn't spent a dime on becoming an American.

Now we had to live together under the observation of the authorities until I got my green card and we decided to go to San Francisco so that I could work with the homeless and prostitutes in the Glide Church. After eight days of driving, Annie was robbed of all her saved money immediately upon arrival. We could only get \$7 in welfare, so we ended up in the poorest area of the violent Tenderloin ghetto. After her life of luxury in England, Annie now found herself in a building full of drug addicts, prostitutes, pimps, arsonists, and criminals, and completely disintegrated.



Sometimes I took Annie with me in the pool rooms where I hung out with the criminals.



On the way home after a happy evening in San Francisco.

I started volunteering to feed the homeless in the Glide Church – if only to get free food for myself - as well as helping in the church's work with the prostitutes. Annie began to fall more and more into night drinking, why I couldn't stand her anymore and spent all my time on the streets with the criminals, with whom I developed such a trusting relationship that I took many of my best photos there. While working with the prostitutes, I became such good friends with the founder of their union, COYTE (Call Off Your Tired Old Ethics), Margo St. James, that for a few days I fled to her warming prairie wolf arms in her luxury Marin County apartment. While I was away, Annie was kidnapped by a prostitution ring that had flogged her endlessly and subjected her to Russian roulette to "break and dress" her like their other sex workers until at night she managed to escape naked out into the streets.

But the violence only got worse, and it was during this time that I first began to feel my own racism through the endless discussions with Annie, when I tried to defend the blacks with arguments about the white oppression, I so clearly saw they were suffering under, while Annie saw no hope for blacks and came home with appalling stories every day about their ineffectiveness and laziness in her workplace. Annie felt I should use the waiting time to write about my experiences as a vagabond, but in my own growing sense of hopelessness and wavering faith in blacks - and the destructive feeling of ghettoization between the screaming and yelling both inside and outside day and night, I may have ended up writing a book-length manuscript, but it was the most self-pitying worthless product I ever produced. To save our marriage, I often contacted her twin sister, Jeanette, for advice, but she said she didn't understand Annie either, since they had been separated from their earliest childhood.

Through the long tear-filled nights, I slowly realized how much pain Annie had suffered in childhood when, at 16, their mother became pregnant by a local professor. This was considered such a sin by their pietistic grandfather that for many years the mother and Jeannette were sent away from home while Annie remained in the parsonage, where, among other things, Reverend Jake Rush had often hung her in leather strips in the woodshed and whipped her.



On the 4,000 miles hitchhiking trip with Annie, she stands with my hitchhiking sign while we get a ticket where we are not allowed to hitchhike. Below, she's broken down at a railroad crossing near San Diego - and I'm cynical enough to photograph it - though I remember more being proud that she'd made it this far. In the past, I had often hitched rides with black women who couldn't handle the sexism from white men and quickly gave up.

To ease her pain in her new ghetto hell, I sometimes took her on hitchhiking trips. Once we went up to my old schoolmate and neighbor from my home village, Eddie Abrahamsen, who had emigrated to Vancouver. Incidentally, at the same time as the daughter of the house between our village homes emigrated. Throughout my vagabond years sent me her cassette tapes of sentimental nationalist songs from Danish Radio, through which I kept a bit in touch with what I somehow associated with Danish culture. Whenever I was furthest down on the highways, I would listen to Poul Reichhardt's vagabond song "Are you close to the birds of heaven?" which always lifted my spirits. On one of the trips to California, we were picked up with my hitchhiking sign by a son from the Terpager farm in my home village, where I had played with him as a child, but who had also now emigrated from the poor West Jutland. In the company of these enterprising West Jutland emigrants, I felt like a pure loser. While I, unable to feed my wife, was, among other things, fantasizing about starting my own business by making or importing Danish buttermilk dessert, which I was sure would be a bestseller among Americans if made by my mother's recipe. The younger Eddie had already started his own business and had his own airplane in 1975.

But it wasn't going to be that easy for me as an emigrant from West Jutland in the USA. On the 4,000-mile hitchhike back from Eddie in Vancouver through Idaho, Utah, and Arizona, with wetback smugglers of Mexicans, Annie broke down completely in San Diego and lay hysterically crying on the railroad tracks after another sexual assault by a white driver and the endless "warnings" from racist cops. When, after eight months of uncertainty, I was finally approved by immigration for the green card, I immediately fled to freedom on the highway. After getting Annie settled into safer quarters with a white family, my goal was to seek out her childhood town in Mississippi in an attempt to understand what had caused her deep pain that I had not been able to integrate with.

Her childhood town, the infamous Philadelphia, Mississippi, known from the film Mississippi Burning, she did not dare to return to.



Annie when I got my green card and we got her to live with a white family after the nightmare in the ghetto. Here she safely stored all my photos, which I had put and forgotten in the suitcase on the street during a nightly fire alarm in the ghetto apartment, where everything was usually stolen. When I came downstairs, I saw that it was inexplicably still there. Without that miracle, this book would not have been written.



Annie's grandparents, Pastor Rush and his wife.



Here I am with Annie's remaining family in 2003. This is Annie's cousin, Eddie Harris Rush, seen here in the shack shortly before his death.

She and the blacks had frequently been in fights with the two poor white boys in her neighborhood who later, as Ku Klux Klan members, took part in the murder of three civil rights activists. Both they and the town's hated Sheriff Rainey, who had incited the Klan to commit the killings and still lived in town, had been acquitted by an all-white jury. Although 11 years had passed, the town was still inflamed with racial hatred, and as fate would have it, I had to hitchhike from Meridian up through the woods along Highway 19, where the murders had taken place. So, with the feeling of being a "race traitor" who had betrayed myself to the town by marrying one of its black daughters, my heart was in my chest. When I knocked on Annie's unsuspecting grandparents' door, I had turned on the tape recorder so I could later play the meeting for her. "Hello, I am your son-in-law," I said. The astonished Reverend Rush immediately replied, "No, you ain't," unable to fathom that he had a white son-in-law. But though they had heard nothing of Annie's marriage, I was immediately invited in and given Annie's childhood bedroom, and though it was difficult to carry on a lengthy conversation with the pietistic pastor - mostly I remember the ticking of the clock on

the wall and our many prayers together (Reverend Rush's folded hands were nailed up 34 years later as "art" on MOMA Louisiana's walls) - I ended up living there for a long time, rejoicing in the freedom the family had bestowed on me as a new American.

Being the preacher's son-in-law, I now found that all the darkest doors of abysmal pain now opened to me in this tormented city, where I came to know almost everyone in the ghetto. They took me in as their own, and I have followed them all the rest of my life - especially those from Annie's own childhood street, Jericho Street, named after the road, where the parable of the Good Samaritan took place. Here, residents told me, the Ku Klux Klan had terrorized them in the past by walking down this street with burning crosses. Back then, the sandy road consisted only of long dilapidated shotgun shacks (the kind where you can shoot through all the rooms with a bullet). Through the confidential understanding of the residents, they gave me the gift of a lifetime by allowing me to photograph many of my best images here, without which *American Pictures* would never have been known.



Helen Wilson's child Sheery outside their shack on Jericho St. right next to my in-laws.



Helen Wilson with Maple Jean Wilson, and Sheery A. Wilson as my next door neighbors in 1975.



Helen and her husband, Lonso, shared the house-keeping in 1975.



Helen and her husband, Lonso, during my visit now in better conditions in 1986. But one of the girls was later strangled by her husband, and Sheery went to prison for cheque fraud.



Maple Jean, Emory, Helen and Sheery when they get my book in 1978. One child, I was told, had died of malnutrition.



During my last visit to Helen and Lonso in their poor shack in 2003, I did a video interview with them about their lifelong love. Lonso (born Christmas 1944) died in 2004. Helen (born May 1, 1946) died in 2008. They had been inseparable since childhood.

Indecision

I loved life on the highways and never wanted to go home again. Especially when, in 1975, I had gotten my green card and had all but become an American.

As someone who never really had been able to make my own decisions, I can see from my letters from that year how much I wavered in different directions, just as I had when I left for the United States six years earlier. Now, with my father in particular pressuring me to return home, I can see that I was just as confused about making a choice myself. Among other things, I felt I had gained a tremendous amount of knowledge about black America but didn't think I understood it well enough until I had the opportunity to travel to Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad, Cuba, and maybe even Brazil to explore how slavery had shaped blacks there quite differently. How else could I come to an understanding of the true human being behind the distinctive black North Americans? I thought.

I also sensed that I was embarking on a project that no one had done before. A complete survey of the housing conditions of blacks, especially the shacks I saw in the South, which in many places stood as they had under slavery. But, as I said, after the Civil Rights struggle, many blacks had begun moving into drab, uniform plastic trailers, and it would only be a matter of time before the photogenic shacks disappeared - and with them, an era of American history. A few other photographers had only sparingly described them - including my Danish predecessor Peter Sekaer 50 years before me - but these were historic images that had long since found their place in Library of Congress. My pictures, on the other hand, were in color and shocked the ignorant Americans precisely because they could not absolve themselves of responsibility for this colorful poverty by placing it in the past. Moreover, I did not romanticize blacks, as was the tendency among American photographers, but tried honestly to depict the self-hatred, violence, and self-destruction I saw as a result of ghettoization.

I had developed a good ability to find the areas with many shacks and to get into the homes of the frequently frightened residents and gain their familiarity. But it was only in the last two years of my journey that I had really started to photograph them.



Exactly the same stove of one of Lep Whitley's women with his child, which the Dane Peter Sekaer photographed 40 years before.



Peter Sekaer's photo of the same stove under the title "Negro mother. Macon, Georgia."



... and the same stove that Lep's mother Mosel cooked on and heated their shack with. Right up until Lefus, in a drunken stupor, had the shack burned down.

I'd had plenty of excuses about not having enough money to do a serious photography project, so I'd spent endless time sitting with various girlfriends along the way, writing hopelessly whiny applications to foundations for some funding to buy film and better camera equipment. Having been turned down for all of those, I realized the last year that I could carry on photographing if I just took a few photos in each location and economized on film. I had eventually found out where all the blood banks were in the south and by hitchhiking to them twice a week, I could afford about 140 pictures a week on my half-frame camera. I had begun to feel it was my calling - perhaps to overcome the perpetual battle against my low self-esteem - and I now felt that I would be failing it if I ran away prematurely from a half-finished job - which I dreamed of one day donating to the black Schomburg Center in Harlem, which had virtually no material on contemporary black poverty.

But at the same time, I can see in the letters to my father that, because of his pressure for me to return home, I wrapped myself up in ever more excusing explanations that I was too busy making a slide show that I hoped could be shown out there in the schools of West Jutland (rural Denmark). The idea had come to me suddenly the year before, while I was staying with a wealthy businessman in Ocala, because I had become the girlfriend of his daughter, Toni Dinkins. In my March 1974 diary, I can see that I first encountered the term "multimedia presentation" at Sante Fe University, where Toni attended. The slide show was set up on two screens simultaneously and was about coal miners in West Virginia. There was both speech and music, and although it was very primitive, it seemed immensely effective by rapidly changing images so that it seemed almost cinematic. I had just the night before borrowed a millionaire's Mercedes and while driving on remote back roads found the poorest black family I had ever seen - the little girl, Linda Jenkins with the oil lamp, who got tremendous significance in "American Pictures." Therefore, the shock of living in a well-to-do home with black nannies to care for the white children seemed particularly overwhelming. And so, when I saw the slide show the next morning, I immediately got the idea that the two screen image contrasts would be a great way to convey the psychological leaps I was constantly making between rich and poor.



In New Orleans, I broke a record with 16 visits to America's highest-paying blood bank - each for four hours at a total of \$6.10 an hour.

Then I started doing interviews with people on my little tape recorder, which would make my show extra vivid.

But as I became increasingly Americanized, and in light of how strongly whites responded to the social contrasts I similarly set up in the picture books I showed them when I hitchhiked, I began to feel equally strongly that it was here in the USA my slideshow should be shown if I hoped to make just a small contribution to social change. I knew it wouldn't do that in Denmark, where people would just use it to point the finger at the US. So, in that respect, too, I felt a great sense of betrayal in fleeing home from my social obligations towards the country that had given me its love and that I had come to love myself.

But in the summer of 1975, the year that photographically became my most productive, something suddenly happened which frightened me. While I had been staying with my wife Annie, my friend, the prison leader Popeye Jackson, had been assassinated, and I could easily have been shot myself in the process. Though quite hardened at the time, it shook me tremendously, and along with many other contemporaneous events, I became fearful that higher forces were now beginning to create the dramatic episodes necessary in a show to hold the audience.



The Linda story set up on double display in my photo books exactly as in the later slideshow on two screens with strong social contrasts. In this primitive vagabond fashion, "American Pictures" premiered in the United States long before it did in Denmark.

That is, a compulsive feeling that my friends were now being murdered just so that I could succeed with a show that I could now see before me and formulate the plot of. Yes, sorry, but it's easy to become superstitious in the solitude of the highways, constantly trying to see patterns, to understand why things happen - or in long despairing periods why they don't. But the final shock came when, in the summer heat on Alabama's forest roads, I saw on television that, as an offshoot of the Popeye murder, the FBI had planted the spy, Sara Jane Moore, in our association of prison inmates. In revenge for the killing, she had tried to assassinate the "head of the system" himself, President Ford. Because of my association with Popeye, I was radicalized and a suspect in the eyes of the authorities. Through the massive investigation that was launched, they had discovered that I had pictures of Sara Jane Moore, so I now feared that the FBI would seize all my pictures.



Annie kept them at her new residence, and since it was only a matter of time before the FBI found her, I hitchhiked the 3,000 miles out there day and night to rescue the pictures.

It felt like an untimely forced homecoming, when I quickly arranged a drive away car in San Francisco and stopped Annie and my boxes of 15,000 photos in there and drove the 3,000 miles back across the USA, where I temporarily stored Annie and the pictures with my friend, playboy millionaire Tommy, in his hidden "three house" in Greenville, North Carolina, while hitchhiking up to New York to say goodbye to my first girlfriend, Marly Sockol, with whom I had stayed with Annie during our wedding and who had stored the rest of the pictures. Up there I found another drive away car down to Fort Lauderdale, in which I picked up Annie and the pictures on the way down. In the meantime, I had found room on a ship from Florida to Holland, although it was cheaper to fly. In my probably unwarranted paranoia, I feared that the FBI might stop me during the extra security check at an airport, but probably as much because I didn't dare check in five years of work at a chaotic airport. I would simply sit on the photos all the way home for fear of losing them.



As Popeye's friend and personal photographer at the time, I was the only one his family allowed to photograph at the funeral. The shirt I'm wearing that Marly Sockol gave me, I still wear occasionally today to commemorate Popeye's influence on my life that I came so close to put an end to during his assassination.

Astute readers will probably wonder where I, a penniless vagabond, got the money for the cruise ship. I was able to pay for it because in my five years as a vagabond I had never spent so much as a cent of the 1,000 Canadian dollars I had earned on the farm in Canada. Partly because I couldn't get in and out of the country, every time I had to renew my visa every three months, without carrying proof of my ability to support myself, in the form of a bank book. And partly because I wanted to have them in reserve just in case, I needed to flee the country quickly one day.

In other words, at the end of my life I must confess that I was never a "penniless vagabond", because I always had the security that characterizes a real capitalist. But I am proud - as you can verify from the printout of the bank book from Riggs National Bank in Washington - that although I often went hungry for three days in a row during those five years, I was never tempted to spend any of the money, either on food or - far more importantly - camera film, thanks to the crumbs from the generous tables of the Americans.



Marly, as she appears in "American Pictures" and in her office, where as a psychiatrist in 1998 she diagnosed my ADHD and could see that I had inherited it from my mother, whom she knew. As my soul guide through the vagabond years and in our enormous correspondence since, she has very much been my saving angel. She came to celebrate our 25th anniversary in Denmark in 1996 - and still visits almost every year.



Even in those eight months where I was locked up during my arranged marriage with Annie, I stood faithfully every day in the hour-long soup lines of St. Anthony's and other churches with the other poor.

During the eight days of sailing, I had nevertheless become a little proud of Annie, as she had beaten everyone on board in the ship's great chess tournament - a huge victory for us as most of the other passengers were rich whites from South Africa's apartheid system. Perhaps Annie's chess victory was partly due to the fact that all the passengers, apart from Annie, were seasick for the whole trip and literally "hung on the ropes", while she burst into cheers the higher the waves went.

For she had been the first black woman to cross the Atlantic in a 34-foot sailboat with her formerly wealthy English boyfriend. Since I had decided to sit on the pictures for the whole trip home anyway, the voyage had lasting significance because I could sit the whole way and sort the pictures into subjects and write on the paper frames where they were taken and of whom, while the memory was still fresh. And ever since, they've been filed under this, my seasick cataloging, as "criminals," "homosexuals," "black welfare mothers," "white millionaires," etc., which 34 years later inspired curator Mette Marcus to categorize my exhibition at MOMA Louisiana the same way.

Returning to Denmark

It was one of the saddest days of my life when, on a drizzly rainy day just before Christmas 1975, I was driven across the Danish border. Six years after I had been thrown out and put on the road by my angry father (for painting political slogans on his church), I had dreamed of returning on my own proud, hitchhiking feet to the bleak South of Jutland and the vicarage of my childhood. I felt that through thousands of pages of correspondence with my father I had in the meantime built up a relationship of equals in which he had begun to see me as something other than a failure. But now I returned home not as some rich uncle from America, but as the prodigal son without a penny to my name, and with a wife my parents in no way understood. Just by raising his eyebrows with remarks like "is that really wise?", my father immediately made me fall back into my old submissive role - which I continued to have throughout my life in my relation to him.

Unlike me, Annie was both physically and mentally abused as a child, which had made her shy and introverted. She spent most of her time reading in our bedroom in the rectory, while my parents tried hard to hide their displeasure and appear as tolerant as humans are capable of towards deep patterns of suffering.



Seven years after my father angrily put me on the road for painting over his church in which the picture of "The Prodigal Son" hangs, he now went on the road to pick up his prodigal son at the ship in Holland.

