

WAITING FOR BETTER TIMES

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ANTWERP

(Ryan Rivadeneyra)

Excerpt of performance in Antwerp in March, 2010, for the festival “Sugary Photographs with Tricks, Poses, and Effects”

The circumstance on which my story rests was suggested in casual conversation. It was commenced partly as a source of amusement, and partly as an expedient for exercising any untried resources of mind. Other motives were mingled with these as the work proceeded. I am by no means indifferent to the manner in which whatever moral tendencies exist in the sentiments or characters it contains shall affect the viewer; yet my chief concern in this respect has been limited to the avoiding the enervating effects of art of the present day and to the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue. The opinions which naturally spring from the character and situation of the hero are by no means to be conceived as existing always in my own conviction; nor is any inference justly to be drawn from the following stories as prejudicing any philosophical doctrine of whatever kind.

Up until about 6 months ago, I wouldn't have been able to point out Antwerp on a map I knew it was somewhere in the middle of Europe, in one of those wealthy Central European countries, but which one? I immediately did a Wikipedia search and a Google maps search and was instantly intrigued. I clicked on the “Photos” option in Google maps to see all the Flickr and Panoramio images uploaded by people, people like you and me. It didn't take long for me to come across an enigmatic image, titled “Waiting for better times”, taken by someone who goes by the nickname “Minderbinder”. At first, it seemed so sad, so funny, and so poetic, all at once.



Was it with complete irony that Minderbinder would use this title in times like these, during the greatest world financial crisis in generations? It seemed like such a simple gesture, possibly an act of protest, to just sit and wait for better times. Or maybe that was Minderbinder's boat capsized in the Scheldt, and he was simply waiting for a sunny day when the tides are high so he can sail around, here and there. Why did Minderbinder want the world to see this particular photograph out of all the photographs that one can take, and show?

I kept looking around and found another picture, titled “Antwerp”. It is a shot taken from under a bridge and showing a generic, central European street. There are posters for the Kinerotic festival that will take place on the 3rd of February, it is a cloudy day. The photograph was taken by a Niccolo Machiavelli, the prince himself. Why did he title this “Antwerp”? Was this his perception of an entire city, this one shot of a scene under a bridge?

I became more and more intrigued with the city, and how couldn't I be, with that beautiful name repeating over and over in my head: Antwerp, Anvers, Amberes, Antwerpen. It sounded to me like an exotic pudding, or a dance style from the fifties. Antwerp, music to my ears! Without a tangible reference, I started dreaming about an entire city and culture, trying to put together a puzzle of assumptions and stereotypes to compose the most complete picture possible. This place would be Europe at it's best, at it's most glorious! I imagined walking and wailing through its streets, seeing hundreds of years of history with my bare eyes. At first I imagined Antwerp full of Caryatid columns, those Greek female-figure sculptures that would carry tons and tons of stone on their back. Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian columns would have never existed here, oh no! Instead of having anonymous Greek faces, they would have the beautiful northern European visages of Belgian Royalty. They were so common and abundant that they eventually were used as stumps to lock your bike to. I would walk around the city with my head high, to capture every detail possible and try to retain those images, and repeat them over and over. My pupils dilated and in a state of frenzy, I pictured a hodgepodge of architectural styles around and upon me. I imagined a city that had it all, monument after monument, representation after representation of European past glories. Just as I thought, Antwerp is a melting pot of cultures and ethnicities, kind of like a Benetton ad. It is as monumental as it is both humble and luxurious; I imagined it containing architecture of all styles from all periods of all cultures. As the Greek columns would disappear, domes and minarets would spring up like popcorn. Modern buildings would have flying buttresses, gothic cathedrals would have

Byzantine mosaics, the decorative nature of Islamic architecture would interrupt the blank facades of modernist structures. The simplistic design philosophies behind Bauhaus buildings would be combined with the pastel art-deco colors of Miami Beach. It would almost be like a European Las Vegas, with replicas of world famous buildings composing the skyline along the Scheldt. Eiffel would have designed many bridges for crossing the river. Ancient Greek architect Iktinus had designed a replica of the Parthenon to stand next to city hall, Isidorus and Arthemios put the Hagia Sophia in the main park, and Frank Lloyd Wright custom-fit another falling water house to decorate the port area. This relatively small central European city turned out to be more exotic than the medina of Istanbul, more imperial and classic than Vienna, and more design-savvy than Stockholm itself.



