

You're in Trouble if You're Eating Your Own Seed Corn

Chris Verene interviewed by A.M. Homes

A. M. Homes: What the hell have you been up to?

Chris Verene: Continuing several projects, the largest of which is ongoing in Galesburg, Illinois. There are many friends and family up there who I visit all of the time. Sometimes it's about taking pictures and sometimes it isn't, but I'm there a lot. I might be going out to New Mexico because a couple of the people in the story have been traveling with a carnival. Whether it's Galesburg or not I just follow the stories. And when I'm not doing that I'm in New York and sometimes teaching. I rehearse with Cordero, my indie-rock/Latin-rock group, and I'm taking drum lessons. The rest of my time has been spent working on the SELF-ESTEEM SALON project. The salon scheduled for April in New York is going to be the biggest and most elaborate one. SELF-ESTEEM is going to be a book called *Self-Esteem*, which is partly derived from the actions that we've done. The general matter of the book is the way in which photographs of people can be such a positive and emotionally changing experience and why so many people have a negative experience with photography. What we're doing at most of the performances is putting people through a dramatic psychotherapeutic process that results in a portrait, which they

receive weeks later; this portrait could be hung in their home in place of a mirror. The idea is that this raises their self-esteem and changes their life in some way.

AH: Can you talk about the origin of the SELF-ESTEEM SALON—how it got started and what it means to you?

CV: With my personality as Cheri Nevers, it's really her mission to make people feel good about themselves. As Chris Verene what I can do with my photography can't be reduced to just that, which is sort of why I created an alter ego who makes it her business to create a one-to-one relationship in which someone's portrait is made and they look fantastic and they become a star and they can share that with the world. But I also see it as a talent that I'm blessed with and I want to change the world's ideas about beauty, one person at a time. And I think that by putting more photographs out into the world I am able to show beautiful people in lovely situations, to serve a greater good. This is why I work with the plus-size model industry in my fashion work.

AH: Can you talk a little bit about the importance of being a star or being made into a star or being seen?

CV: It's really not for everyone, but I do look for my target audience. A lot of times the participants are people that are photographed a lot or are known personalities, but they have some deep-rooted psychological problems with their appearance and their self, their soul. The upcoming salon is more about our staff treating the client to a lovely soul-searching experience than it is about being photographed.

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CHRISTIAN HOLSTAD & CHRIS VERENE, *THE SELF-ESTEEM SALON: THE BAPTISM SERIES*, Deitch Projects, New York, 6–20 April, 2002;
the artists in an in-home action / DER SELBSTACHTUNGS-SALON: DIE TAUFSERIE; die Künstler während einer Hausaktion.



CHRIS VERENE, *CAMERA CLUB 6*, c-print, 24 x 20" /
C-Print, 61 x 51 cm.

In the spaces we build with our shows we are able to jump right into somebody's soul and figure out whether or not they need some help or what it is that we can do for them. At the Whitney Biennial, the curators showed my *Camera Club* series. During the show, I presented the SELF-ESTEEM SALON as a corollary to the mean and manipulative men in the *Camera Club* pictures. We created a salon that was a kinder and sweeter way of making portraits of people who want to be models. We ran an ad in the *Village Voice* looking for models using the same language as the *Camera Club* men to prove that it can be dangerous to let just anyone photograph you. We felt like we could guide them and show them something about themselves that the bad side of that industry could never show.

AH: Talk to me a little bit about the importance of alter egos for you. There seems to be a need for you to have alternate personalities, like Cheri. Were you like that as a kid?

CV: I don't know when it happened. Maybe moving to a big city, being just a small kid from a small city. I can't think of any other way to be. It's also license to do things that are almost contrary to another body of work. You are like that, I think, as a writer... I don't know all of your work, but I know

that difference between *Jack* and something else. But my way, photography, is naturally a multi-media thing. Video and performed actions, all of that can be done with a different name because I can choose to make it more Chris's project than Cheri's. And it's also a question of doing something in drag or not. But as helpful as it is, it also makes it more difficult because you have to maintain the egos of these different projects.

AH: When did you first start working in drag?

CV: Well, when I was playing music in high school with my friend Benjamin (who is a subject of a documentary movie now, and everybody's heard of him), he influenced me tremendously. He was quite a bit older, was from rural Georgia and was an amazing drag queen performer, not with the trunk full of clothes, more of a kind of thrift-store drag queen. I wasn't really dressing. It's a state of mind too, more so.

AH: How do you feel when you're all tricked out?

CV: It depends on what I'm doing. My god, did you stick around for the auction at Christie's? Somebody handed me Joan Jett's guitar and asked me to carry it in front of hundreds of people. That was crazy fun! That's the kind of thing that Cheri Nevers lives for. But it can also be challenging, depending on whom you meet. When in drag, either you're the star or you're worrying if you should get out of the car at this intersection or not. It just depends. But it's hot, it's exciting, it's a different me. I'm more careful about it now, I'm not all tricked out very often.