My sensitive mother, who could pronounce no English words except for her "cotton coat" (pronounced "sudden soat"), had a strong compassion for Annie "as I can see she has bad nerves like me." And my mother apologized to visitors that "Annie saved Mads' life" (my nickname, too, I immediately fell back on in the village), referring to how Annie had tearfully begged me not to ride home with Popeye the night he was murdered, which did indeed save my life. Now, on the other hand, I felt more in mortal danger than ever before when Annie, drunk and in despair, chased me around the rectory at night with bread knives.

I had already written in one of my letters: "I dare guarantee that if 20 negroes were suddenly thrown down in my village in Denmark, the whole village would immediately emigrate in protest or find a life raft like the racist governor Wallace." Of course, I meant blacks like those I had met in the underclass, but still, it hurt people in my village later when the letter was reprinted in *"American Pictures"* because at that time people considered themselves openminded in Denmark and in deep solidarity with blacks from the United States.



Annie for evening coffee at neighbors Morten and Stinne together with Jerry Kwakoo - a Ghanaian refugee, whom we had for many years living in the Ubuntu collective, until he and his later Danish wife moved into my grandparents' old retirement house near Copenhagen.



My first local showing of the pictures. Behind Annie is my father's hand-driven projector and Morten. In front, Stinne, Thomsen Sørensen and Marius's parents, Niels and Frida Ibsen, with whom I had so often written papers in high school.



Annie sought peace of mind with Morten, our tenant farmer, who didn't know a word of English. On the table her magazine, Ramparts, with the cover story about the Vietnam movement's burning down the Bank of America in Santa Barbara, California.



My 91-year-old grandmother, upon my returning home, immediately found old bedding from her long life in three parsonages for Annie and my marriage, but she was unable to find us an apartment where we could use it.

But new times were already upon us with the landslide election in 1973 which brought the racist Glistrup into parliament, and my mother proudly recounted how Glistrup had driven around the courtyard of the vicarage one day and waved to her, since the former vicar's son, Ernst Smidt, had also won a seat in Parliament for his Progress Party and now wanted to show Glistrup his roots in the West Jutland moors. Some of the most eager Glistrup people were our tenant couple, Morten and Stinne, who, as I wrote in Chapter One, had been my saving angels in my childhood. But funnily enough, the only friend Annie made in the village was actually the reactionary Morten. Although he didn't speak English, the two loved to play chess against each other, although of course "black Annie" beat the Glistrup man as soundly as she had beaten the South African racists.

My "West Jutland show"

From the US, I had sent my father a description of what my planned slideshow would be about, and I had asked him to send it around to local schools in the hope that they would organize it. After all, I had to make some money fast. My father was very keen to get me out to "tell a bit about your travelling experiences", to dispel the rumors that had been going around the parish that the minister's son had become a drug addict, criminal, prostitute, homosexual, and whatnot. First, my father invited our closest friends to a small private screening in the rectory, and they sat in complete silence for the several hours my oral narrative, after which I turned off the slide projector and asked if they had any questions. After a long time, the elderly farmer and father of four of my former nannies, Thomsen Sørensen, ventured to ask in his rural dialect, "Is the soil always so red in America?" I explained that it was only in the warm southern states where humus decomposition was so rapid. That was the first and only question I got at my first showing of my American pictures in Denmark. Probably they were both speechless and relieved that their minister's "Mads" had become more than a criminal and social loser in the US after all.



I sort and select 15,000 small slides in my old room in the rectory, where they now replaced the school books on my shelf.

As the practical organizer that my father was, he quickly arranged several performances for me, the first of which at Esbjerg Folk Highschool was already a month after my return. It was impossible for me to finish the multimedia show before then, so I ended up just standing and speaking freely from my mind for six hours while I pushed each slide forward on my father's old slide projector. But it was a good experience, because I spoke with an enthusiasm that kept the audience completely riveted for so many hours that it convinced me I had sensational material to work with. To this day, several of the high school audience members continue to recount the experience of hearing my live lecture before it became "professional show business."

But I had to work quickly, because my first multimedia show was scheduled for the big Trinity Church in Esbjerg on February 29th - only about two months after my return. So, during the Christmas holidays I had already started stacking my slides by subject in the order I thought they should appear in the slideshow. Then, on my father's typewriter, I quickly wrote the text, in much the same "oral" style as I had so effectively told the story at Esbjerg Folk High School.



Author Richard Wright had grown up near Annie's childhood town in Mississippi, and they had both found escape from the apartheid oppression of the Jim Crow laws through reading. I had never had time to read fiction in the US but was now trying to understand Annie's deep pain by immersing myself in it through Wright's "Black Boy". Throughout her life, Annie walked with her nose in a book to hide from the outside world.

After all, I wanted it to sound like I was telling it live, even if it had to be recorded on tape to be mixed with music and interviews.

I've often wondered since how I managed so quickly to produce a show that turned out to run for the next 40 years to packed houses. There are probably two main reasons. First, I thought it was only for local use, because if this went well, I could always later make a well researched show for urban intellectuals. And second, I could feel that it was as if it was all already built up in my head in the US and was now just pushing to flow out of me. For I remember how the only one weeklong writing of it as the easiest thing I ever got off my chest. Since then, I've sat fiddling with my later newspaper articles and texts for days without being able to find the right phrases. I was so relaxed while writing, which could only be done when my father wasn't typing sermons and wedding speeches on his typewriter, that I even lay reading both of Richard Wright's classic novels about blacks with my depressed black wife by my side at night. Wright's novel "Black Boy" about his upbringing in the South greatly inspired me while writing the first part of the show, just as his novel "Native Son" about the Chicago ghetto where Annie's mother had been murdered inspired the show's second part about ghetto violence. What took the longest was actually the selection of the music and Annie's transcription of the words from it. But even that almost flowed out of me without much thought since I had bought or been given the records in the US, because each one reminded me of some black friend, I had stayed with who had played their favorite songs for me. So, it felt like their direct gift to the show to commemorate them every time I subsequently presented it.

To commemorate my friend Tony Harris, I used a song on a record he always played me to sleep with by The O'Jays, "Now That We Found Love" along with the photos of Linda to end the first part of the show. But one day Annie turned the record over and played the other side, which I had never heard because Tony had had an automatic stacker record player which always played the same yard-high stack of records. And on the unknown side, I suddenly discovered Tony's other great gift to the show, "Ship Ahoy," which ended up being the opening theme song and big hit about the forced transportation of slaves across the sea.



The record I bought before the trip home to commemorate Tony, but which I had never heard the other side of with the hit song "Ship Ahoy".

To this day, my old audiences both in the US and Denmark often start singing that song when they meet me on the street. With the great success the music had in my show, many probably imagined that I was something of a musical genius. But the truth is the exact opposite, that I am so unmusical that only the catchiest tunes got through to my ears in the black homes I lived in. Since they are played only once in the show, they must be instantly catchy for those spectators in the audience who are as unmusical as I am, for precisely the same reason.

After the manuscript was written, it had to be narrated on my father's Grundig TK 120 reel-to-reel recorder. This was done right next to his nailed-down gramophone suspension so that, when it was time to switch to music, I only had to stop the narration and put on a record. I knew nothing about sound mixing, so it was with hard cuts and audible clicks every time I had to do a re-recording. And this was not infrequent, for after six years of absence, I had almost forgotten how to speak Danish and was constantly making anglicizations such as "Silvergade" rather than "Sølvgade" without even noticing. Worst of all, my father's music system sat in the living room next to the kitchen, so when my mother made noise with the pots and pans, the whole load spectacle went directly into the show - which probably wouldn't have been made without her hysterical childhood spectacles either.

At this point, perhaps it is also time to confess my small crimes against proper documentarism. Since it had to be done so quickly and was only a preliminary version, I allowed myself a little cheating in two places. For the religious section, I had made some sound recordings from black churches in the US, but suddenly found myself missing the contrasting soundtrack from a better off white church. But then I discovered my father's record of choral music from his Trinity Church in Esbjerg on the shelf and quickly cut some of the organ music from there into the show. And since I was missing the heart-wrenching crying I remembered from a young mother at the coffin of her murdered four-year-old child in Harlem, I used a clip of my wife's heart-wrenching crying one night in San Francisco. Why not? Surely one white church could be as good as another, and one black pain as good as another, I justified it. I also thought that it really would have been a greater crime if I had actually stood beside the suffering mother at the casket and cynically recorded her weeping in the moment.



Mother with child hit by gangster's stray bullets is accompanied in the show by this text: 'What impression does it make on such children when they see their siblings shot and killed in the street? Or on a young mother having to say goodbye to her four-year-old son in a world where it's hard to tell the difference between a cradle and a coffin?'

It was bad enough that I was photographically exploiting her - a guilt I returned to incessantly in the book afterwards. But these two scenes ended up staying in the show throughout the years - with Annie's explicit approval.

The Copenhagen intellectuals

At the end of January, our local co-op diary gave Annie and me a ride, with all our suitcases of pictures, on one of the big milk tankers that drove at three o'clock every night the 6 hours to a big dairy in Copenhagen. From there we could stroll out to my brother's house in suburban Bispebjerg, where we were now moving in to make the rest of the show. Soon I got in contact with an incredibly nice and helpful Danish-Dutchman - the photographer Jan van Steenwijk - who helped me make a primitive dissolve unit and sold me three Kodak carousel projectors, which my father had lent me money for. It became a rewarding friendship because my equipment kept breaking down. It was enriching for him too, because at my film premiere 6 years later in the New York, the Village Voice reported that the US State Department, to counter the powerful effect of my pictures in Europe, had paid a number of European photographers to travel around and photograph "the other side of the US".

At my US premiere, the US media reported that, to counter the impact of my images in Europe, the US State Department had paid a number of European photographers to travel around and photograph "the other side of the US". One of those chosen was my friend Steenwijk, who himself published a book about it and was granted American citizenship. We were invited out to debate our "opposing views of the US", although we were in complete agreement - just photographing from different angles.



And one of those chosen was my friend Steenwijk, who published a book about it and became an American citizen.

Having settled in Copenhagen, I was still a little tempted to see what one of the Copenhagen intellectuals might think of my pictures. I did not know Jørgen Dragsdahl personally, but before leaving for the United States I had heard a lecture by him in the Student Society on the black panthers, and now that I was reading his newspaper Information again, I knew that he often wrote about the situation of blacks in the United States. I therefore one day I dared to call him to tell him that I had some pictures from the black ghettos in the US and if he would like to see them.

I've later in life gotten requests like that so often myself from young aspiring photographers who've just taken a handful of pictures of some homeless people, so with my inferiority complex about intellectual celebrities, I expected Dragsdahl to probably say a polite no. Therefore, I made sure to mention that I had worked with the black panthers myself and met several of the famous leaders. It was probably the latter that got him to listen. To my surprise, he agreed to look at the pictures one evening in his apartment in Lyngby. I took Annie with me, as I had heard that Dragsdahl himself had had a black girlfriend in the US, so maybe it would make an impression. We were served tea and a bit of cake at one of his dark, inherited mahogany tables, after which I showed him a selection of the postage-stamp-sized slides I had brought with me, using a magnifying glass. It wasn't long before Dragsdahl showed enormous enthusiasm and at the end almost performed a veritable war dance of joy on one of the tables. "Do you realize, Jacob, how important these pictures are to me? I've been writing here for years about the oppression of blacks, but no one really believes that the ideal image even leftists have of the United States is that bad. Now you come and deliver John's bloody head on a platter itself." I may have confused that last expression with his own father, John, but I told him I was about to finish a slide show and if he could come to my first test screening of it at my brother's house.



Annie pulls slides out of the small half-size paper frames and puts them in glass. Unfortunately, it was to happen so quickly that I haven't since had my "seasick" inscriptions on them from our Atlantic trip to accurately catalogue them with.



Here in my brother Niels Jorgen's living room I put together American Pictures as a slideshow, and here I had my premiere for Dragsdahl, Annie and a few others. Funnily enough, it was also from here that Niels Jørgen established the annual Copenhagen Marathon. As Jantelov Danes, we both found inspiration as entrepreneurs in the US.

Annie, as a black intellectual, had been so proud to meet for the first time an intellectual Dane who knew her world and therefore appreciated my work, that she eagerly helped me put the 3,000 pictures in cardboard frames into glass frames for the show. But the night before our first showing, Annie, in her nervousness, began drinking again and keeping me awake with hysteric breakdown, crying and verbal attacks on me. At one point, in irritation, I lashed out at her in the dark and hit her right in the eye. I had never hit a human before, so it was not a good start for "American Pictures" that my wife showed up with a black eye. Jørgen Dragsdahl said in his usual cheerful way, "Jacob, if I don't like your show, I might write in the paper that Jacob Holdt beats his black wife."

But the tone and the tears quickly changed when I started the show to the tune of "Ship Ahoy" with the images of the slaves at sea. Neither had Annie seen how I had put the sound and pictures together before and sat dissolved in tears and pride at her personal involvement. The only one who didn't seem affected and wandered in and out during the show was my brother Niels Jørgen. He thought the show was manipulation as he didn't trust his older brother's stories. But through his sport (leader of our biggest athletics club Sparta) he soon had second thoughts when, during his first marathon in New York, he had to run through the black ghettos of Brooklyn, the Bronx and Harlem and was appalled to run through neighborhoods like those I had described like the ruins of Germany after the war. He came home with his own USA inspiration, creating the Copenhagen Marathon, and excitedly told everyone that "'American Pictures' is actually true, because I've seen it myself."

And Jørgen Dragsdahl performed another war dance and insisted that I come in and show some of the pictures to the staff at his paper Information before returning to Jutland with the show. Soon after, I was sitting in the large editorial offices in Store Kongensgade, showing a tray of 80 selected pictures to a larger crowd of editors. Many were truly hardened journalists, but they were shocked and said afterwards that part of the reason was that I had been one big excuse for myself. The director, Steffen Gulmann, immediately smelled money and called in the head of Information's book publishing house, Per Kofod, to immediately talk book publishing, world rights, American rights, and whatnot, so it all swooned for me.

But first they decided to let Dragsdahl, for the first time in Information's history, publish a five-page supplement with pictures - and then immediately arrange a Danish tour with my show in Information's name, even though they hadn't seen the show yet.

I was completely speechless at how quickly it all developed, without any of them asking whether I even wanted to do all this. Again, I was dumbstruck to find myself in the midst of such intellectual heavyweights as Jan Stage, Erik Meier Carlsen, Bente Hansen, Knud Vilby, Philip Lauritzen, Alex Frank Larsen and soon Peter Wivel, whom I knew only as well-writing names from reading this, the most intellectual of newspapers. I do not remember whether I said "yes" to them at any time, but from my "yes" philosophy and because I certainly did not say "no" loudly enough, they assumed that of course I consented. Many years later I heard that there had been a very vocal minority, however, who argued that the many pages were completely out of proportion and an overestimation of reader interest in my photos. Jan Stage, hardened from war zones all over the world, didn't think the photos were anything special - and in his adventurous context, he was right. I like to believe this testimony from the meeting, because shortly afterwards Per Kofod took me to lunch in the King's Garden with Jan Stage, during which I didn't say a word (nor was I asked to), because I immediately felt that Stage, the man of the world, didn't take me for shit.

The premiere in West Jutland was called "our world premiere" by the Trinity Church 25 years later, when they invited me to show it again in the church on the exact anniversary. I was disappointed at the opening, however, that my old Danish teacher Erik Madsen came after the intermission and said he couldn't take any more. It was simply too intense for him, who had been the only one of my teachers able to maintain my ADHD inattention when he had entertained me in high school with the most blood-drenched and sexual interpretations of the classical tragedies. It should also be said that my father's Grundig tape recorder broke down shortly after the start, so I had to stand and fast-forward by hand throughout the performance.

The result was that my speech sometimes went into a West Jutland slow drawl and especially the music played too fast or soporific slow. I had hoped they would watch the whole five-hour show at once but had actually made it in two parts with the idea of returning to schools and churches with the 2nd part later to allow more time for discussion. I did so in this church, but for practical reasons due to the sudden high demand, it was subsequently always shown all at once with the result that people were so much more quenched after the long sensory bombardment. For word soon spread to schools all over Jutland, whereupon every day in March was quickly booked.

One of the first high school shows in North Jutland was organized by my intellectual cousin Birgit. She was the only one in the family who had an education, and just before I met Annie in the autumn of 1974, my father sent her to the United States to try to persuade me to come home after all those years on the road.



The Harlem shootout, which my cousin experienced. Although it was the first time in five years that I saw my family, I don't have a single picture of Birgit in the US. I was so poor that I couldn't afford to take pictures I didn't need - such as of my own boring family. But I enjoyed when "my rich cousin from Denmark" invited me to restaurants and the Empire State Building.

One day I took her on a ghetto trip up through Harlem and the Bronx, but she seemed untouched by it all as she talked eagerly about how good an educational system we had back home and why I should go back and get an education myself. I just walked and tried to get her to open up to how exciting everything was outside of her world of books here in the US. "Don't you see all the violence and poverty around you at all? The violence is everywhere just below the surface," I tried, but Birgit just kept talking about her intellectual world. Suddenly, in Harlem, we were caught in a shootout between police and criminals and forced into a doorway to avoid being hit. But what made an indelible impression on Birgit afterwards, while I had been calmly standing and photographing the shooting duel, was how the shopkeeper, completely unaffected by the whole thing, had been standing and kissing his girlfriend. This scene convinced her of how deep-rooted the violence was and made her open her eyes a little to my non-academic approach to life.

Now that Birgit heard about the show's success, she felt she had to give me a chance at Nørre Sundby Gymnasium, where she was a newly hired teacher. But as she had seen me throughout her childhood as the not too bright five years younger cousin who had been kicked out of high school, she didn't have much faith that my show would catch on with the students. She was tremblingly nervous about losing face among her colleagues, she told me, when I arrived with all my boxes. Although I had told her how long the show was, she had only dared to set aside the last two hours of the school day for it, "because then the students and teachers can just go home if it's too boring." Before the show, she almost apologetically introduced how she had been in America to rescue her cousin back home, and that she thought he should just "have the opportunity to show some of the pictures that I myself was there to see him take." Great was her astonishment and joy, therefore, when all 700 pupils of this working-class high school sat completely nailed to their seats. Not a single one was seen leaving before the end of school at 2 p.m., and when the pupils heard that there was also another half, they immediately demanded to see it and remained seated until 5 p.m., after all their buses had left.