The more I looked into these modern buildings that were slumped up against the older, more elaborate and decorative architecture, the more I seemed to question their ideology of function over form. What exactly was their function? Well, I think I figured it all out: it's making money. Money and modernism go hand in hand. In my hometown of Miami, Florida, there is a saying that goes: mo-mo, mo-mo. Meaning: more money more modernism. How can a couple of planks of metal resting on a few sticks cost so much money? I'll tell you how: Belgium and the European Union.

In the past twenty years Brussels has become the capital of, say, the world. Not London, not Berlin, not New York, not Tokyo or even Beijing. Fucking Brussels! It came outta nowhere! Anyways, this is where all the European tax money goes to, to then get distributed back around Europe to the places that need it most, lets say, Greece or something. I have to say, I think this was a good decision on the part of the leaders of our world. Belgium is a place where people dance at least fifteen centimeters apart from each other,

and bellybuttons are sacred and may never ever touch- so that's a good thing when it comes to money; imagine the financial capital of the European Union in, say, southern Italy or Spain? No fucking way! If you can't get the Germans to manage your money, give it to the Belgians. So once you have money, the main thing you have to do is show it off, like you would show off newly purchased jewelry and then be embarrassed for it days later. Except this time it's summer and your perfume combined with your sweat leaves a green mark around your neck. So I say, show it off by throwing up some modernist buildings all over your town, to dazzle the local and foreign population with these marvels of engineering ingenuity. The fact is, Belgium is the moneymaker, money taker, and money distributor of Europe, and whoever parts the parts usually gets the best part, right?

A prominent historical figure I encountered during my research is William I of Orange. He is the liberator of the Dutch people from Spanish rule, just like Manuel Belgrano for Argentina or Simon Bolivar for Venezuela. More importantly, William I was an inspiration for one of my heroes, General George Washington. After several years in power he was assassinated, just like another one of my heroes, Abraham Lincoln. His killer was captured and brutally tortured and killed. Here I am quoting directly from Wikipedia because I probably couldn't imagine a more brutal and hilarious death: "his right hand should be burned off with a red-hot iron, his flesh should be torn from his bones with pincers in six different places, he should be quartered and disemboweled alive, his heart should be torn from his bosom and flung in his face, and finally, his head should be cut off."

One of William's favorite pastimes was hunting. He had acres and acres of land where he was the only one allowed to hunt in, and he would travel to the hillside fields every other weekend to shoot up a storm. He was a great hunter.

So one day William of Orange goes out to hunt some rabbit, right? He leaves his log cabin and grabs his best rifle and a half-smoked Cohiba. He starts strolling through the forest, slowly making his way to this sweet spot only he knows about where the most beautiful rabbit hang around. Everything seems normal in the beginning, but today is a different day for him. Today, instead of thinking about a nice kill, he is thinking about love. He finds a spot in the shade by a large rock, and takes off his heavy boots. He leans the loaded rifle on the rock beside him, folds his hands behind his head, and looks to the sky.



"I know what love is", William of Orange says. "Love is a feeling. Love is the feeling you have when you have no need to analyze your feelings; you only have love when you completely forget that love exists. Me, I had love when I was smoking my Cohiba and walking with my rifle, but I stopped having love once I sat here by this rock and started thinking about love. Is it possible to think about love and hunt at the same time?"