AH: Going back to Galesburg, what's Cousin Steve up to?

CV: I guess not so much but he's there. Nothing is different since my book came out, but the family received it really well. I was so pleased. I tried to make it mine, and to make it a book that they could read and that could function as communication between us, because although they've seen lots of the pictures, there's nothing as comprehensive as that. The town newspaper did a huge story, but I haven't heard so much as a word from Steve. It's a challenge to make work about my family or people I'm very close to because they're going to see it. It's all true.

AH: Has your relationship to them changed by the public nature of the work?

CV: I'm ready for that to happen. It keeps not happening. Maybe it's just gradual. I know that my family seemed to be far more excited about having been in the local newspaper than in other newspapers. I have been even closer to them and the book has done its good work and perhaps it's get-

ting people to think about some parts of the city and the family that they might otherwise have shut out. And so on that I'm making another book.

AH: Is there any sort of internal contradiction in the sense that the work in which you're taking pictures of your friends and family is the work that makes you successful and the way success takes you farther from them, and yet it's also your link to them?

CV: I don't think that it does take me farther from them because every grant that I've written this past year, and the one that I just got Hallelujah, (a Pollock/Lee grant) has been about going back home—about having more money to stay in Galesburg for longer periods of time. I've got this new At-Risk Youth project that I want to do. I'm physically putting myself in town with my project proposals and plans. This summer I was hanging out with Travis who is older now and really starting to be a young man. Travis's half-brother and I were talking and he was like, "You know we're all kin." And I was like, "What do you mean?" And he was like, "Well, your cousin." (I call her my twin cousin, she's like my sister; we have the same birthday.) Anyway, she has two children with her husband and they are Travis's

cousins, and in Galesburg that's a big deal. Everybody lives around where their kin are and they're just on the outside of town but the thing is, the town can't even tell which side of the tracks. It's not a high-fallutin' side versus a really poor side; it's more like two middles. To find out that I have two cousins who are Travis's cousins is exciting and I feel more and more like I'm meant to be there. Really I just feel more at ease.

AH: Can you talk a little bit about the importance of narrative to your work? I'm curious about the importance to you of telling stories visually. I think what you're doing is almost like creating a novel, you're doing it in accruing images over time, almost a real time representation of passing of lives. There really are very distinct narratives and ongoing characters and interrelatedness... It is very clear that there's a cognizance of a history and what's come before, both in terms of the people you photograph and also in the history of photography. I think that that gives it a vital resonance. And as much as you're carving your own territory, you're also acknowledging what precedes it.

CV: Yeah, I think that there haven't been enough good books of photographs that tell real human stories. When I was eight, I knew that my parents had a bookshelf that was locked, I think I once told you about this.

AH: Yeah, Diane Arbus in the closet.

CV: That's the truest thing I can come up with as far as influence. Then at age ten, I think I saw Arbus's people in a pure sense. Her influence on me happened in a vacuum. Accordingly, I began to photograph my family at age 17, before I'd had any art classes or even knew any art. (Amazingly, I am now friends with Amy Arbus who worked at the recent SELF-ESTEEM SALON.) I know that I didn't try to change my work to look like other people's stuff, but later I took a workshop with Larry Clark and then later with Larry Fink. In Atlanta there's a tremendous photography art community.

AH: Do you feel a responsibility to your subjects?

CV: Yes, it's a constant thing, especially in terms of publishing and doing things that are more permanent. With the Galesburg work I feel that in order to get really complex parts of people's lives I have to actually be part of that with them. I can't fly into downtown Seattle and photograph some bedraggled, scary young teenage kids and try to tell their story, for example. But if I am in someone's life—and am planning to be for the present and future—I feel like from that point I can tell their story, whether it's

VERENI THE GREAT, JAILBREAK, 2001, Galesburg, Illinois /
VERENI DER GROSSE, GEFÄNGNISAUSBRUCH.



joyful or sorrowful, but I have to be committed to how they feel about it. I have to be committed to showing up and coming back to visit. I can't be a flaky relative, a flaky friend. I have to be a pen pal. But on the other hand there's a real balance with some people as far as not messing with the equilibrium of their world; I have to know when to say when. And I'm very, very careful about that. But in a lot of my work, some of it published and some of it not, there's mental illness and some very difficult situations and family troubles. I couldn't do that unless I was absolutely a part of it and committed to it, which is why it has to be art.

AH: You've also talked a lot about wanting to make a difference in people's lives. Can you talk a little bit more specifically about this, even in relation to what you're just saying now about keeping the balance but also trying to be a positive force and how the images that you're making help you to do that?