Soon word of this spread to all the other high schools, where, without my even having to ask, they virtually all set aside the entire school day for "American Pictures" - and again and again for new classes of students over the next 30 years. And the next six times I arrived with it at my old Esbjerg High School, my old Danish teacher Erik Madsen always stood proudly on the balcony, as if to show that he had been right, as the only teacher, to vote against my expulsion in his day.

Almost even more successful were the tours that the daily Information soon organized for their "intellectual" readers, particularly in the four major university cities. Aarhus University's largest hall, Stakladen, could only hold about 600 spectators, with the result that the organizers came in despondent on the first few occasions, saying that there were still 3,000 queuing outside. As a result, no fewer than 15 performances had to be staged in the Stakladen, where I thus played to 9,000 spectators in the first two years. The ticket price was only 12 DKK, which I had to share with Information, who gave me a rental car, a secretary to go with me, and something I had never tried before: paid hotels. Wow, what good is that solitude for when you have your audience to stay with? I protested. Ashamed of all the money, I announced that the proceeds from some of the performances were going, among other things, to the Danish Christian Science Monitor, which was struggling for its life in those leftist times.

Perhaps most importantly, Information gave my "West Jutland show" a brand-new name with far more clout: "American Pictures". It was actually Jørgen Dragsdahl's title for his big five-page article and thus an important gift to me. I remember protesting at first because it would make it look anti-American, when everyone and anyone knew that America is more and other than just its ghettos. But that was exactly the point. The mood at Information and in large parts of the population was precisely anti-American after the Vietnam war, which was to be exploited. I myself was still so eager to return to the US quickly that I didn't want to have my chances ruined over there with such a heavy title.



I was proud when I photographed my first audience in Århus University's Stakladen. My projectors can be seen in the back of the room, where it was shown 9 times for sold out houses. For my 40th anniversary at the same venue in 2016 - with my re-digitized version of the show - some of those students reappeared – now as retirees.



Here I announced that the money went to Kristeligt Dagblad (The Danish Chr. Science Monitor), just as later on Information tours I announced free screenings in the prisons of Herstedvester and Vridsløse - closed to the public.

"Imagine if someone made 'Danish Pictures' solely on the basis of the Greenlanders' situation," I pleaded, suggesting both "Un-American Pictures" or "American Mirror Pictures - of Ourselves." But no way. That's how it was announced in the ads, so for the first many shows I stood and apologized to the audience that my own title was, after all, the one on the opening slide of the show: "A Personal Journey Through Black America." That was my first little pro-American rebellion against Information ... and there were soon to be more.

I always thought that it was Jørgen Dragsdahl who had given me that title, but when 42 years later I was on TV with Erik Meier Carlsen, where we were to debate the significance of the '68 generation', he claimed that it was he, as editor-in-chief, who had suggested the name "American Pictures" during the heated editorial meeting about whether they should organize my tours. But with the strong left-wing mood at the paper at the time, I think they were all really equally good about branding "my West Jutland show" so strongly internationally.

After that, things moved quickly. After Information's promotion, the City of Copenhagen immediately made me an offer I couldn't refuse. They gave me the "House Theater" in Magstræde for the whole summer to present my show in. All the income was mine, although they were responsible for ticket sales, staff and advertising. So for those three months, from June to August, I moved in and did shows there every night - interrupted only by the 200th anniversary of the United States, when I was in jail with the street theater group Solvognen after our joint action in Rebild where Danish-Americans always celebrate 4th of July. I don't think the House Theatre has ever had 50 sold-out nights of the same show since.

For many spectators it was an unforgettable experience, which they still talk about today. It felt like a chamber of torture to sit 200 people crammed together under the roof on hard beer boxes in the unbearable summer heat with no ventilation. In the beginning, my father's tape recorder kept breaking down, so I had to send the audience home to get their own recorders - and still it was in to sit and suffer for six hours and wait for the show to go on, while I stood without pictures and entertained verbally with my tales from the Wild West. Often it got so late that I invited people who didn't make the last train to spend the night with me, curled up in various stage curtains.



Posters for my performance in the House Theater, side by side with posters for Red Mother's performance, "Homely Coziness".

Later in life I was told that also this had been "a great vagabond experience" for the audience. Funnily enough, I had never slept so primitive as a vagabond as I did now in the midst of my success on the slanting boards of stage. My crazy uncle Ebbe from Marbjerg came in frequently from the fields and enjoyed basking in his nephew's success. With his sunglasses, he looked like he had stepped out of the film "The Blues Brothers" when, with my permission, he was given a free bar and stood drooling, shouting out during the break: "That's good, Mads, I'm proud of you, now it's time to squeeze the lemon to the limit. Milk them all." I was embarrassed by his vociferous financial advice surrounded by these serious metropolitan intellectuals, but you must never forget to look out for your own redneck family when you unexpectedly manage to rise a bit above the mud. For he could no more foresee than all the leftists that I would be a millionaire in today's money before the year was out.

Celebrity factor

Once again, I felt the sense of inferiority I still carried from the past as I watched celebrities and politicians of the day come up to me at intermission and praise the show. I guess we all feel that way, that the famous people we grew up with take on a special "larger than life" status. Especially when you grew up in the countryside and only saw them on TV and in the movies. So, I had no idea which leg to stand on when famous actors Henning Mouritzen and Lise Ringheim, and at their invitation the day after Peter Steen, came to one of the first performances to talk to me about the show.

Just as importantly, through my new role as centerpiece of the show, I came into contact with a whole new breed of pioneering actors who were part of the zeitgeist. Every morning I was shaken right out of my stage curtains when Red Mother would rehearse on stage for their upcoming play, "Homely Coziness." Once Troels Trier kicked in with his hoarse holler to "I'm on recreation" it was exactly what I was in the mood for. In this way, I came to know Red Mother as my own family that summer, when after the day's rehearsals they lay in the front row, sleeping through my evening debauchery.

And yet I didn't recognize guitarist Henrik Strube when, in 2005, he handed me "a lump of iron," as I put it in my confusion, followed by a "who are you?" at the unexpected reception of my first ever award. It was also the last Bjørn Afzelius Prize awarded, as there was no more money in the account and the committee had wracked its brains as to who would be satisfied with only half a cash prize. And so, I could only say yes, followed by a muttered, "But who is this Afzelius who has made this fat Sisyphus lump?" After all, I hadn't followed Swedish music in my many years in the US, which is why Henrik Strube thought I was making fun of him in public and wouldn't talk to me for years.

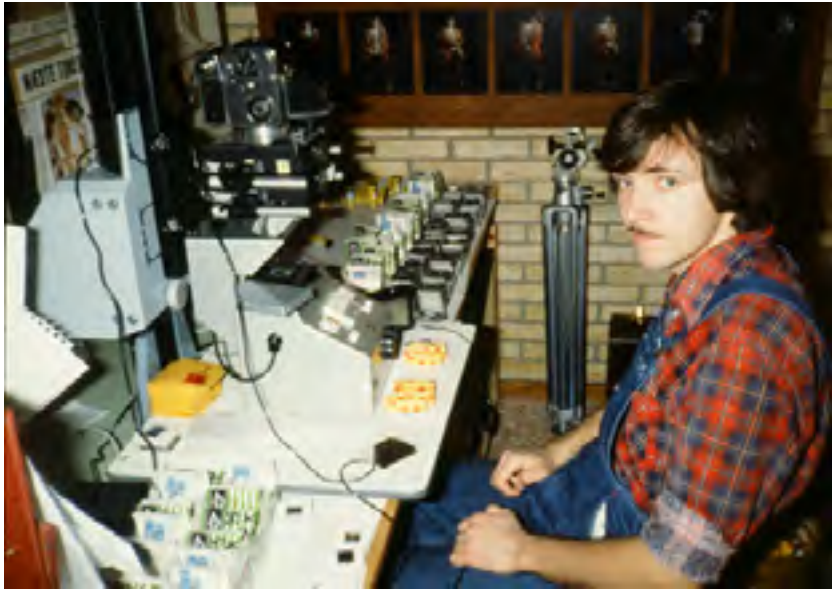
One of the new theatre groups of the time that I enjoyed the most was undoubtedly Solvognen, who had invited my slideshow to their summer seminar. Many of them later developed into well-known artists and writers, and film directors such as Nils Vest and Jon Bang Carlsen, for example. Like so many others they had been die-hard America-haters but were inspired by my show to travel to America themselves, where they, like me, ended up loving the country for better or worse – as shown in Jon's films "Hotel of the Stars" and "Phoenix Bird", among others. So that summer, on America's Independence Day, they got me involved in their July 4th Action in solidarity with the Native Americans. I was proud that they let me in on all their secret preparations - like hiring horses all over the country for the John Ford style Indian attack on the whites. But I was less happy about being arrested with them and spending half the night in King Hans prison in Aalborg, while Hjørring's mayor and the entire town council and their invited guests of honor sat waiting in vain for my 200th anniversary performance until 11pm in Hjørring Bio. It was such a scandal that Hjørring Bio had to organize my show again the following week - again to full houses as a result of the scandal.

That right-wing politicians supported "American Pictures" as eagerly as Christiania people and the left was revealing of the entire left-wing spirit of the times just after the Vietnam War. Glistrup supporters frequently came up after the show and asked for my autograph - right next to the one they had gotten from Glistrup himself.

Only once do I remember a man walking out during my show in Roskilde saying, "This is too damn red!" and how surprised I was since I saw nothing "red" in it.

Today I can see that there were a lot of leftist clichés in my first "West Jutland show". While I felt myself becoming more and more deradicalized from the fanaticism of my youth during my last years on the highways of the United States, it was as if I became radicalized again to some degree immediately upon returning to Denmark. "Adapt or die", as they say in the US. "Follow custom or land flee", as it applied in both countries. I enjoyed the attention, but at the same time was so distressed to see the anti-American forces my show unleashed in the more primitive types, that for a long time I felt more like "fleeing the land." That first summer, when Information was spinning gold on my work, and I came to air this to the paper, Jørgen Dragsdahl invited me to lunch at a fancy restaurant, where he tried to persuade me to stay in Denmark. I don't remember his arguments, but mine were certainly something to the effect that since this, my life's work, apparently had so much impact, "it doesn't belong here in our El Dorado without racism and great inequality, but over there where it might make a difference."

That I was seriously thinking of running away, I can also see from my childish pride in Dragsdahl's article. I secretly got Information's printing company to print almost a truckload of extra copies for me. Partly because I didn't imagine that any other newspaper would ever write about me again, and partly so that I could send them out to schools as publicity for the show - if and when I returned from the US again, so that I could make a living again here in the future.



Jens Jørgen at work in 1976 in Hjørring. He later made the cinema film "American Pictures" and continued to make copies for me throughout his life until his death from cancer in 2018.

A product of the time?

At my first performance at Hjørring High School on September 2nd, 1976, a shy student from afterwards asked me if it was really my original slides I was travelling with? "Don't you know that slides lose color every time they are shown? And if someone throws a petrol bomb into your car, they'll be gone forever. I'd be happy to offer to make copies for you."

I was shocked. By then I had already presented the show with the original slides 112 times, without thinking for a moment how dangerous it was. After comparing the copies made by several professional companies with those that the young high school student, Jens Jørgen Jensen, was able to make both better and cheaper in his basement, I immediately moved in with him in North Jutland. Here, between his homework and my lectures, we sat day and night copying the pictures onto large Hasselblad films, so that the small pictures could get more light on the screen under the frequently miserable blackout conditions that existed in schools at the time. As a rule, the janitors had to make giant 24-by-12-foot screens of table paper, or

whatever they could get, beforehand, which the small pictures could barely light up.

That the leftist zeitgeist dictated that 600 hundred pupils should sit through an entire school day watching something they could barely make out, especially when sunlight sent great white splotches across my dim night pictures of criminals, was no doubt my undeserved salvation. Now Jens Jørgen also saved my original pictures, which only a few years later I heard offers from American collectors to buy for sums as high as four million dollars, to which I cheekily replied, "I'm waiting for a better offer from the CIA." Immediately after the rescue, the originals were stored away in a bank vault, from which they were only retrieved in small batches at a time for use for new copying.

Again, and again people told me that their enthusiasm was mainly due to the fact that they had grown tired of the intolerant ravages of "monk Marxism", under which everything had to be interpreted from cold anti-human analyses. That's why it was so refreshing and disarming for them "when you came wading in your clogs with your West Jutland real-life vagabond show and defended the good in man even in the most despicable capitalists." It also inspired many young people to try their hand at the road as "vagabonds", and thus helped to break down the worst extremisms of the strongly left-wing zeitgeist.

Show business and "private life"

In the midst of this success, my own personal life was in tatters. While I had been creating the show in my brother's house, I was running the housing agencies on the doors to get Annie and me an apartment, but to no avail. "Don't you know there's a five-year waitthat is IF you're already signed up?" they replied, shaking their heads all over the place. Finally, I was so desperate that I pounded the table in the Copenhagen Landowners Association, across from Jarmer's medieval tower, shouting, "You must have some ruin like that one where I can live with my American wife?" Then they went out and looked in the files once more and said that after all they had one vacant apartment, but that was because nobody wanted it because the last tenant was found dead after so long that the body had spilled all over the place and seeped down between the floorboards.



Two of Annie's huge tapestries composed and sewn from cloths from motifs in my pictures in record time. "Living in the shadow of the total lie" I was already offered \$42,000 for at her exhibition in 1978 in Århus Art Museum, but for me they belonged inextricably to the show and therefore also hung for a period in our permanent theatre in San Francisco.



My first liberating and wonderful encounter with "Red Annie" in her garden in Brumleby - with a glimpse of her red roses behind.

It had smelled so horrible that they hadn't been able to find anyone to clean it for a long time. "I've seen plenty of bodies in the US, so I'll take it," I said immediately, and then moved with Annie into Prinsessegade 52, right next to (the hippie town) Christiania. While I went on my first tour in Jutland, I left Annie in the apartment with virtually no furniture other than her large chessboard brought home from the US, where she could sit and play chess with the ghost of the former occupant. She was miserable, and it was impossible to comfort her.

During one of my performances in the House Theater, I soon had her elegantly replaced by another Annie. To my amazement, there was a new bouquet of red roses on my elevated projection table night after night when I arrived. After a while, when I asked the staff who placed the beautiful roses each day, they had been told not to tell me. But after a month, I found out by accident. They came from a fan called Annie Hedvard, and when I found her in Brumleby unannounced, there was a large portrait of me above the door with a long braided beard, which she had sewn as a tapestry. "Red Annie", as she was immediately dubbed on account of her red hair and the gift of red roses, radiated a vibrant and infectious artistic energy, and we instantly impregnated each other in one way or another. (A bit confusing for "black Annie," as she now came to be called, because in her childhood she had been called only "red," while her twin sister, Jeanette, was called "blue.")

Soon I was sleeping as much in Brumleby as curled up in the stage-blankets of the House, and when Red Annie heard of Black Annie's macabre dance of death, she immediately offered to exchange apartments, whereupon Black Annie blossomed with red roses in her new courtyard. Now that I had fulfilled my promise to get her a new country and - what was even more difficult at the time - a home, we were separated. And our relationship as friends became so good that for the American edition of "American Pictures" we together wrote the chapter "Ghetto Love" about how the ghetto had destroyed our marriage.

Red Annie blossomed just as much. She was so inspired by my photos of death and pain that on our small living room floor she transformed its former stench of death into a veritable explosion of colorful cloth cuttings on giant tapestries with the motifs from my pictures.

Soon the first huge tapestries were hanging in the foyer of the House Theatre, warming up the audience. This was the start of Annie Hedvard's artistic career, and already the following year she had major successes with exhibitions at Charlottenborg, the Glyptoteket and in Aarhus Art Museum, which was opened by the Minister of Culture. As recently as 2004, her tapestries, along with my paintings, were invited to be exhibited in the US Congress to celebrate President Bush signing of the law to establish an African American Museum.

This was all the more remarkable to anyone who knew her, for Annie had been paralyzed in her right arm from the shoulder down after a botched operation, but could now miraculously both sew and handle the heavy tapestries, which could only be sewn in small pieces at a time on the living room floor and then assembled in larger rooms. And I myself was equally creative in our new artistic symbiosis and soon started writing away on the planned book.

Later I found out that the apartment no one else wanted was Grundtvig's old residence, where they say Grundtvigianism was born. Just as Annie and I were now inspired to truly "bridge the gap from the home of the dead to the land of the living," Grundtvig had here a century and a half earlier done away with the prevailing intellectual dogmatism of the time and had had his poetic revival. Here he had felt "delightfully inspired" to break with the rigidity of Danish Christian life and wrote "The Land of the Living" about living with the living here and now and not waiting for an afterlife in Utopia. And here he even created "Den signede dag med fryd vi ser", which I knew by heart in my childhood because my father had put a framed verse on every step up to my room. As I carried his coffin out of the church to the strains of the hymn's final verse, "So we depart for our fatherland," I sobbed terribly, having long since reconciled myself to his Grundtvigian inspiration through my new work.

But Red Annie was also a provider. When my father's tape recorder kept breaking down in the House Theatre, she immediately found me a professional Revox with reels so big that my lecture no longer had to be stopped in the middle of each section because of reel changes.

And when the apartment became too crowded with tapestry production for me to be there myself, well, she immediately got me my very own studio with red walls and equipped with everything I needed in photo technology, filing cabinets for my pictures, light tables and my first electric IBM typewriter. This happened because her former husband, the American photographer Stewart Fox, had been so successful with his exhibitions that he had to seek tax shelter in Australia and so sold his entire business to me cheaply. I even got both his wife and girlfriend in the bargain, as we let the girlfriend, Kristine Urup, stay in one half of the office while I got the other. The whole thing was in a wonderfully beautiful half-timbered backyard above the English Mermaid Theatre in Ny Vestergade opposite the National Museum. The quirky Jewish-American photographer Stewart Fox had housed a chimpanzee before me, "so why not you?" as he put it. He also taught me for the first time how to photograph properly with aperture, time, distance and such technical things that I had never got to grips with my automatic camera in the US.