So William of Orange decides he's gonna do an experiment. He is going to try and hunt, and think about love the whole time. He puts on his boots, grabs his gun, and sets off on another walk. This time he strolls much slower, ruffling his feet through the fallen leaves and looking up to the sky. He tries his best to think about love. He then sees a rabbit, points, shoots, and kills it. He takes it back to his log cabin.

So, Barcelona and Antwerp are sister cities. They've been like that since 1997, the same year my young-

est sister was born, so it's almost like Antwerp is my sister, and we all know that if you like it or not, sisters are forever. You can't choose your family, right? So I tried to think why, what makes them sister cities. Sisters tend to have similar facial characteristics, like Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen, or Tia and Tamara, so I figured there must be some similarities between the two cities, and also major differences.

The one thing that's most different is probably the most important thing in my, and I dare say, all of our lives: the weather. For Barcelona, the average temperature for the 20th of March is a high of 16 and a low of 7 degrees. For Antwerp, the average high is around 9 and the low is at 2 degrees: that's a 6-degree difference! So in order to attempt to raise the average temperature of the city of Antwerp, I filled a balloon with air from Barcelona. I will then take it to Antwerp to release it, raising the average temperature of the city by 0,0009 degrees. As I release it, think about the sexy Spanish air molecules that will unite with the air molecules of the city. As you inhale your next breath, think about that little piece of Spain that will soon be inside you, that will soon contribute to your well-being. This air was once part of Barcelona, but it was also once part of me, passing through my respiratory system, providing my blood with the oxygen molecules needed for survival, and then going back into the this air that we share. As you breathe your next breathe, think of how you and I are coming together. A piece of me is going inside you, and we are making life. Thank you. You're welcome.

So it was extremely hard for me to really conceive the city without actually being there, no matter how much research I did. All I could think about was Baroque architecture, fashionable people, and flamenco. So I decided to go over in October to see it for myself, for two days and one night and without telling anyone. I considered the possibilities of accidentally running into Minderbinder, or Niccolo Machiavelli, and how great that would be. I hopped on a flight and made my way straight to the main square, where I encountered this woman. What was she doing with an umbrella, it wasn't even raining? I started staring at her and her eyes finally matched mine. She stayed there, freakishly still, making eye contact with me and smiling, holding her umbrella. She was soooo fashionable, was that umbrella a fashion statement? Talk about accessories! She finally approached me, and in a perfect central European English accent, she said, "Is this your first time in Antwerp?" "Yes", I said. "Then follow me", she said, "I will show you around, I will tell you all you need to know, I will dazzle you with curious historical facts and useless information. I will dazzle you with interesting stories about churches, alleys, and parks. I will make your eyes glow with amazement as you indulge in the curvaceous nature of central European architecture, from gothic, to baroque, to rococo, to classic, to neoclassic, and most of all, to romantic. We will dance through the medieval streets, under the autumn sun and treacherous grey sky. I see you're a Photographer; well, I will take you to the most beautiful places. You will be clickety-clacking all day long, exposing your film or your digital sensor or what have you. I will give you pure inspiration, I will be your guide." "Okay", I said. And off we went.

I eventually and inevitably fell in love with her, like a student falls in love with a teacher, or like I'd wish you all would fall in love with me. I thought of her as a great artist, and I wanted to make art just like her, touting people around here and there, helping people discover what any and all places have to offer. I wanted to be able to show, like her, the magic of pure existence, to be able to show people the simplest things, like a bicycle, or water, and have them be beautiful. At first I thought, "How dare her try and open my eyes towards new possibilities! I am an artist, I see what I want to see, and what I see tends to be better than what other people see." But she was always one step ahead of me, literally and figuratively. Instead of taking photographs, she would just point to things. No documentation, no camera, she just cut out the middleman, just like that! She pointed to the City Hall and the Guildhouses at the Grote Markt, the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekathedraal, the statue of Brabo, the Antwerp Lawcourts, the central station, and much, much more. As I spent more and more time with her, I liked her more. What was it about her? Was it that European exoticism? That foreign accent, that blonde hair, that fair skin, those long legs? A typical European queen, does everyone north of the Alps look like this? Hold on, did I like her because she kinda looked like my mom when she was young? Was this a kind of Oedipus complex thing? I really don't know, but what I do know is that she had a heart so big it didn't even fit in her chest.