CV: Well, I don't always know when I'm successful in helping to change someone's life for the better, but I'm always trying. So it's not as if I have a list of accomplishments. I've been working with my friend Rosie Hendricks in Galesburg, who had been in the research hospital for a long time and had not been a participating person in the city. When it closed and she began her life in Galesburg she was a person of very little means and wasn't able to take on the world and get a job somewhere and suddenly have a life. She had to kind of carve her way through the city and find people that she could rely on, not for help so much, but for a life for herself without the help of an institution. So this is someone who is on the borderline between being able to live in the world and not. And my point of going on round Rosie is that I can't promise her things, but I can be a real friend.

AH: Where's Rosie right now?

CV: With the book coming out I thought there might be tumultuous change, and there wasn't so much. She likes being in it. She appeared in one of the local newspapers and that was nice. She's the woman who waves to everyone in the street and people think that she's really nuts, but she really does know who they all are; she's watched them for years. She has either the bike or the cart. When the *New York Times Magazine* asked to do a piece about one of my Galesburg people, I was very reluctant, but they did interview her for a full-page "What They Were Thinking" piece with my recent photograph of her with the cart. And Rosie talked about trying to build a reputation and respect in this

town and the sort of quiet journey that she's been on. She gets welfare checks and does volunteer work to help people that she finds less fortunate than herself. So, it really changed her and part of the city in a way. People who would have really bad-mouthed her and said, "Oh that dirty old lady," suddenly found that things are not always what you prejudge them to be. That's just a tiny but great example of what I'm trying to do. I think that the At-Risk Youth program is trying to really do social work as artwork.

AH: Talk about that a bit.

CV: Well, in small-town or small-city culture, if there's nothing for the kids to do, they will still do stuff. But you can't get served in a restaurant in Galesburg after dark if you're younger than eighteen years old. You can go in and sit down and blend in, but almost no servers will wait on you because the restaurants are tired of kids hanging out in their restaurants. So it's just a glass ceiling or a glass wall as the case may be. And something should be done, but it's invisible like prejudice or racism. It's working in action. Galesburg has a huge Hispanic population that's marginalized and almost never seen. And it has a really sizable young black family population that's all working and doing stuff, but it's the young people that mix those groups and hang out and do things together and it's the young people who will inherit the city. Unfortunately, the city ignores young people and won't sponsor community centers and even the churches aren't doing enough. If your parents don't have it together to even run much of a life, they certainly aren't going to get you into a church group. There was a proposed ordinance in downtown, a comic book ban. It is thought that the sale of comic books encourages gatherings of kids downtown, and that this could lead to a criminal element.

AH: What's the population of Galesburg?

CV: About 30,000. It's concentrated in the middle and it spreads out to the farm community; it feels smaller than that, and there aren't any other big cities nearby. There's an expression that is driving my new work: "You're in trouble if you're eating your own seed corn." People aren't really doing that, but in certain times in history they have been hungry enough to eat the seed that they needed to plant or they would eat it because they were doing so prosperously, because they were going to have a great year next year, and so on. And in shunning the youth and the way the prejudices are working with businesses and jobs and industry, they are eating their own seed corn. People are very

proud of Galesburg; it's historic homes; it's the birthplace of Carl Sandburg, but it's all teeny tiny. And those houses can get broken windows in a week; you know what I mean? Not vandalism on purpose, but metaphorically speaking.

AH: So what kind of art practice would be social work?

CV: There are several proposed things to do: music shows (even though it's for one night, it starts to change the idea of the community when you have good things happen downtown with kids); an art show in town with poetry and writing by young people; and a show of my photographs. An extension of the At-Risk Youth project is to take teens on field trips to see the world.

AH: In one of the things that I was reading about the SELF-ESTEEM SALON you said, "Anyone can succeed in life if you work hard on believing in yourself." That notion goes back to your idea of why it will help people's lives and change

people's lives, but there also seems to be a fairy-tale element, in the best sense of a fairy tale, not negative. Like the good witches, if you work hard and brush your teeth, good things will happen for you.

CV: Doing things that are for a wide audience, I think a lot about maxims and slogans. In my spare time and in my private time, I'm not necessarily such an acute and round optimist. But Cheri always is. You won't catch Cheri not being that. But overall, I believe in the power of positive thinking and I believe, as simple as it sounds, that pre-visualizing things can help them happen. It's not necessarily true for all. But I do see places where I could do some good. Not to preach to the converted. For example, Los Angeles needs a SELF-ESTEEM SALON. It's a big city but I'm going to find those people and I'm going to get them into my tent and I'm going to whip them into shape, as much as I can.

ROZIE AND HER MOTHER IN THE BURGER KING ON
HER MOTHER'S BIRTHDAY.



CHRIS VERENE, UNTITLED (FROM
GALESBURG), 1997, c-print edition, 24 x 20"/
OHNE TITEL (AUS GALESBURG),
C-Print-Edition, 61 x 51 cm.