The working collective of our Ubuntu House in 1979 admires the purchase of the fifth VW van for use by Howie (right) during his tours of Sweden and Norway. Jerry at the far right was in charge of the German-speaking areas of Europe.

When I was able to afford my first car, a used VW bus for \$2.000, from my large income from the House Theater (of the type American hippies had always picked me up in), in less than six months I had become a man of means and had to set up a private limited company. As I began to get more volunteer American helpers, the fleet had to expand, and over the next ten years we ended up wrecking 17 VW vans - partly because I insisted that none of them cost more than my first one.

When the House Theatre was to be used for real theatre after the summer, I negotiated with the Mermaid Theatre to continue there in the winter. But I soon concluded that it was too small for my large audience. So, the following year I bought a commercial apartment on the mall, Købmagergade 43, for only \$38.000. It became American Pictures' headquarters for the next ten years, where the show was presented daily to 90 schoolchildren during the day and to the public in the evening. Today, I still use it as a lecture hall and have set up a dialogue center and a women's mosque where, before Friday prayers, women put their shoes inside the door - on Red Annie's tapestry made from the bloody image of the man my friend Butch murdered in New Orleans.



With Per Kofod at our photo exhibition in the Frankfurt Book Fair, where I also showed the slide show to publishers from all over the world.

The creation of the book

In September 1976, my publisher Per Kofod took me to the Frankfurt Book Fair, where I had to present my show to publishers from all over the world. To get all the equipment in its many boxes, Per had to get a whole first-class sleeping car, where it was so cramped that we sat most of the time in the fine restaurant. Wow, I felt like the man of the world and wondered how long this undeserved luxury would last. I had better try to play the comedy as best I could not to be let off, like when I happened to say the wrong thing to the drivers in the US and they didn't invite me to meals or at home.

It was fun to be at such a "goat market", but it soon felt like a slave market to be put up on a pedestal and auctioned off to various publishers. Before I knew it, the book had sold to seven countries. The intellectual Per Kofod and I were each other's opposites, but we enjoyed the fancy dinners with publishers. His vast knowledge came partly from having worked as a young man at a publishing house in France, and partly from having started Denmark's first book café the same year I had travelled to the United States. During his own stay at my old Krogerup Folk High School - the only thing we had in common - he had scored the very headmaster Ole Wivel as a father-in-law, and since Wivel was now a director of Denmark's largest publisher, Gyldendal, Per Kofod had someone from whom he could always get loving advice - while the only thing I got out of my drunken Krogerup stay was Ole Wivel's black cat (mentioned in Chapter 2).

On the way home from Frankfurt, Per suddenly said to me on the train, "So Jacob, everything is running smoothly un tracks now, and we just need one thing to not go off the rails. Now you have to go home and write that book we just sold to so many countries." It came as a shock to me. He had sold me on the basis of an empty so-called "dummy" with only 16 pages of my pictures, and I hadn't thought that the book should contain of much else. In fact, I had no idea what I was going to write in this whole book of 272 blank chalk-white pages. So, I ended up just handing over the entire script of my "West Jutland show" with a "can't you just use it?" Per actually had no choice, and so had to put a whole army of people to work getting intelligible Danish out of my hastily transcribed show texts from the same year.

One of them was my cousin Birgit, but soon heavier artists like the famous author Kirsten Thorup had to be brought in.

Because after now for six months of seeing how strongly my show worked on people, it took ten wild horses to get me to change a comma in that text for fear that it might suddenly not work on people anymore. Today, I can't help feeling annoyed that various editors, because of the spirit of the times, allowed so many political platitudes to appear in the first editions of books. What probably saved the book were the personal letters that they convinced me had to be included. But then again, these were just as hopelessly and sloppily written on the road - many in English - so my real writing for this book was the translation, editing down and composition of the best of my letters to friends and parents. The thousands of pages of elaborate diaries and the majority of letters I never got around to reviewing. Various astrologers have often been able to see from my horoscope how 1976 was the year of most creativity and artistic expression in my entire life. It certainly felt as if I was receiving almost divine inspiration from above, when I did not, in my own opinion, have enough of it in myself.

One of Per Kofod's great gifts to me was to hire the designer Kytte Fennestad for the layout and image editing of the book. However, I got a shock when I was to meet her for the first time with Per at a lunch in Cafe Sorgenfri in Brolæggerstræde. In the darkness inside, she seemed intimidating, with her large Bridget Bardot breasts jutting out, and she presented herself so confidently and intellectually, that I hurried to hide in a small Jutland mouse hole. But she immediately sensed what was coming and said, "go dav do. A æ ov from West Jutland." Even from a dune farm with four wings on the edge of the North Sea. I immediately breathed a sigh of relief at the thought that we were two Jutlanders against one from Copenhagen. And so, it soon ended, as we sat there in the semi-darkness selecting some 400 pictures - the number Per had decided should go into the book, long before he read my text. But when Kytte later saw my "Jutland show text", she immediately realized that it should not be a traditional photo book with big pictures and few words, but a cinematic story. And knowing that Per would not budge, together we began to select the number of images required for a visually coherent narrative.

We ended up with 800 images, but as she was aware that Information couldn't afford to scan that many, we didn't tell Per about it. Until her death in 2016, Kytte continued to have fun about "the time we cheated Per." We succeeded by hiding for a long time, and almost living in, a dark backyard room at Center Repro in Øster Farimagsgade 16 B. The many slides had to be scanned by painstakingly pasting each one, smeared in oil, on the drum scanners of the time. Kytte and I were allowed to do the expensive work of mounting, and the repro people agreed to wait to send the bill to Information until after the book was published. Kytte was sure - and now I appreciated her never-failing and convincing incisiveness - that under her loving hands the book would be a success, and then no one would question afterwards that the bill might be twice as big. And how right she was. For Per only smiled with relief when he saw the sales figures the following year and heard of our fraud.

I learned a lot from making my own book with my own hands. A lesson I would like to pass on to today's readers, who probably have no knowledge of what it was like to make books here in this lead-heavy time almost right after Gutenberg invented the art of printing. For example, I had no idea how difficult and expensive it was to print color photographs back then, which meant that so few color pages were included in Information's editions of the book that for many years people thought I was an old-fashioned black-and-white photographer. "No, I've always seen the world in festive colors," I replied to their astonishment, and continued teasingly, "but Information and the spirit of the age saw the world in black and white then." My book usually took two or three weeks to print in its large editions in four colors, one color at a time, whereas today it is spat out in a few days in a single printing pass. That's why I had to spend the first few days at book printer Resting Hansen in the village of Snesev in central Zealand, checking that the colors were warm enough and that my black friends weren't too black. "Well, don't worry about that, because I have seen with my own eyes real "halenegre" (racist for "negroes with tails") on vacation in Gambia that were so jet black they were almost blue.

So, I can understand why you wouldn't want monkeys like that here," he said. I later realized how lucky I was that in the US I had not been able to afford the finer Kodachrome film but had always used the cheaper and less contrasty Ektachrome 160 ASA. Because black Americans don't like to look too dark, let alone to be slapped up like pitch-black blobs against a white wall, as I typically saw them in the Polaroid pictures that the poor themselves could only afford.

Kitte and I loved it when Resting Hansen drove to Copenhagen to proudly show us examples of how good he had become at "painting the blacks as white as Jacob and I want them". For Kitte was his absolute opposite, who could not get enough of black men. That trait became so much a part of her layout that it became a problem for me in the US, where for historical reasons it was unheard of to depict black men's penises - far worse than black women's breasts.

The book had to be made so quickly that we only used the selection from the 3,000 images in my slideshow, and only when we were working on the cinema film two years later did Kitte go through the 12,000 remaining in my archives. With her artistic eye, she immediately discarded many of the ones I had selected for the show. In fact, I've never since chosen my own images for various productions, as I'm not good at it. My criteria were namely based primarily on choosing the pictures of my best friends, but they in no way held up to Kitty's intellectual and artistic interpretation. I think she was the first to teach me the expression "to kill your darlings" - to slaughter all your dearest friends. At the same time, Kitte hated sentimentality, so I fought with her to include my most tear dripping passages, such as the story of the little girl Linda, whose lamp I bought kerosene for so she could read in her shack. It was the section that always got Americans to surrender and come out weeping after the first part of the show. Kitte probably rightly argued that such nonsense didn't work the same way in a book. "No, let's shock the Americans by showing them the black dicks they always wanted to cut off."

For many of the more personal pictures, Kitte asked questions along the way about how I had managed to get into their beds, why I kept telling elaborate stories that she loved.

But to many of them she said sadly, 'well, it could be a good book if we included that story. But that's no good now, because Per Kofod will be angry with us. He wants a boring, nice book. But wait until we get him out of the picture, then we'll do the "real" American Pictures. And it will be called "American Pictures on the Bedside"!' Now Kitte is dead, and we never got to make her dream book. So now I will endeavor to make her bedside dream come true with this "On Saying Yes" book.

My African Dream

It had been an amazing year, with everything going so fast. But in my growing guilt about all the money I was now making and about having run away from the US where I felt my pictures should be used, I preferred to put off telling all my American friends about it until I had found some constructive solutions as to how the money should be spent. Still, I never doubted and had already aired the idea before my return home to my father that if I ever came into money, it should be spent on the poor in Africa and preferably a hospital in South Africa's frontline state of Angola, where the slaves to America came from, as my contribution to the fight against apartheid. Now only six months after the show's launch, two things had happened that made me believe my childhood dream (described in Chapter 2) could come true in a meaningful way.

During the summer performances at the House, an audience member came one day and introduced himself with an "I am from the other side" as a diplomat from the Soviet Embassy. Only 16 years later did I discover that he was a KGB agent. When he invited me to lunch in "Ravelinen", I immediately had the idea that I could use his and the Soviet's help to penetrate the bureaucracy of the Angolan government, which the Soviets were supporting with arms supplies. And since he seemed visibly enthusiastic about "American Pictures", I began to tell him about my plans. My publisher, who intended to sell my book all over the world, had told me that it was virtually impossible to get royalties out of the Communist countries, and so I had come up with the idea that these countries should pay in the form of hospital equipment



It was always my dream to make the gifted Linda, who moved audiences all over the world, part of our working collective. Here she is during my first visit with the book in 1978 – now living with a foster mother. But by the time I took her to a show in 1986, she was too damaged by crack, and I had to give up. Later in life, she was usually in prison, as here at right, where she used my/our book in her drug rehab. In 2003, she was finally free (left) and promised to straighten out her life. But shortly after I received a letter to send money to a lawyer as she was now in prison again - now with both her sons.



and doctors for my hospital, which was quite reasonable, given that it was their arms supplies that made such humanitarian action extra necessary. But all this - and with it my relationship with the Russian diplomat Nick, as he simply called himself - soon began to change for me. For on November 12th, 1976 - the day after Angola's independence - I had a packed presentation at the Academy of Fine Arts, eagerly explaining my plans and asking the architecture students to help me design the hospital. Miraculously, they were themselves working on an idealistic project for the ANC training camps in Tanzania, so if I had been a little unsure whether my ideas were too world-weary, I was now heartened to see the enthusiasm they showed for helping. Admittedly, unlike them, I had chosen a country in bloody civil war, so it was good that the Danish government under my old comrade-in-arms, prime minister Anker Jørgensen, was now supporting the MPLA government. It was fighting against South Africa's apartheid regime, which had invaded Angola with US support. This problem I now saw too in a positive light, since Jimmy Carter, exactly one week before Angola's independence, was elected as the first American President ever to put an end to the United States' centuries-old repression of human rights in poor countries (which had radicalized me in Chapter 5).

So, only six months after my first show, and six months before my book was due to be published, I was finally able to tell my American friends about all these exciting developments on my newly acquired IBM electric typewriter. But it was not easy to make myself understood to both blacks, uneducated sharecroppers, criminals, white millionaires, reactionaries, and idealistic leftists alike. I had forgotten this old mass letter - the first of many to the Americans - which I over the coming years used as a confessional for my frustrations with the Europeans. The letter is funny because in it I outline an exact plan for how the money will be raised by me and five to eight volunteer "barefoot revolutionaries" traveling around Europe and the US with the show so we could send barefoot doctors to Angola. When I only recently found a copy of it, I was amazed at how many of my naive dreams in the letter ended up coming true.

For example, shortly afterwards, five black American "barefoot revolutionaries" (and later a few whites) ended up traveling around 14 countries with the show for many years, almost without pay, to raise money for the Africa project. And sentimental as I was, of course it had to be in the same VW vans that had most frequently picked me up in hippie-era America. Although the project at first ended up with development projects in Zimbabwe (after that colony became free and democratic in 1980) while I gave up working with the closed systems in Angola and the Soviet Union. Yet even my childhood dream of a "hospital" (starting as a clinic) came true seven years later in Angola - now instead with the support of the Danish Ngo IBIS and the EU - for refugees and freedom fighters from South Africa's bloody apartheid regime in Namibia. And just as I promised in the letter, after a few years I returned to the US with the show, and thus could continue to follow and photograph my lifelong friendships.

Most friends' first reaction to the letter was joyful astonishment that anything at all had come of the way I had been vagabonding, and that the result had so much interest in a small distant and foreign country. One of them was my black friend, Tony Harris, who wrote this in his reply: 'You told me a long time ago about the potential of your slide show. But care for suffering in America ceased in the sixties along with hope, hippies, and love. Being a victim of the time shift myself, my vision of what you could accomplish was distorted. So, receiving your letter and empathizing with the content made me cry. It was a cry of joy, joy that you have found purpose and meaning, and a practical way to express your love for humanity. I believe in you and want to be a part of this effort.'

I didn't expect American friends to come all the way to Denmark to share the joy of the success, so I was thrilled when Tony came to Copenhagen shortly after to work with me. Admittedly, he had strong warnings by his family before his first trip abroad. "They are killing people over there!" his grandmother had cried. It turned out that, like most Americans, she didn't know the difference between Denmark and Angola, whose bloody civil war raged in the American media.

Or possibly because Tony had told her he was going over to help build a hospital in Angola, which he eventually ended up doing. For Tony became my first "barefoot revolutionary," which evolved into our nearly 40 years of performing together on stages all over the world.

Every time I had come hitchhiking through Greensboro over the years, I had slept on the floor of his living room with noisy trucks outside. So polite had I been that when I arrived unannounced after he'd gone to bed with some dark beauty, I'd climbed up on garbage cans and in through a narrow bathroom window high up so as not to wake him - whereby one time in the dark I accidentally smashed his tooth mug against the floor, causing him to rush out with his gun and shout in fright, "Jesus Christ! Don't you know there's a death penalty in North Carolina for breaking and entering at night?"

Kitte and Tony on a later occasion, but very telling for both of them.

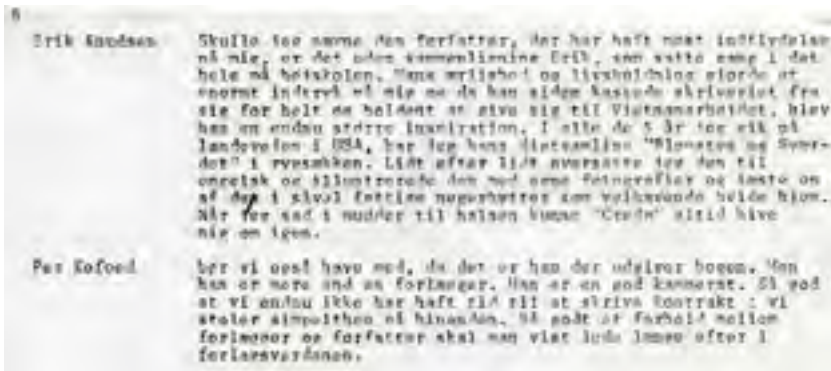


Now I was looking forward to giving him my own red giant bed, which I had just built high up in my red studio to avoid being beaten to a bloody pulp by the hot-blooded red Annie. Our relationship had become so intense that we had made an agreement that I should only sleep with her and Grundtvig every Wednesday and Sunday. Her daughter, Tania Fox, has ever since entertained my American visitors to Christiania about how, as a child, she only got proper food on Wednesdays and Sundays when her "papa" came to visit, and Annie cooked my Jutland favorites such as fried herring in parsley sauce with boiled potatoes. But unfortunately, Annie was so intense and sensitive that she could tell when I had female visitors in Ny Vestergade on other days of the week, so in jealousy she would cycle over at night and throw stones through my window facing down to the courtyard where she knew my bed was. And when I was lying there one night with Ellen - a Greenlander - it went so far that Red Annie smashed the door with an axe she had brought with her and doused us in bed with a bucket of water with ice lumps in it. She forgot, however, that this very element bounced off on a Greenlander, with whom I tried to warm myself a little that evening. Then I had to spend a week building a new bed in the opposite corner of the "red room" way up under the ceiling out of throwing range, which on Tony's first day in the country I tried to convince him was "safe from aggressive women". "And unlike the noisy trucks at your place, you can even lie in peace and listen to the most beautiful passages of Shakespeare rising up through the floorboards from the Mermaid Theatre and try to score its lovely actresses during intermissions," I promised.

But Tony did not have in mind to enjoy any of my women's drama. To keep him awake during his jet lag on the first day after arrival, I took him over to Kitte for dinner, who I knew loved black men. I was embarrassed that the always laid-back Tony had arrived from the US in a garish green ghetto suit in the mistaken belief that Danes were a stylish people. But Kitte welcomed us, and we had a good time. While we were talking about the book, which was due out the following week, Tony was in the bathroom and suddenly came out wearing only a loose bathrobe and said smilingly, "Jacob, I think I am staying here."



It was the first time my parents met my new Annie, whom they were relieved had helped my old Annie (who cooked the food for the party) to find an apartment.



From my duplicated invitation to old and new friends, describing each one's importance to me and "American Pictures." But note here especially the words about my publisher Per Kofod.

Kitte was as shocked as I was but didn't protest. Because unlike me, Tony the charmer knew women so well that he never had to ask first. Throughout my life, I saw him with stacks of women at a time without getting a single dramatic scene out of it.