So, all in all, we had a great time together.

The next day I met this other guy, his name was Christian. So me and this guy Christian are both sitting outside this coffee shop drinking some coffee. Both of us were just there, practically lying down on these very comfortable reclining armchairs typing up a storm on our fancy Mac computers. To make conversation, he blurts out something like, "You have a Mac, you must be an artist or something." I say, "How did you know I spoke English? In fact, I am an artist, and a quite good one at that, although I have many other talents and interests. For example, I love watching movies, and I'm very good at making a variety of desserts and pies from scratch, like rice pudding." "How interesting", he says. So we get to talking about all these trivial things like art, life, death, and all that kinda stuff. All of a sudden he says something crazy, quoting that one famous guy, I think it might have been Benjamin Franklin, or Descartes or something. He was like, "One really dies twice: first, when you loose your life, second, when those who remember you, loose theirs. Therefore one lives on in other peoples' memories. If you are able to make artwork so meaningful that it will always be remembered, then you will live on forever. Most artists have lived in peoples' memories longer than they lived in real life." "That's not even true", I said, "most artists make art all their lives and die lonely, long forgotten by those who once admired them. Most artists die in peoples' memory





before they're really dead. Anyways, I don't make art either for the dead or for those not yet alive, I make art for the living, and the living only. In fact, when I die I would like all documentation of my work to be destroyed along with my body. Call me selfish, but that's the way I roll." "Well, then you are quite selfish", he said. "Look", I said, "in a way, I compare my work to that of the work of the many scientists working on the Large Hadron Collider at the CERN laboratories in Switzerland. These scientists are trying to recreate the physical conditions of the universe shortly after the Big Bang. If they are successful, they will be able to decipher the most unthinkable enigmas of the origins of our universe, and thus our existence. They will know me better than I know me, and I know me pretty well. It's quite exciting and ambitious, but however, if they fail, they will create a black hole large enough to swallow the whole entire universe in a split second. It could happen at any moment, and we wouldn't even realize it happened. From one second to the other all of us could be crushed into smithereens and turned into spaghetti

or chocolate pudding. In fact, it may have already happened and we could all be in another dimension right now, a parallel dimension where I am an artist sitting in some coffee shop in Antwerp. The point I'm trying to make is that those scientists are on the verge of understanding both the physical and existential questions about life, death, and the universe, or they could screw up the universe to the point where these questions are no longer relevant. This, my friend, is exactly what I want to do with my art: Either I explain all we have to know about life, love, and death, or I will die trying." Christian smiled, "Curiosity killed the cat", he said. We both sat there for a while, completely silent.

There was a couple next to us. Both of them had teary eyes, they looked soooooo sad. With Christian sitting next to me, lost in thought, I wondered what had happened in the lives of this beautiful young couple, what tragedy had brought them to pour their hearts out, onto this coffee shop table while sipping on their double-espressos. All of a sudden, the boy was like, "But baby..." And the girl was like, "I have forgotten you. I have forgotten who you are, I have forgotten who you were, I have forgotten everything. First, I forgot that you weren't there. Then, I forgot that I didn't see you. I forgot that I would expect you or you would expect me, I forgot that either of us would forget both of us. I forgot that I would forget. I forgot that I forgot that I would forget, and then forgot that."

And the boy was like, "But baby..."

And the girl was like, "I have no memories of you. The memories of who you are no longer exist. I don't recall the memory of having memories. The memories of you left after a short time, and were replaced by other memories, more recent memories, and older memories, that suddenly became relevant memories. Your memories have been edited, and now they aren't real memories, just a symbol of memories that were once there."