Thus, I had to trudge home alone, disappointed, on that first evening when I had been looking forward to paying back some of the hospitality I had enjoyed in the US. It wasn't many days, however, before Tony tired of Kitte - and vice versa: "He's such a sex animal, I get nothing done except emptying his ashtrays everywhere, because we never get out of bed," she complained. By then Tony had wandered on to the next Danish woman, an equally sexy architect, in what was to become an endless line of women who still today in their old age keep asking me with big dreamy wet eyes if Tony will be back soon. I was shocked, for though I had seen black beauties jump into his car every time we drove too slowly through Greensboro - and he had always generously left the leftovers to me, who had no idea what to do with so many - he had always sworn that he would never date a white woman. In fact, he had never allowed any white before me to enter his house, just as I never managed to score even one of his equally anti-white black surplus women. But that was just the first act of the long process of transition Tony would go through over the next few years, living for the first time in a free society without white oppression. Not a single night did he stay with me in the six months before I bought the apartment in Købmagergade, where he could have his own room - and thus much greater freedom. Kitte asked me often after that: "Don't you have another of Tony's kind living with you?", and indeed if I had not often since had a large surplus of black men whom I wished to get rid of, generous as I am. At least three of them went to Kitte, but she deserved that, now that she had tried to create a groundbreaking work with black dicks.

Publishing and reception

Publication day on April 22nd, 1977 was approaching, and I had long ago started sending out invitations to the big book party at the House Teater.

Partly to old schoolmates, friends and lovers, and partly political and symbolic invitations, such as to the ambassadors of the United States, Vietnam and Cuba in this, my first Danish attempt at building bridges between longtime archenemies.

It's funny that I didn't take any pictures of the book party, where I just, like at my other performances, used my old half-format Canon to show the audience how small the originals behind the book's pictures were. And since I have no diary from this busy time either, I have nothing but a miserable memory to draw on. In fact, I was so tired of taking pictures after the 15,000 I came home with that I pretty much stopped photographing during my first years in Denmark - partly because I was now myself the center of everything. The two African Americans, Annie and April Young, had prepared tasty, and for me sentimental, "soul food" with beans cooked on ham hocks, cornbread etc. and my friend Dale Smith, played with his orchestra for among others my proud parents, who were among the guests.

For me it was a great day, but for everyone else, except maybe Per Kofod, it was of course just a good opportunity to party a little. I had hoped to have speakers like the American ambassador and did not understand why he was just sending some representatives from the embassy and only seeing the show himself at a special performance the next day. Instead, there was a whole other American speech that people will never forget. It was Harb Lelshab, whom I had visited the year before in Nyborg State Prison, when I heard that as a black American, he had been given a life sentence. As an American soldier in Germany on leave in Denmark, he had brutally murdered a man during a drug deal. His story and ghetto upbringing were so parallel to the stories in "American Pictures" that I had contacted the highest authority, Hans Henrik Brydesholt, to get Harb out to join the party. As director of the Department of Corrections at the time, Brydesholt, in keeping with the entire zeitgeist, had a highly sympathetic view of the social legacy that drives people to prison. So, he immediately gave permission for Harb, accompanied by his psychiatrist, to be the keynote speaker at my book publishing party. Harb had never faced an audience before - and I don't think he'd ever met ordinary Danes - so he was mortified, he later told me, when he delivered the most rabidly Marxist speech about imperialism and racism I'd heard in a long time.



Harb Lelshab in the CEO chair in 1980.

Most of the audience no doubt belonged to the left, but as the left was by then softening from its former orthodoxy, many - especially me - sat curling their toes at Harb's now slightly old-fashioned rhetoric. Still, under the impression of the show, there was an understanding of the angry outbursts of an oratorically well-endowed black American.



Kitte Fennestad and Per Kofod with my old Danish teacher Madsen and wife Agnete on the right.



Annie and my cousin Birgit on either side of me at the school table.

I should add here that one result of his performance was that he was henceforth permitted to go out regularly to work in our "American Pictures" work collective and to study cultural sociology at the university. And as part of his rehabilitation, I made him the director of "American Pictures".

In fact, it was Harb who presented the show every night in Købmagergade for the next few years. So we had to start this at 6pm so he could get back to the prison before midnight. Eventually he was allowed to stay overnight with us from time to time, and one night he and a fellow prisoner had found a couple of girls in the nightlife, who they took home and spent the night with on the floor of our performance room. The next morning, the girls asked them what they were doing in Denmark, and Harb replied, grinning, "We're in prison for murder. That's the infamous Israeli axe murderer you probably remember from the newspapers, while I was just using a gun." It is safe to say that they only got one night stands out of their honesty.

Since Harb stole my short-lived black French girlfriend, concert pianist Patricia Octavia, from me and after eight years was released for good behavior and moved with her to France, where at the time of writing I have just visited them and was writing this paragraph. Harp is still grateful that we through "American Pictures" helped build up his shattered sense of self-worth and thereby contributed to his never subsequently returning to prison - contrary to all too many of my friends in my book.

The week after the official release party, my father invited me to an alternative book party for my West Jutland friends in the vicarage on my 30th birthday. Many of the old friends who had been to all my birthdays in the same place during my seven years in the village school were there - and funnily enough, 16 years later it was still without the girls from class. We all sat with Tony at one of the long tables in my father's Confirmation room, and at the other long table sat all the old farmers. At the high table sat Kitte Fennestad and Per Kofod, seated with my old Danish teacher Madsen, why I had intended to read the essay for which he had given me a bad grade: "The Negro Problem in the United States".

I gave up, however, feeling that the day should not be about me, but about integrating these two sides of Denmark - the left-wing Copenhagen intelligentsia with the more sedate farmers from what we now call "the outskirts of Denmark." It went beyond all expectations. Per Kofod later said it was one of the parties that had given him the greatest experience of his life. My father gave an entertaining and teasing speech - which I have happily and conveniently forgotten now - about how silly I had been as a child. But the highlight of the evening was Tony Harris, endlessly entertaining with gangster stories from the ghettos. Much to my surprise, even the schoolmates who had dropped out after seventh grade now understood fluent English and sat with big ears. It was on this night that I first really discovered Tony's laugh-out-loud liberating entertainment and enlightenment value among a more conservative audience, something I was to enjoy for the next 30 years.

Like most first-time authors, I was excited as a child and thought the book would change my life. I remember proudly cycling around photographing how the bookshops had displayed it, but I made sure that there was preferably a homeless person or beggar in front of the display window in a natural way, so as never to forget the vulnerable people the book was about. Again, my eternal guilt. And so, I was also reminded of how the Danish welfare society had changed for the worse since my departure and continued to deteriorate as the book's success up through "the poor eighties."

The reviews were consistently positive, which was a relief as I had never - and still haven't - received a single Danish review of the slideshow. But when I consider how many entertaining pages have since been written about me in the newspapers, the book reviews today seem surprisingly short and restrained. Reviews are important, especially for authors like me who are not intelligent enough to understand their own product. In good reviews you learn something about yourself, or at least about how others see you, why at best they can help change your life. In that sense, I was probably most pleased with Thomas Bredsdorff's review in Politiken on June 18th, 1977.

Although I was annoyed that he was the first Dane to continue the banal Jesus comparisons that I had so often had to listen to among the poor unenlightened blacks. But in the rest of his analysis, he hit better than most the essence of the nonviolent communication, or loving thinking about others, that I had learned to use and survive on in the United States out of sheer necessity.

"... Jacob Holdt shows what tremendous political power lies in being able to love one's fellow men (...) Nowhere in this expansion of consciousness does he allow himself to hate a human being. Even a Rockefeller he meets as a man who in a different role would be responsible for fewer murders. It is a system he hates, not people. (...) To be able to judge so harshly and clearly and yet not condemn any individual human being from the possibility of being loved and being able to live a different life is what makes this book unique both in image and text," he wrote.

I remember that when I read this first psychological analysis of my way of traveling, it made me feel guilty because I thought it was too beautiful and over-romanticized to suit me. After all, you know yourself well enough to know that you have all sorts of other sides too, where, for example, you were in the moment annoyed by the behavior of your fellow human beings, and were therefore just human. But as I had become increasingly irritated by the hateful anti-American sentiments that the show reinforced in many people over a year of performing the show, Thomas Bredsdorff's review helped me to find my way back to my real message - to find myself again, so to speak, amid the confusion that my sudden success in show business was giving me. In that sense, he helped to correct my life and give me the strength for the rebellion I started shortly afterwards against Information and the success of my own book.

A weapon in the Cold War

The personal contact with people that I best achieved as a vagabond, I had tried to continue as a lecturer by always staying with my audience or organizers - just as I later required my black travelling staff to stay in private homes.

But how could I continue this principle when the first 10,000 copies of the book sold out in just two weeks? I had already enjoyed meeting and talking to many of the readers when they stopped me in the street to say thank you for the book - which, by the way, they still do many years later, especially when they are well drunk at People's Meetings and Rock Festivals - to tell me how it changed their lives in their youth. But especially just after you've published your first book, the personal encounter with readers means a lot to most writers, I think. So now, when Information wanted to print even larger editions, I demanded a "personal" letter be included in each book in my desperate attempt to make at least myself believe that I was writing to readers personally. Incidentally, it's a letter that many of them still keep.

"Dear reader. I feel like writing to you without having to make it into a book again. The book you have here is the second edition. As you may know, the first 10,000 copies sold so quickly that it totally surprised both me and my publisher Per Kofod, which is why it has been missing from the bookstores for several weeks. Because of the rush and our good friendship, we have not yet signed a contract (...) By the way, the tax authorities demand that I pay taxes for the years I spent on the road - or as they say: "You must have lived on something..."

And so, I went on for four closely written pages before ending with:

"I'm also making my own theatre to run the show permanently for a longer period, as it was almost always sold out the few months it ran last year in the House Theater. Well, I'll have to finish now, but if nothing else I hope to see you one night after the show.

Best regards Jacob Holdt."

I can laugh today at how naively I tried to hold on to every one of my readers of a book that ended up selling a quarter of a million copies in a short time.

Meanwhile, at our first dinner after the book's success in the media, my otherwise polite and charismatic Russian diplomat, Nick, had suddenly disappointed, even hurt, me deeply. In six months, we had developed a deep friendship, and he had promised to help me with my plans for the hospital in Angola.

Nick told me that he had been thrilled to read about the reception of my book, since as a "press attaché" (or a similar term for his subversive activity) at the embassy he usually spent most of the day reading Danish newspapers.

But then suddenly he switched to a more serious tone and started talking about how his bosses in Moscow had decided to use my book in their fight against President Carter's human rights campaign, which they felt was aimed mainly at the Soviet Union's human rights abuses. "For American Pictures exposes all the hypocrisy, since you show that human rights are just as bad in Carter's own United States. And of course, we are not capable of making propaganda as strong and convincing as you, because you speak directly to the heart of people. So, we need you. That's why it's also important that you don't join the Communist Party or put on the show in Eastern Europe and lose credibility. Because it is in the West that we need your unique and epoch-making work in the fight for social justice. You have enormous power over the minds of the young."

He completely knocked me off my feet, because it was the first time anyone had ever associated the word "human rights" with the social and racial oppression I had portrayed in "American Pictures." And that was only because Carter had begun to use the same words about the very different oppression that was going on behind the Iron Curtain. Here, at the same time, the Soviets had begun to feel threatened from within, because only a few months earlier Vaclav Havel and other dissidents in Czechoslovakia had published their "Charter 77", accusing the Communist governments of violating the UN human rights conventions that the Soviets had just ratified the year before. Precisely because, as a young man myself, I had been enthusiastic about Alexander Dubček's "socialism with a human face", I had hopefully followed the Charter 77 movement extra closely during the spring of 1977.

With the election of Carter and his declared commitment to human rights, I began to believe - no doubt with the same wonderful naivety as Carter himself - that for the first time in my life the United States would respect both civil and social human rights in the Third World, which, apart from his disappointing embrace of the Shah of Persia, he did more or less live up to, within the limitations even the world's strongest man is subject to.



I don't know why we had this posed picture taken before our escape behind the Iron Curtain. With Annie, Tony and Wolfgang Poth.

I was delighted with Carter because in his first speech at the UN he admitted all the oppressions which had made the young people of my generation feel so strongly anti-American, and because he put his money where his mouth was by immediately ending over 30 years of US support for Latin American dictatorships and cracking down on the apartheid regimes in South Africa and Rhodesia.

All the hopes for a better future that Carter had given me in that spring of freedom, so intoxicating and exhilarating to me personally, I now felt that a foreign totalitarian power was coming to ask me to help betray. For it was my intention to return as soon as possible to use my work inside the United States itself. And would I have any possible credibility over there, any ability to change attitudes among whites toward blacks, if it came out that I had helped undermine the very president who had given blacks such high hopes for a better future?

And would America, with its new emphasis on civil rights, even let me in if I were exposed as anti-American? I was not able to fathom that with my modest abilities I had suddenly inadvertently ended up as a minor chess piece in the Cold War between two fierce superpowers, but immediately sensed that it was a role that, with my conflict-shy nature, I didn't feel at home in nor in any way want. So, I completely backed out and probably didn't utter a word to Nick, which he may have interpreted as a sign that I had no objection to the conspiracy.

This threw me into a deep depression, as I felt I could only get out of the dilemma by sacrificing my life's work. And that would initially lead me into a showdown with all the friends I had made at Information and involve a betrayal of the trust they had shown me and all the money they had invested in our mutual success. I was far too confused and conflict-averse to make that call now, and so I ended up doing what I had always done as a vagabond when things got tough: fleeing out on the highways.

A few days after the dramatic encounter with Nick Gribin, I packed the car with camping gear and took with me my three good friends, Tony, Annie Hedvard and the German bookseller Wolfgang Poth. We had loosely talked about going on holiday in Italy, but I spontaneously said, "We're going to Czechoslovakia." And so it was, for this was my first childish and powerless rebellion against the human rights trap I felt Gribin had put me in. Therefore, I wanted to go to the country where, with Charter 77, there was now a smoldering revolt against his own government's human rights abuses, after Brezhnev had reluctantly acceded to the Helsinki Convention two years before. We laid flowers in Wenceslas Square, where my youth hero Jan Palach had carried out his suicide burning in 1969, and visited dissidents like the writer Jiří Mucha, who had been sentenced to death but given years of hard labor by the Communist regime.

It was on this trip that I first began to wonder about the many similarities between American black's and Communism's oppressed as victims of a closed system which crushed hope and initiative in people.

I began to discuss this with Tony, with whom, funnily enough, I was also spending the morning, 12 years later, when after a late-night drinking party with students in Union College in New York, we opened the television and saw people dancing on the Berlin Wall and couldn't believe our own hangovers. For on that trip to Prague we had passed the Berlin Wall, where I had photographed graffiti paintings, such as my favorite, "Under Stalin we had no wall," and revisited the even more desolate East Germany, where once, during a visit while in high school, I had managed, with nervous heartbeats, to steal one of the large official Hammer & Seal ornaments and smuggle it out through the wall past the stretch-marching soldiers.

While we drove around enjoying the relative poverty of communism with cheap meals in luxury restaurants (though in practice with only one menu everywhere, namely Wiener schnitzel with anchovies on it) surrounded by lots of waiters showing no incentive, in the car we played non-stop ABBA's latest hit, which was even more popular here behind the iron curtain:

"Money, money, money, Must be funny, In the rich man's world. All the things I could do, If I had a little money ..."

On the surface everything was happy for us with the prospect of all the money that would come to us, once I had signed my contract at home. But that piece of music also reinforced the thoughts of all the responsibility my success had given me, which I had run away from, and which now lay like a heavy shadow over the whole trip. Although I only superficially shared my concerns with my travel companions, they could sense my tension and irritation. At night, Tony and Wolfgang slept in the inner tent, and Annie and I in the awning of my parents' old cottage tent.

It seemed like a palace compared to the small tents and Trabants of the Eastern Europeans, but there was nothing royal about lying right next to me and Red Annie when she wanted to have sex and I only thought about Red Russians and the book. Especially in the daytime, Annie's colorful enthusiasm, "see the yellow fields," was driving us crazy. In our gray-melted state we quickly each thought of escaping our mutual confinement behind the iron curtain.

Here is the only impressive structure we saw in 1977, which the romanticized workers of the GDR had erected in the same year that the USA sent a man to the moon.



The wall as I saw it on the trip in 1977, but which we would later pass through numerous times for our lectures in Berlin, where the show was most successful in Germany.

Wolfgang was the first to "defect" as soon as we reached the West German freedom, while we didn't manage to squeeze Annie out before Florence, after which she hitchhiked home. For me, there had been another purpose to the trip, to lure Tony away from his Danish intoxication of freedom to seduce all the white women from whom the invisible walls of his domestic racism had kept him excluded. Now we finally had time to talk - not least about the dilemma I had got myself into with the book. But on that point Tony was no support, for he now had the same deeply invested interest in the success of "American Pictures" as did the publisher and everyone else.

During one of these conversations, Tony, in a huge drunkenness, revealed that he had been sleeping with Edwina, to whom he had introduced me in 1973, and with whom I fell so in love that I wrote one of the book's most important letters to her. But that wasn't what shook me, as over the next several years together we had to get used to sharing many other girlfriends. The scandal, if one can speak of such in the context of Tony to whom everything seemed so Teflon like natural, was that Edwina was his own aunt.

The cold book war is heating up

Now it was a matter of returning to Denmark as quickly as possible, when in the midst of our pleasant conversations over the many bottles of Tuscan wine on the banks of the Arno River we were told that a new edition would be printed quickly why they needed my requested changes. In my three-week period of reflection, I had not yet found a solution to the Russian roulette in which I found myself. I initially chose to play nice with Per Kofod in order to get my changes in the book accepted.

But soon he started saying that they couldn't really print any more editions without having a contract with me. I was evasive and first talked about how I wouldn't give them the right to sell it to the US because "it's not good enough for that." Per was not much for giving up the promising American market, but he suggested that perhaps we could separate the contract to not deal with the US at first.

That made it even harder for me, that I could now not drag out the contract negotiations with American excursions. And so, I began to conclude that there was nothing to do but stop the book anywhere in the world by refusing to write a contract altogether. I began to argue that I was not mentally strong enough to take on such a huge responsibility with all the emotions I had already seen the book trigger in people. "I'm not intellectual like you, and you all know that here in Information. I just happened to create this Frankenstein monster which is now destroying me and the whole anonymous vagabond life I loved. I want to keep my freedom."

I don't remember the exact words, but Per Kofod understandably felt it was a deliberate betrayal of him, our friendship and all the trust he had shown me. He began again to talk about all the money the book would give me all over the world, but in so doing he was only reminding me of the worst anguish which more than anything else had made me melancholy. Because by stopping my own book worldwide, I would also be stopping all the money that should fund my dream project of a hospital in Angola. And what is a life of freedom and security without dreams?

That my relationship with Per Kofod was still warm and affectionate is shown by the photo of him from the summer of 1977, when he invited me to his summer house. Deep down, therefore, I felt terrible about the war I knew would soon break out between us.



I knew I would get no understanding from Information in my fight against the Russians' attempts to undermine Carter, whom I had come to see as my ally with his Christian views on forgiveness and dialogue. For on June 28, 1977 - two days before my last meeting with Nick Gribin - Information ran an editorial that both I and Gribin had read. In it, I was personally used as an example of Carter's hypocrisy, which is why Gribin had been extra excited to now expect Information's support for the Soviet attack on Carter's human rights policy. I reproduce an excerpt here because it clearly shows why my fight against Information thereafter became so fierce and unrelenting.

"Now, human rights are perceived as many things. In parts of the world, the economic side of the matter is given the most attention. On that front, things look bleak for the US itself. Photographer Jacob Holdt's "American Pictures" reveals conditions that no one can admire. Again this year, the civil rights organization National Urban League has published a progress report showing absolute regression in the economic position of black Americans.

But the human right to economic security and a dignified livelihood in Carter's America is not a right, but a privilege. And the social and fiscal policies he promotes will not change that fact (...) A worldwide campaign against human rights abuses is needed. But with the US and President Carter at the helm, such a policy becomes a cynical exploitation of the hopes of millions."

Information's final sentence alone knocked the legs out from under me. Through my idealization of Carter and our shared hope of creating a better world, I felt myself under attack for "cynically exploiting the hopes of millions" if my book became just empty words without being able to contribute to some change for blacks. Yet there was not a single sentence in the editorial that I could not agree on or disagree with - which was the crux of the whole issue. It was therefore time to put right all the injustices committed by the United States in my youth, and this could only be done by trusting and giving all my support to a man who had miraculously achieved his rise to power through the system. In the same way that only a man of the system, Mikhail Gorbachev, could achieve the power ten years later to first reform and eventually destroy the sick and oppressive system of the Soviet Union.

But to turn the whole thing on its head, as Information did by undermining Carter's sincere attempt to bring the US into line with human rights for the first time, was outright one-eyed reactionary hypocrisy.

But when I refused to sign the book contract, of course there was no understanding. I couldn't use arguments that I didn't want to undermine Carter's human rights policy, because I knew I would be immediately trampled by Information's know-it-all leftist intellectuals. I couldn't even say anything about knowing that the Soviet Union was planning to use my book against Carter, because then it would immediately get out in the press that I was meeting with people from the embassy, and I would lose Soviet support for the Angola project. I felt so infinitely small and stupid with my half-emotional arguments confronting these all-powerful heavyweights at the employee-owned newspaper. That way they only saw me even more as such an inarticulate loser, which caused me to backslide further. So, I went home and wrote a six-page emotional letter to Per Kofod, which said, among other things:

"... another thing entirely is that I can't see the political implications of my book. I know so little about the world and can therefore only be shocked when my book has already been brought into the human rights war. I do not want my book, while pointing out the oppression somewhere in the world, to go on - consciously or unconsciously in the reader - to justify the oppression elsewhere on the globe. As I said, I don't think my book will bring much relief for the people it deals with, but it is not inconceivable that it will indirectly become a burden for people elsewhere. This is one reason not to disseminate it further at this stage of the human rights cold war (although I am opposed in principle to the idea that one should not be able to protest against injustice as long as conditions are worse elsewhere)."

In the end I was called into a meeting in the large office of the newly hired CEO Finn Kern, which in those years of prosperity faced Store Kongensgade in the gigantic building, every corner of which I knew. As financial manager he tried to make me feel guilty about all the money the paper would lose if they didn't get the profits from my book and their other sales success, Alex Haley's "Roots".

I don't remember much else from the conversation except that I burst into terrible sobbing - really violent, with snot all over my head - and at one point threw myself hysterically on the floor and pounded my fists into it, shouting, "No, no, no. I can't. I can't stand to have such a huge responsibility on my shoulders," and that sort of thing. Whereupon I suddenly ran out the door and swore I'd never set foot on Information again (if only out of embarrassment at my hysterical behavior, which must have made them all think I should be locked up in an asylum and was too risky to invest in any longer) But when there's big money at stake, people don't think like that, so the publishing war continued - now without me.

Instead, I put my lawyer, Søren B. Henriksen, to take legal action against Information to stop the book. In the leftist spirit of the time, he was as uncomprehending about this as anyone. For Søren was a Maoist, and even wore a Mao cap the first time I met him. It happened when I needed a lawyer for the purchase of my new headquarter for American Pictures and asked my brother, Niels Jørgen, if he knew anyone. He told me that he had gone to school with a student who had just finished law school. But when he asked Søren if he would help his brother buy a condo, Søren promptly said no. He was ideologically opposed to that kind of bourgeois capitalism - as were all the other 68ers at the time. But when Søren asked Niels Jørgen who it was and was told it was "that Jacob Holdt from 'American Pictures'", he turned on a dime and immediately sold out his ideology. Hooray for hypocrisy on all sides during all ages, for when Søren B. Henriksen later rose in the system and ended up as CEO of the Danish Capitalist's union DHS, I was always invited to his bigger birthday parties along with ministers and elite businessmen. When my table host at Søren's 50th birthday party, Foreign Minister Niels Helveg Petersen, asked me in wonder why I, as the only different-looking person, had come along, I simply replied, without going into detail, "I was Søren's first client." After all, we old reds cover up each other's foxy smell when the wind starts blowing the other way.

But the wind didn't do that in 1977, when I gave Søren his first real assignment and legal headache, which he himself didn't understand. "Stop my book all over the world. I don't want it used by either the Left or the Communist countries against the United States," was my order.

Second escape behind the Iron Curtain

I didn't tell him anything else until I fled to Poland in a hurry, before Søren sent his first lawsuit against Information, after which I knew that my cold war against the publisher would break out into a blaze. But why Poland? Well, my nerves were completely on edge during this drama, during which I did not want to be contacted by either Søren or Information. Already at the book fair Per Kofod had sold the book to both Communist GDR and Poland, and during the last meetings at Information I had been contacted by representatives of the Polish embassy, who brought the Polish publisher's contract for me to sign. Or rather - because they had signed that with Information - an amended contract on which it was written in small letters that I gave them permission to make certain changes to the book. When I asked what they consisted of, they said they wanted to delete certain sections on homosexuals and one single nude picture in front of a crucifix, "as it would offend the Catholic Church". It was the first time I had seen any Stalinist dictatorship show consideration for the feelings of the Church, so I immediately saw an opportunity to have the book stopped there too, although I knew it could not be stopped in the countries Per Kofod already had contracts with. Therefore, I refused, after a very depressing afternoon with several cognacs, to sign, but immediately got the idea to travel down to the Polish publisher to negotiate with them - also about supplying hospital equipment rather than royalties to the hospital I had not yet given up.



Søren B. Henriksen attended all our parties the Ubuntu House - and still does. He is seen here under my hitching sign with Jørgen Dragsdahl. He was also with us as a lawyer and friend during our difficult start in the USA.

On the left, I'm at his 60th birthday party at Børsen with prime minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen.

The day before my departure I went as usual to Cafe Sommersko, where I met a photo model-like beautiful girl, Majbrit. She had no idea I was a new writer, which I found refreshing as I didn't need the usual female fan offerings at the moment. She sat on the stairs inside, loudly amusing herself by mimicking my "redneck" crossbreeding between a monotonous West Jutlandic dialect and a ditto American accent. Since I needed "true love" right now and took it as a flirt, it suddenly slipped out: "Well, if you think of me as a mere country bumpkin, come with me to a country where you will see us entertained like Jeppe of the Hill in the baron's bed."

Majbritt had not yet taken her summer vacation, so the next day we fled under the protective blankets of the iron curtain, without letting anyone know where we were. The greatest experience was when we already the first night were invited home by a worn-out 60-year-old worker in Torun, whose wife gave us their own bed and made up for themselves, the son and the daughter-in-law in the cramped living room. For when the father told of his psychological breakdown from years in the prisons of Stalinism, it felt further like a confirmation of my domestic rebellion here to cultivate "love across all borders" in his very spacious bed with Majbrit. For without any bitterness, he saw not only himself as a victim. "If you think we are poor here in Poland, you should see the poverty inside the Soviet Union. You won't believe your own eyes. Our oppressors suffer even more."

It started out as a romantic trip, surrounded by horse-drawn vehicles, feeling like kings in my big VW van and the huge cottage tent. Once again, I realized the truth that the only thing communism was good for was nostalgic, safe and relaxing holidays from the stress of capitalism and the struggle for big money. When we were finally accommodated by the publisher in a luxurious hotel - by Polish standards - in the days that followed we were subjected to an army of VIPs who fed us lavishly, got us drunker and drunker every night and took us to huge balls. Invariably, they ended up pulling out some papers for me to "sign" in the middle of the night, amidst the camaraderie and cordiality. I still refused, and as I said to Majbrit, who didn't understand why I didn't just get the inevitable over with, "If I can't prevent my book from being used against human rights by this country, then I will at least do everything I can to support human rights here in the country itself."

She discovered how far I was willing to go on the last night, when, after completely drunk having swam around in the disgusting Polish garfish jellies, we were invited home to the wife by one of the highest bosses in the Communist Party. He convinced us how high up he was when he showed us his photo album of his personal government visit to the White House - the new occupant of which I felt our whole visit was about. Suddenly, the Communist boss pushed his wife and Majbrit into their bedroom and locked the door in order for her to sleep with his wife in there, while he dragged me into the fancy Hollywood-style bathroom with his pants down.

In the midst of the shock of realizing that the man the Communist Party had put in charge of removing my fags from the book turned out to be a self-oppressing queer himself, I realized what power I now suddenly had over this party boss. After all, this closed system was known for using just such methods to blackmail people. I didn't even have to threaten #MeToo denunciation, because I knew that the next day, when he was sober and realized his mistake, he would be like a pious lamb. This was for me a giant victory for human rights, that I had been able to give him his pacifier while I myself stood upright and firm that wet slippery night. For Polish gays told me after the fall of the Wall that my book was the only one in which they had ever seen homosexuals described in a positive way. It had meant an incredible amount to them in the midst of the self-hatred that this Catholic-Communist conspiracy had given them.

But all victories have victims, and Majbrit could not get home to Denmark fast enough, where she immediately entertained and warned everyone. "If you are in love with Jacob Holdt, just go on a relaxing holiday with him in Poland. Then you'll be cured forever." I never saw her again but heard that soon after she found herself a rich Spanish capitalist. But I hope, Majbrit, that you will forgive me when you read this.

Roots of Submission

While I conducted my personal Cold War, at home there had been a Warm War between my lawyer and Information, in which they had finally agreed on a compromise. Søren B. Henriksen could not legally stop the book in the entire world, since I had previously given a verbal commitment that it would be published. But he had had so many restrictions put into the contract - not only that it could not be published in the Eastern Bloc, but also by left-leaning publishers in the rest of the world. And most importantly, that all publishers had to make sure it wasn't used for anti-American purposes.



I have always felt at home among the poor and have been touched by their overflowing hospitality when, as here in Eastern Europe, they had nothing to give. Especially when you were a rare guest from the rich West. Just as Tony and I experienced the month before in Tito's Yugoslavia, married couples moving out of their bedrooms so that we could sleep comfortably while they slept on couches in the living room with their children, this family in Torun insisted that Majbrit and I have their bedroom while they slept in the cramped living room. Once again it made me think of Jesus' words: "Truly I say to you: This poor widow has given more than all the others who put money into the temple block."



While everything still breathed romance and relaxation with Majbrit. But in Warsaw things went wrong when one night we were completely flooded in the overturned tent in the deluge of the century. And it was soon to get even wetter ...



I loved Poland's horse-drawn carriages and underdevelopment, which reminded me of my West Jutland childhood in the 1950s, and I kept returning on camping holidays with my children after the fall of the Wall.



My proof in the Polish book that my struggle for Polish gays succeeded.



Since this was virtually impossible for publishers to ensure against, the book was effectively impossible to sell to new publishers, and indeed was never sold to anyone other than those who had already bought it in Frankfurt.

Only because Per Kofod's other bestselling author, Alex Haley, was coming to Denmark for the publication of "Roots," I ended up finally giving in. Otherwise, Information wouldn't let me come to the reception on October 18th or let him see my show. So I sold myself to Mephisto, or however it felt, because it was myself who had brought the other financial success, "Roots", to Information. Two years earlier, while living with my black girlfriend, Mary, in the dense woods of Alabama, I had read in an issue of Reader's Digest that a black man had found his way back to his ancestral roots in Africa and would soon publish a novel about it. I'll never forget how I immediately saw the significance of that for America's blacks, which is why the first thing I did after returning to my own Danish roots was to urge Per Kofod to secure the Danish rights before a major publisher snatched it up. Therefore I was now mad that Information was now using Haley to "blackmail" me, but realized I had lost the battle anyway.

So, it was a day of celebration for all parties when Alex Haley was one of the first to visit my newly refurbished theatre for the show in my new Ubuntu House. However, he fell asleep (on my hard but cheap Czech-bought chairs) already after the show's first "Ship Ahoy" scenes with the slaves coming across the ocean to the US, having flown the opposite way that same day and suffering from jet lag. Consequently, Alex Haley was most captivated by Annie Hedvard's beautiful tapestries, which is why she, and not I to my chagrin, got to talk to him the most. Just as Tony proudly told me that he and Haley had stood and peed together in the toilet and exchanged pleasantries like, "what the hell are we doing over here in this white world?"

Shortly afterwards, when I was invited to my first American gig in Portland, Oregon, to much media fanfare, a TV station had sent black reporter Dick Boggles to interview me as I stepped off the plane. But in superficial American media fashion, he hadn't looked into why I was there and what I had made to be in the news, so I responded something to the effect that I was there to present a show about racism "that Alex Haley came to see in my own home."

Then his curiosity was piqued, because Alex Haley was his personal friend, and Haley had sat in his own house and written parts of "Roots." Thus, I ended up being invited home by the journalist, who - when I told him during dinner that I would be traveling afterwards to visit all my photographed friends in the show - ended up donating me one of his cars for the purpose. And when I was frequently stopped in this, my first American car donated by blacks, by black police officers who wanted to give me a ticket for my swerving while photographing shacks, I simply showed them the pictures of me and Alex Haley together, after which they always let me off without a ticket (but instead wanted my autograph.) I learned to use this trick throughout my years of lecturing in the US, but soon replaced the pictures of Haley with my pictures of Reagan when stopped by white cops.

Perhaps the biggest mistake of my life

For here we come to the really painful part of this whole story of my life's greatest folly in, for idealistic reasons, protecting Carter's human rights policy, virtually killing my own lifetime achievement before it even got off the ground. How could I have been so naive as to believe that a new and better world was really coming with Carter, without any sense of reality about how ephemerally short such small historical advances can be? Probably only because I held my cards so close to my chest and did not discuss my dilemma with others for fear of not being understood in the still strong anti-American zeitgeist in which virtually no one else had confidence that America could really change for the better.

That cynicism was proved right when, only a few years later, there was a fierce reaction to the Carter optimism with the election of Reagan, who instantly took us back to the racist domestic policies and bloody interventionist foreign policies of the past. Needless to say, in this new reactionary era - with Reagan's support for bloody dictators, death squads, and counterrevolutionaries in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador, where he started the entire and continuing wave of violence whose refugees the U.S. to this day feels compelled to build walls to stop - I no longer felt like using my book to "protect" what I saw as genuine American humanistic values.



While staying with Mary in the summer of 1975, I read a Reader's Digest story about a black man who had found his roots in Africa and immediately sensed that it would be a sensation. But little did I think then that Mary would become for me a kind of "roots" in the midst of "the black belt" running through the South, to which I would return every year for the rest of my life until her death in 2014.



Myself, Annie Hedvard, Alex Haley, my future wife Vibeke Rostrup Bøyesen and Jørgen Dragsdahl.

Something else that has since bothered me about the slaughter of my own book's possible world success - and thus my dream of a hospital in Africa - is that I mistakenly attributed so much power to the Soviet Union and its expatriate diplomats. That it was not imaginary paranoia on my part that the Soviets would exploit my success was evident after the fall of Communism from many documents in the KGB archives, such as this letter dated December 8th, 1977, which purported to be the KGB's action plan for 1978: "With this in mind, we must - through Jacob Holdt - ensure the execution of the anti-American operation and of the actions connected with it. We must also ensure that this operation has an effect in other northern European countries, especially Sweden and Norway." But how, frankly, would the Russians have been able to use my book effectively against Carter in the first place? And certainly not when the book and the zeitgeist already did it all by themselves. For the Soviets were not alone in misinterpreting the book's contents as an expression of "Carter's hypocrisy." Especially in gleeful Germany, there was hardly a single review of the book that did not use phrases about "Carter's hypocrisy", without anyone probably claiming that the Soviets had the slightest influence on conservative West German newspapers like "Die Zeit" and "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung".

Through my continuing conversations over the years with Nick Gribin, as well as my travels in the impoverished Eastern Europe, a picture slowly formed in my mind of how weak the Soviet Union actually was in those years just before its collapse. A collapse we made a small contribution to in "American Pictures" by spending some of the money earmarked for Africa a few years later filling my brother's car with food and coffee, which he drove down to Lech Wałęsa's striking Solidarity rebels in Gdansk under the guise of his sports club Sparta's exchange with Poland. It sparked the only real argument I had with Gribin when I told him about it. For this very reason I was glad for the meetings with him, because in this and other ways he could not fail to let shine through what a paper tiger the KGB, which he did turn out to represent, had been all along.



My old girlfriend, Carole Kronberg, on the right, was as big a Carter enthusiast as I was, and she was an active volunteer in Michigan when Carter sought re-election in 1980.

Wenn Jimmy Carter Jacob Holdts Buch liest (hoffentlich tut er's),
wird er sich fragen müssen, wie glaubwürdig ein Präsident, ist, der
fromm- und frömmelnd, für die Freiheit anderswo, kämpft, aber
Millionen seiner Mitbürger nicht einmal die einfachste Freiheit
verschaffen kann: das Recht auf ein Leben schon vor dem Tod.

DER ZEIT 1. September 1978

The end of the long review in Die Zeit: "When Jimmy Carter reads Jacob Holdt's book (hopefully he will), he will have to ask himself how credible a president he who is piously and sanctimoniously fighting for freedom elsewhere, but who can't even give his own citizens at home the simplest freedom: the right to a life before death.

I think he knew it deep down, but he kept writing his fabricated reports to "the center" in Moscow about how important I was (even after I had spent most of Reagan's presidency in the US) to avoid being sent back to domestic poverty himself. This shows better than anything how powerless the KGB was in the West. (I am not talking here about KGB's internal terror and high-level espionage).

Of course, I have no idea how much money the book would have made if I had released it in a timely fashion around the world. Sales in West Germany may give a clue, since it ended up here longer on Der Spiegel's bestseller list than any previous foreign book - for long periods number two, second only to a book about Hitler. This was despite the fact that I had been at war with my German publisher, Ingeborg Meier, for a long time, with endless and embarrassing letter-writing, which I still have lying around in thick binders, and which could fill a whole book if published. Strange to think that the book I had spent only a few weeks writing, I spent half a year trying to sabotage. I knew in my heart that in German-speaking countries I could not contractually stop the book, but my conscience told me that I should at least try to delay it by making so many impossible demands that S. Fischer Verlag had no chance of fulfilling them.

People around me remember how I sat from morning to night hammering out requirements on my IBM typewriter for the publisher. First, I demanded, in long-winded letters, that they do a new translation of the book, using my own incredibly talented German volunteer, Rudi Samiec, who had translated the German show. But here fate played me a funny trick. For the following year I was suddenly woken one morning by the police and dragged off for a long interrogation, where I was now told that Rudi was an East German spy planted by the STASI to work for me, and that his real name was Jörg Meier. Neither of us had had the slightest idea, as he had always told me that he was a West German student visiting his beloved grandmother in Hamburg, whenever in reality he was in East Berlin with his boss, the notorious Markus Wolf. He was later expelled in the biggest ever spy exchange between East and West, along with Chancellor Willy Brandt's personal secretary, Günter Guillaume, who was also planted by the STASI.

Brandt was forced to resign, but we loved Jörg Meier, who continued to work for us in prison and after the fall of the Wall has continued to help me to this day. He loved the luxurious life in the West, and with his fabulous psychological ability to empathize, no one was better than him to empathize with my confused ideas and to support and convey them in solidarity.



We had never thought about the fact that our beloved West German volunteer Rudi Samiec was always in another room when he had to be photographed and filmed, especially by German TV stations and magazines. But I have often since teased him about how bad a spy he was since I managed to get him in one of my pictures, seen here on the back left, while he was helping Tony, Jerry from Ghana, Harb and Howie find pictures for the show. Since the fall of the Wall, he has continued to help me, and many years later I am holidaying with Jörg Meyer at his new home near Munich.



At this IBM ball-head typewriter I sat from morning till night for months trying to stop my book - instead of going out and lecturing and enjoying life.

That was hardly the intention of his Communist government, which he openly ended up opposing before the fall of the Wall.

Meanwhile, the war with Fischer Verlag had escalated dramatically. As I hated the gloating West German tendency to always point fingers at the USA and Carter when we gave lectures in West Germany and West Berlin, I felt that both the book and show only made sense if it was all about raising money for the hospital. For the leftist German youth were enormously hateful in those years when they were trying to make up with the opposite hatred of their parents' generation. In particular, my human defense of the Ku Klux Klan and Nazis in the show was a red rag to them, with the result that my black barefoot mediators could not stand for long, night after night, to stand and "defend the Ku Klux Klan to a furious mob of whites who seem like they want to lynch me," as Jerry Justice put it.

That's why it was so important to us that both the book and the show were about our own European responsibility for our colonial oppression in Africa. But we got no help in this from Fischer Publishers, whose salesmen I had promised after the first book fair in 1976 to present the slideshow for at the following book fair. I don't remember it myself today but have found descriptions of how I used the occasion to shout and scream that no one should buy this "anti-American book that everyone is using against Carter" from a publisher that just wants to make money off the poor and whatnot. It turned into a scandal that I have happily forgotten. But it didn't make it any easier afterwards to get any kind of understanding from Fischer for my demands to at least have a letter and an account for donations included in the book about our Africa projects. So, I ended up cancelling the contract with S. Fischer, now that Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and East Belgium had become our main lecturing territory.

Reading through it today, I am embarrassed by the furiously perfidious attacks I made on the publisher who had given me my biggest bestseller. Years later, I personally met Ingeborg Meier, who, almost trembling with fear of me, nervously asked: "Do you still hate me?" I had no idea what a monster I had grown into in her delicate life and gave her a big hug and apology. "No, it wasn't you I hated, but the book which I felt was far, far too big a responsibility for me at the time," I replied.



Jörg Meyer continued his work for us in Nyborg State Prison, where we installed a sound studio in his cell for the recording of the German version of the film. But we were proud when he was exchanged to the GDR with none other than Günther Guillaume here. For it made us feel a little bit connected to our great inspiration, Willy Brandt, with his own reconciliation and dialogue-seeking "Ostpolitik", for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Not least for being the first Chancellor to kneel and apologize for the German genocide of the Jews, which I remember helped to de-radicalize me in Canada in favor of a more forgiving attitude. For it was here in Toronto that I saw the famous "Knee fall" picture taken during Brandt's own Warsaw Pact with Poland on my father's 50th birthday on December 8th, 1970 -just before I left for the United States – the country which had the great enemy image of my youth.

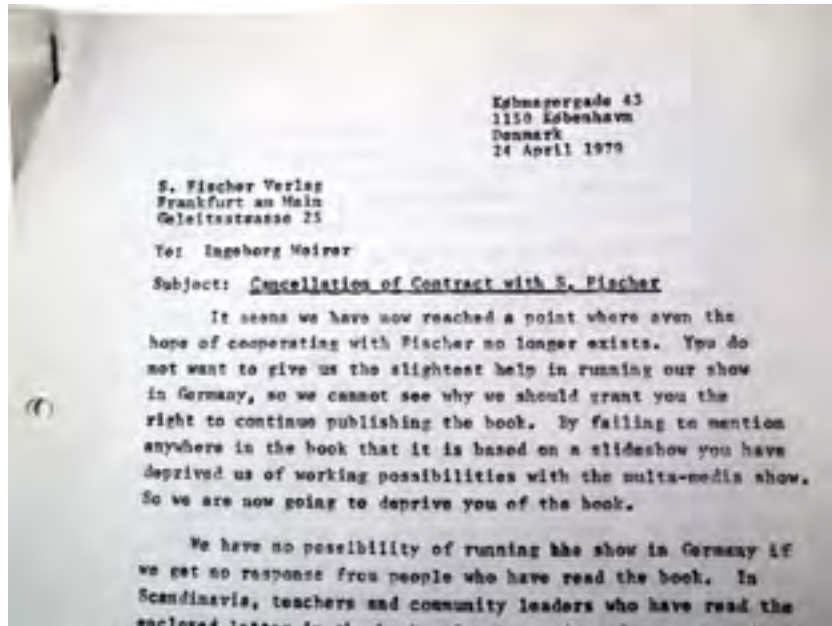


It was packed every time we presented the show at Berlin's Akademie Der Künste and like here at the Kant Kino, where I now began to equate Tony Harris with myself, as you can see from the sign. But it was humiliating for my black "barefoot presenters" each time to be stripped to the socks by the racist East German border guards.

(After the election of Reagan, we now had a warm collaboration about a republishing of the book in a whole series of countries.)

Later Fischer Verlag sold the book to Der Spiegel, which reprinted large parts of it as a serial - printed in color for the first time in the magazine's history - which, however, did not contribute to the book's best-selling success, as fortunately there was a magazine strike in the weeks when "my" Spiegel issues appeared.

One day Gribin proudly showed me how the Soviets had stolen my book from Der Spiegel and printed it in their biggest Russian newspaper, Izvestia - which landed me in prison. Because when Kitte and I went to Africa in 1982 to hand over money to schools for refugee children from Mozambique, we had to fly over Moscow. On the long trip to Maputo, Russian sailors recognized me from the articles in Izvestia, which made them pour so much vodka into us throughout the trip that we remember nothing of what went wrong on arrival, except that we couldn't seem to stand upright and ended up in jail instead of - as invited guests of honor - in the government palace.



The culmination of my endless attempts to stop the book in Germany was my termination of the contract with Fischer Publishers on all sorts of grounds, such as that the book had no merit when it was not being used to support our struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

The meaning of it all

In the same way, it annoys me that Gribin had such a devastating influence on the cinema film "American Pictures", which the film director Ebbe Preisler had already started in 1976. For this purpose, he founded the company Holdt-Preisler Film, but since I had now gone to war with Per Kofod to stop the book, I also felt that I had to gain full control over the film myself, in order to possibly stop it worldwide on the same grounds. I therefore engaged in a similar, but less dramatic, showdown with the sweet, but obviously uncomprehending Preisler to get the film into the American Pictures' Africa Foundation. This was not legally possible, but it meant that we now had to finance it ourselves with the large income that came in from the book for the first three years, but which then quickly dwindled when I stopped it. But the money belonged to the Africa Funds and could not be transferred to other companies.

I allowed myself to do that anyway, believing that the film would soon pay for itself, and then the money could be returned. The idea was that the film would continue to raise money for Africa after we moved to the US, I thought.

Although the cinema film was shot (on an expensive Krass camera) by unpaid volunteers in my personal bedroom and edited by myself in the living room, while the audience watched the show in the theater next door, it ended up costing us over 1 million kroner. Again, I took pride in doing everything myself and sat day in and day out struggling with hundreds of miles of audio and film tape at the Steenbeck cutting table while the show ran so loud, I couldn't hear my own sound. Then I sat for weeks in labs in Stockholm, cutting the negative films down to just five miles, which I light corrected. But since the film was finished in this slow way only after Reagan and the new conservative zeitgeist had taken over the minds, all the money was wasted. Its four-hour length was unsellable in the cinemas, so we had to take over the Alexandra Cinema ourselves and let our unpaid barefoot employees show it continuously from eight in the morning until midnight in a desperate attempt to recoup the money lost. It's not unknown for movie projects to lose money, but the losers here were our projects in Africa - and many years after myself when the rightwing paper Weekendavisen to portray myself as greedy ran a sensational article about how I had illegally moved Africa money around between companies. However, the 600,000 DKK lost in the Africa Fund was exactly the same amount as the film lost. But no one would have complained if the film, like the book, had made millions as expected.

Still, we had reason to be proud of the projects, and in my case especially of our very last contribution before the money ran out. Because we did actually make a hospital and a nursing school in Angola for refugees from Namibia's apartheid, which I helped to fund with the EU and IBIS for the freedom movement SWAPO. In this way, my naive childhood dream of building a jungle hospital like Albert Schweitzer came true after all, without me having to degrade myself by getting the slightest help from a totalitarian regime. For the woman behind the hospital later became the first Minister of Health of liberated and democratic Namibia, Libertina Amathila, who wrote of the help in her memoirs.



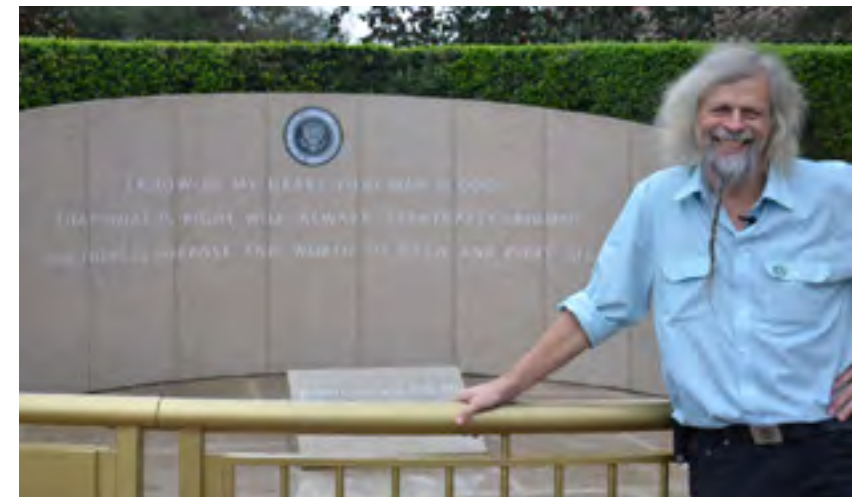
Disappointed that Reagan, after Carter from 1981, led the US back to the anti-democratic policies that had shaped so much of my generation's anti-Americanism, I immediately set about reprinting the book in many countries.

In addition to Reagan's support for death squads and counterrevolutionaries in Central America, which started the continuing waves of violence against which the United States today must build walls, his bloody trail elsewhere in the world also led up to today's problems. In addition to his support with weapons for Saddam Hussein, including chemical gases against the Kurds, he also helped Zia to power in Pakistan and encouraged him to embrace Islamic conservatism and Sharia law in order to win the support of the peasantry for his military dictatorship - the Sharia that has curtailed women's freedom in that country ever since. Worst for me, against the wishes of the Congressional majority, was his support for South Africa's bloody apartheid regime, which nearly killed Kitte and me during our work to smuggle documents for the ANC.

When I met Reagan in Miami in 1972, everyone considered him such a ridiculous outsider, that I could sit in the front row, as shown in the photo, and harangue him about his racist claim that "America has the best health in the world," when I had already seen enough untreated disease among poor blacks. But precisely by being the first since the Civil Rights struggle to use "coded racism" under his Southern strategy, he was able to later defeat Carter, who as a Democrat had won in every Southern state. His one-eyed ideological blindness also eventually had consequences for blacks. When, after continued progress for blacks, he cut the tax rate for the rich that had created relative equality in my vagabond years, inequality immediately exploded. When I made American Pictures in the '70s, for example, every white owned six times as much as every black. Today, they own 20 times as much as every black.

The extent to which his pitch-black footprints lead up to today's problems can also be shown by the fact that the solar panels Carter had put up on the White House to personally meet the necessary climate targets he set in his Global 2000 Report were taken down by Reagan immediately after the election.

That there are consequences when people choose short-term populism is something we are seeing very strongly today. When the government's own scientists published the world's first climate report on August 22, 1981, predicting everything we know today about sea level rise and future disasters, Reagan simply scrapped it and hired the most reactionary people in the EPA to step up the fossil fuel extraction which Carter had tried to curtail.



All this infuriated my students when we demonstrated together against Reagan. But conversely, it helped make my show such a success on campuses that even Reagan's own speechwriter demanded "equal time" after my lectures to present the government's views.

But we have to reconcile with all our enemies, and my neo-liberal friend Søren Pind (Danish Attorney general) helped me do that when he took me to Reagan's memorial and pointed out the only thing Reagan and I had in common: "I know in my heart that man is good, that what is right will always eventually triumph, and there is purpose and worth to each and every life." Ronald Reagan. Thank you, Søren Pind, because no one is happy in the long run by seeing enemies in their fellow human beings, and I can see with some hesitation that Reagan was not that for me - the man who made my life a success ... after Carter had stolen my success.



International solidarity was beginning to fade, and in protest against the rise of racism in the 80s, the blacks came up with the idea that we should all go dressed as the Ku Klux Klan to the world premiere of the film in the Alexandra Bio.

And the initiator, Carsten Nørgaard - who many years later flew home to attend my 60th birthday party and is now Denmark's consul in Namibia - has since confirmed that the hospital would not have happened without our support.

In present-day money, we ended up sending about 800,000 kroner to the projects, but as my expected big book money dwindled to almost nothing, it's easy to see from the accounts that it was money I and the other travelling "barefoot revolutionaries" raised on our own by hard honest work on the road. It is also easy to see that if, like normal companies in the gradually less altruistic and more liberal spirit of the times, we had been paid proper wages, had proper cars (we ended up, as mentioned earlier, driving 17 VW buses into the ground, each purchased for under \$3,000, and became Falck's (Danish AAA) biggest customers) and had hotel accommodation rather than free accommodation with private individuals or in often freezing cars, we would have ended up with a staggering deficit instead.

Although the idealism of the five African American barefoot presenters, who received only \$50 per showing, and our Danish-French office staff, who lived on welfare benefits, was high, the relatively modest results in Africa raise the question for me whether it was all a form of exploitation for the benefit of one white man's ego project, despite our joint democratic decision-making.



While Tony, Harb, Jerry or Howie stood in the office and showed the show through the wall to the audience, I sat in the lobby and edited and mixed almost as many miles of film and audiotape as I had hitchhiked to create the film.



After the liberation of Namibia, these twins, Candy and Selma, told me that both their parents had been massacred by apartheid South Africa's soldiers during the liberation struggle and only by fleeing up to Kwanza Zul in Angola, which I had supported financially, did they save their lives. It was a great moment for me, after so many years of lecturing with *American Pictures* without really knowing if it really changed the racism in the minds of the audience. Here I suddenly saw a meaning to it all. At least *American Pictures* had helped save lives.

But also, whether internally we really represented anything groundbreaking new with our sexist division of labor, when it was exclusively black men who took both the toil and the pleasure out on Europe's stages, while white women did the tedious office work at home organizing the tours. This was by no means intentional, however, as everyone who joined the venture came into it by chance after seeing the show and knowing its purpose. No one - not even Arab drug addicts or prison inmates, whom we successfully helped to rehabilitate by giving them shelter and something to live for - was turned away. And since then, when most of the work collective's ten black men and white women moved to the United States with the show in 1982, the show was actually carried on in Europe by white Americans - both men and women.

For most of the volunteers, it had been a learning and happy period, during which they started families and had children, and from which they later benefited as writers, professors, educators and workshop leaders on ghetto and minority issues. By the time we gathered in Copenhagen for our tenth anniversary in 1987, we had become a huge family, with 22 having come together as couples and by then produced eight children.



This is the work to build the dormitories we funded in Nyafaru for the refugee children returning from Mozambique after years of guerrilla fighting against apartheid rule in Zimbabwe. On the right is the wish list for Kite and me from the Batsiranai farm, which 800 former guerrillas had been given by the Mugabe government, but without farm machinery and tractors. We fulfilled their wish by sending everything through the Danish Embassy.

Irrigation layout 100 ha	89,500
Capital Equipment	
Tractor, 70 hp	24,000
Plough	
Roller	
5 row planter	
Annual	
Pip sprayer	1,200
50 headlocking cattle	7,750
12 pigs	5,000
17,000 Eucalyptus per year	15,000
1 mallet	2,200
Planting 15 km	5,000
Transport	30,000
Irrigation layout for year	10,500
	87,650
	30,000
	17,000
	15,000
	87,650

We had been going so fast in our common belief that we could change the world that it was probably only when I gathered them all again in Denmark for my 60th birthday in 2007 that most people realized during my presentation what good results we had actually achieved in Africa. Here I also invited the barefoot criminal sellers of my book from America's black ghettos, the travelling presenters of the show and even some of those who had built the projects in Africa, to a several day celebration in the huge exhibition halls in Øksnehallen around my photo exhibition "The Ghetto in Our Hearts."

So yes, I had made the biggest mistake of my life by giving the evil empire too much power over my life and the lives of others - and thereby betraying my fundamental belief in the best in human beings.



As part of our collective, we had a very special person living with us for a week in 1979. It was President Carter's "human rights envoy", Dr Charles Pinderhughes, pictured left, whom Carter had sent to South Africa to put pressure on the apartheid regime by acting as a psychiatrist to evaluate the mental state of the many political prisoners. In fact, he came directly to us from there and recounted his harrowing impressions for us. As one of America's leading black psychiatrists, I also had him evaluate the text of my new film script on whether it would be good enough for use in the United States. He called it "a masterpiece." It was this script with his notes - blue-stamped by Carter's own representative - which I teasingly handed over to Nick Gribin. I later found out that Nick sent it all the way up to KGB top boss Andropov, whom he had led to believe that in me they had their most important weapon against Carter. Andropov - the "Butcher of Budapest" and the Prague Invasion - of whom Reagan (the Butcher of Angola and South Africa) said, "It takes two of us to dance tango", became the second last leader of the Soviet Union before Gorbachev.



The permanent collective of the Ubuntu House in the first years from 1977-1982, front from left Tony, I and Jerry. In the back, Elisabeth, Vibeke, Jean, Dominique and Howie. I think Harp was in prison that day.



The Arab addict, David, on the left, was drug-free all the time he lived with us. It was he who always laughingly showed the love booklet - in which I had received 10,000 kroner from the "Russians", as we called Nick Gribin - to guests so that no one could be in any doubt that we were infested by the Communist countries. Dominique from France (right) was our permanent secretary, even after we moved to the US.

I had failed to listen to the forces of goodness around me who believed in my work and tried to protect me from my inner shadows. I had failed by not drawing my nearest and more earthly Sancho Panzas sufficiently into my lonely struggle against the imagined dangerous windmills of a great power, thereby slaughtering in the process my own Rosinante nag, whom I should have rode on out in the world along with with my "Wandering Barefoot Knights" to take up the fight against all evil and witchcraft. Like the idealist Don Quixote in my madness, I had surrendered to the supreme power in his words, "he who believes that the state of things in this world can be changed believes something he ought not to believe."

Yet my abysmal failings could not stifle the youthful and infectious idealism that together carried us forward into the world of reality and thereby inspired others too. For many spectators in our Ubuntu House theater later told me that the experience of seeing us - children, adults, blacks, browns, whites, Jews, Arabs, two right wingers, several socialists, a single communist and myself as a lone centrist social democrat - living and working together in happy harmony was as great as the experience of the show itself. Our diverse community's belief in life and a world of opportunity was necessary to give ourselves identity and our lives and work meaning.

Sadly, racism in Denmark first broke out in the open at the same time as we left Denmark. This happened with an attack on asylum center near Copenhagen and physical attacks on the refugees I had started to house myself in our now empty premises in the Ubuntu House. And ever since, as we all know, things have gone downhill. But in this new age of racism, there was no longer any interest in my product at home, while Americans began to use it as one of the most important and effective means of combating racism - that is, of changing attitudes. This meant that for the next 30 years I had the longest track record of any lecturer in American universities.

Now, in my old age, I have returned to my homeland, which I refuse to give up on completely. So in the premises where we in the working collective lived together in Købmagergade and where the show ran for ten years as the longest-running show in Danish history, the integration work continues.



For 10 years, we presented the show for 90 schoolchildren every day during the day, and to the same number of adults in the evening. At midnight, up to 66 Arab refugees rushed in to clear all the chairs and fight for a sleeping space on the floor of the auditorium. During the years I traveled in the United States, the young Jewish idealist Maia Feldman stood alone woman with all these Arab men - no problem. It was Maia who, in 1983, filled the house with PLO prisoners just released from Israeli jails. Today, she is back in the Ubuntu House, working on building bridges between Jews and Muslims.



The large audiences immediately became a challenge for us, as the Kodak Carousels of the time had never been used in practice as here in Oslo Concert Hall for 1400 spectators and in the USA for up to 2000. Multimedia shows were used as permanent installations in museums but were unknown in the USA. Especially a travelling slide shows with over 3000 images in 40 trays that had to be changed every six minutes. Today, bright video projectors are not a problem, but back then we only had 250 W halogen bulbs. They popped incessantly as we projected through the four heavy tele lenses onto huge cinema screens or onto the homemade 24-yard-long, 12-yard-high screen of table paper that the janitors had to build in advance in schools. We wrote to the organizers that "it must be so dark that you dare to take the film of your first wedding or of your first-born out of the camera in there." Still, few schools lived up to the requirements, and we always spent a good part of the show crawling around the ribs high above the students in the gymnasiums to seal the windows with our brought rolls of black horticultural plastic. Often the lighting conditions were so hopeless that my black co-workers immediately upon arrival called Falck (AAA), who covered the entire building with tarps in record time. In the US, things got a little easier as most performances were in closed auditoriums at night, and I got the American Kodak Carousel boosted to provide 30 percent more light.



From April 22nd 1976 in a school in my hometown. The first three years I could only afford three projectors and a fade on one screen.

Today, the premises house the Ubuntu House with dialogue and fellowship between Jews and Muslims/Palestinians, bridging and helping people of hate and pain, feminist rebellion against male imams in our women's mosque and bridge building between blacks, whites, browns and yellows from all over the world etc.

So maybe a little came out of "American Pictures" after all. Despite my frustrating struggle against my own book, it did bear some human fruit - not least for my own family.



– Because we put so much effort into fighting the apartheid system back then - the South Africa Committee also held meetings in our house - it is a particular pleasure today at the Ubuntu House to have had Mandela's daughter, South Africa's ambassador, Zindzi Mandela, as patron of our diverse house, named after Nelson Mandela's Ubuntu concept, "I am by virtue of you being something." And so, it is as if the ring has finally ended, and some of what we fought for has finally succeeded after all. In the group photo, I am seen to the right of Zindzi Mandela. And on the far left is my son, Daniel, who had just returned from a hitchhiking trip through free South Africa - the country I was banned from during the years of the anti-apartheid struggle.



I find the pictures here a bit funny, as they appear one right after the other on my filmstrip photographed on the same walkway over to the Mermaid Theatre from my apartment. At left Majbrit, no longer so enthusiastic after Poland, and at right Vibeke the day after.



Vibeke and Kitte became instant bosom friends during the time they lived together in the Ubuntu House and travelled with my ex-wife "black Annie" and Tony in Africa. Kitte died after a long illness in 2016 and we had a funeral memorial for her in the Ubuntu House. As the woman who had gifted me both my book success and my nuclear family after a whimsical life, I owed her everything and wept as I carried the coffin out of the church.

For when I had to return home from Poland in 1977, untimely after my unsuccessful attempt to "integrate" with both Majbrit and the top of the Polish Communist Party, I met a replacement for my lost girlfriend already the next day. This happened when Kitte Fennestad, rejoicing at my return, took me to an art opening at Gallery Arnesen. There I saw the most beautiful young girl pouring wine for the guests and could see that she was just as eager to meet me. I still remember the thought that immediately overwhelmed me: "There stands the woman who will be the mother of your children, and it doesn't matter whether you are sexually compatible or not, because she radiates all the love, goodness and gentleness you have always been looking for but have yet to find." I had always imagined that only in America would I find a compatible spouse - at first I thought it would be among the blacks and was on paper still married to a black, later more realistically among the Jews, who were always the ones I swung best with - but now in meeting Vibeke I felt that she represented something domestic I had long missed - something archetypally Nordic, but without the "coolness" that made me feel like an alienated hick among Copenhagen's intellectual women.

So Vibeke and I immediately started flirting with each other over the loud-mouthed "intellectual" guests, but Kitte noticed and became jealous when, after our long collaboration on the book, she felt that I was her personal invention - the ugly duckling who could only behave on the marbled floors in her authoritative company without clumsily destroying our joint bookwork. I've never really made a move on women I'm attracted to, and I was far too shy to go over and talk to Vibeke. So, to my huge annoyance, Kitte yanked me away from the gallery long before the opening was over, and I felt like I'd missed out on one of the biggest opportunities of my life. In my irritation I told Kitte I had a headache and wanted to go home. But late into the night I wandered the streets alone anyway, and at midnight trickled into Café Sommersko. There, at the railing to the stairs, I got into conversation with a driving instructor, Erik Grøndahl, about my new book, which he had read, and suddenly, as if by a miracle, Vibeke, who knew him, stood behind me and joined in the conversation with the first words I heard her say: "I've read your book."

I was immediately hooked and asked her at closing time if she wanted to go to one of the then few open nightclubs, Charlie Brown, where we danced wildly until five in the morning. As we walked home across the bridge, I said a polite goodbye with a "I'm going that way home to Ny Vestergade, but I hope to see you again." It was as if Vibeke's whole heart sank in her enormous disappointment when she said, "All alone?" That answer, of course, was what I was hoping for, but since I always have a bit of a tendency to want to put off the best until later - if only for fear of doing the wrong thing - this reaction was as natural to me as when we got home and I took Vibeke to my housemate next door, Kristin Urup's big bed and told her she wasn't home, "so you're welcome to spend the night there." Again, Vibeke's heart sank so low in her abdomen that I had to take pity on her and take her into my own bed.



This picture is from when Vibeke moved into the collective in 1978. For she made herself immensely precious, and it took a whole year of persuasion before she gave in to "the polar bear", as she called me, since I am not the best at showing affection. But suddenly, to my happy surprise, she had moved in with Tony and the others during my first US tour. What a joyous homecoming. Beforehand we had spent so much money on cross Atlantic phone calls that we figured afterwards that she could have flown over there up to several times for the money.

To make a long story short, we both felt that we had found the love of our lives, which made Vibeke feel guilty because for five years she had been living with her fiancé Ole, whom everyone in her family expected and wanted her to marry. But in their shared enthusiasm for my book, her fiancé had been inspired by it to hitchhike around the US himself, with the result that he now lost the love of his life during his American trip, something I have always felt guilty about, even though we have been friends ever since. I myself was quite sure that after my own hitchhiking 100,000 miles search through America I had finally found the wife I had been brought up as a minister's son you should have. But I'd also learned on the road, whenever I had similar feelings, that the quickest way to find out if you really fit together for better or worse was to invite the woman out on a long hitchhiking trip. So now I had the same idea to test my relationship with Vibeke and asked her if she wanted to come to Poland.

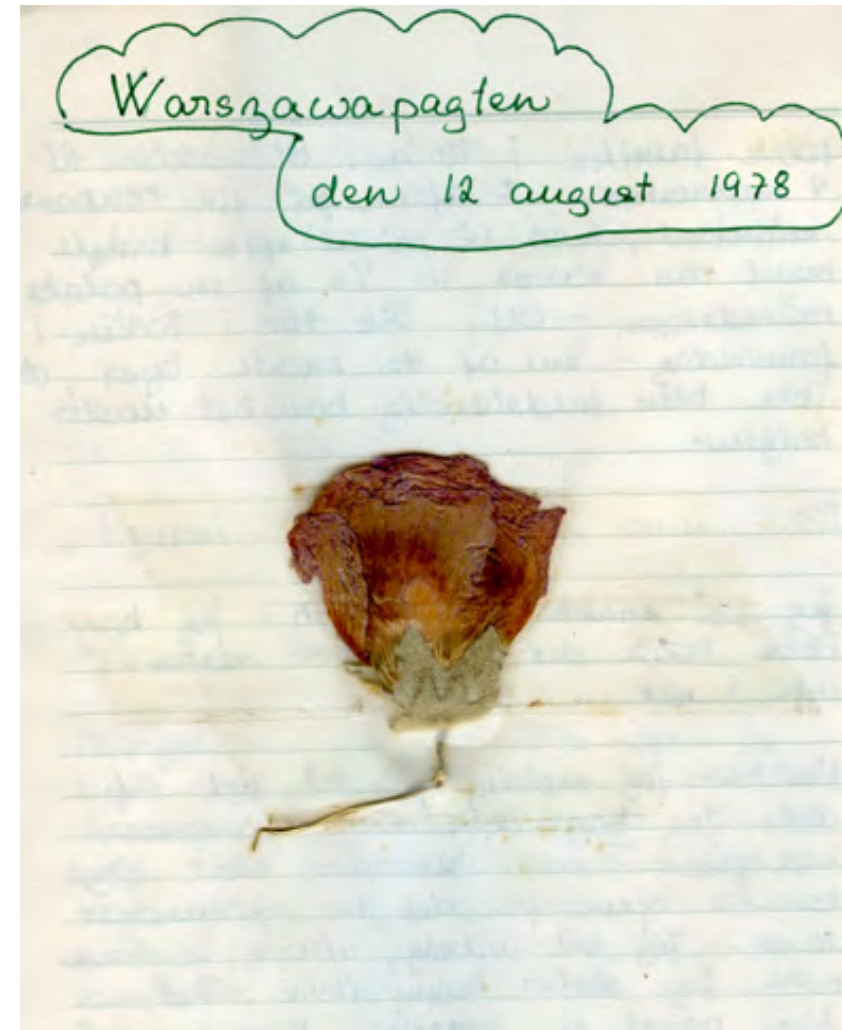
And to make sure to get it right, I took her on exactly the same journey of trials that had ruined my relationship with Majbrit: "If Vibeke makes it, then it really MUST be true love. Then we can also manage to live a long life together afterwards," I thought. And sure enough, this time it went perfectly, and when, with Majbrit's help, I had previously got the publisher in Warsaw to accept my demands, Vibeke's and my evenings with the Communist Party bosses became a little less wet and completely free of sexual abuse. They did, however, use the visit for interviews and to photograph the lovely couple together for their publicity for the book. And at the campsite in Warsaw, our relationship this time drowned not in a veritable deluge as with Majbrit, but in a lake of Cupid's arrows. For it was here that we made the decision to have a child together and signed our joint "Warsaw Pact" covering all our obligations and responsibilities in this relationship. And while the original Warsaw Pact - the one that was created as a violent forced marriage the year Vibeke was born in 1955 and was seen by my generation as something that would last forever - has long since disintegrated after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Vibeke's and my "Warsaw Pact", created in love and freedom, has now existed for a longer time than the original.

The result can be seen in our two children, our son Daniel, who at the time of writing is hitchhiking around in today's somewhat freer Russia - one of the only countries in the world whose inhabitants he had not yet had time to empathize with and understand by living privately with them. While our daughter, Lalou, is sadly behind new walls as a psychologist for traumatized Palestinian children in Gaza - where she is even under heavy Israeli bombardment at the moment - as a reminder that without empathy for those we perceive for a fleeting period as "the other" or "the enemy", new destructive walls will continually arise between people.

Thus, our children are living proof that "American Pictures," which I, in a moment of misplaced faith in how powerful and inhuman our imagined enemies can be, came close to killing, lives on in the hearts of people - at least of my children, who owe it everything. Thus, I have at last learned to integrate myself with my life's work, and do not feel that my efforts have been wholly in vain."

For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

Math 16:26



OGÓLNOKRAJOWA
SPÓŁDZIELNIA TURYSTYCZNA
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02-092 Warszawa (2)

Jeg erklærer hermed i
helt cedru tilstand at jeg
virkelig ønsker at få et
barn med Vibeke og at jeg er
indforstået med at påtage mig
bleshiftning osv. i samme omfang
som Vibeke, når det er muligt.

WARSZAWA PACTEN 12 August 1978

Jacob Holdt

I hereby declare in a completely sober state that I really want to have a child with Vibeke and that I agree to take on diaper changing etc. to the same extent as Vibeke, whenever it is possible.
The Warsaw Pact August 12th, 1978
Jacob Holdt

OGÓLNOKRAJOWA
SPÓŁDZIELNIA TURYSTYCZNA
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02-092 Warszawa (2)

Jeg erklærer hermed - i helt
cedru tilstand - at jeg - som
mange gange før ~~gjort~~ har
ytret ønske om at blive gravid
med Jacob - den internationale
isbjørn.

Warszawa den 12 august 1978.

Vibeke Rostrup Bøyesen

I hereby declare - in a completely sober state - that I - as expressed many times before - have the wish to become pregnant with Jacob - the International Polar Bear.
Warsaw, August 12th, 1978
Vibeke Rostrup Bøyesen

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Om at sige ja

Erindringer 1947-1977

Af Jacob Holdt

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