And the boy was like, "But baby..."

And the girl was like, "I don't remember anything. I try to remember, but there is nothing to remember. I remember that I was supposed to remember, but I no longer remember what I was supposed to remember, so I don't remember. Even though you may remember perfectly, all the details, all the things you didn't decide to remember, I still won't remember them. But you also don't remember. Neither you, nor I, remember."

And the boy was like, "But baby..."

I thanked Christian for his time, then got up and left. In a desperate search for answers, I came upon a small shop with a neon light that said, "Psychic". It was destiny; I had to go in.

The local palm reader was called Jhosselyne. I think she was like Mexican or something, but she played up an Eastern European part to attract more clients. She had that vampire-ish accent.

I walked inside and my first impression was that it was a fairly pathetic looking place. She had a bunch of pillows all over the floor and a few scented candles here or there, I think they were patchouli. "I've been expecting you", she said, poking her head in from another room. "Please, sit. Would you like some chai?"

"No, thanks. I just want a quick reading, no cards involved or anything."

"I know. I know exactly what you need." She paused and stared at me for a second. Actually it must have been like 20 or 30 seconds. "I see. Now, give me your hand, and I will tell you what to do."

I gave her my right hand. She observed it, first the palm, then the back, and then she touched each finger, with both of her hands, and then those parts between your fingers, and then she put her nails under my nails, one by one, and then she dug her thumbs into my palm. It was quite sensual, she must have had a lot of experience with hands in her lifetime.

"Ahh, you have very slender hands, mister...?"

"Mr. Rivadeneyra. Ryan Rivadeneyra."

“Rivadeneyra, a Romanian name. Well Ryan, you have very slender hands. You will be very lucky with these hands. You will be a very good piano player. You will practice every day, you will be disciplined, you will listen to Beethoven and Mozart. You will become very popular among family members during Christmas, while you play the piano for everyone to listen. You will receive complements from your in-laws, they will say that you must have been playing all your life. You will then say ‘No, it’s because of my slender fingers, and because I practice every day, I am disciplined, I listen to Beethoven and Mozart.’ And they will be impressed.”

“This isn’t really what I’m looking for. I want you to tell me the future, not give me advice. I just want to know the future.”

“Tonight, you will go to a bar, a small, quiet bar. You will sit at the bar, alone, waiting. You will ask the bartender if he has wine, and he will say ‘Yes, red or white?’. And you will say ‘Cabernet Sauvignon, please’. You will sit at the bar for a while, slowly drinking your wine, and when you only have a sip left, a man will come and sit next to you. He will say ‘What are you drinking?’ You will say ‘Cabernet Sauvignon.’ He will buy you a drink, and will talk to you for a while. You will be friendly and talk back to him. You will not be interested in what he has to say, nevertheless, you will pay close attention. After 30 minutes of fluid conversation, he will excuse himself to the restroom. He will leave his drink, and his phone, on the bar top right next to you. While he is in the restroom, you will take his phone, and you will use the camera to record a video of yourself. You will record yourself drinking the rest of your Cabernet Sauvignon, and the rest of his Cuba Libre. Then, you will put your coat on, and leave the bar. You will go straight to your hotel and go to bed. The next day, you will wake up a different person.”

And that is exactly what happened.

So I’m in the airport heading back to Barcelona, right? And I’m just waiting there, in the terminal, right? I look up and sitting right across from me are the new king and queen of Europe, the most beautiful and elegant couple to walk the streets of this old, old, continent.

So Seal and Heidi Klum are right there in front of me in the Antwerpen Deurne Airport, waiting for a connection. Coincidentally, Antwerp is exactly 456 km from both of their hometowns in England and Germany, respectively. Seal and Heidi stare at each other, it comes naturally to them. They never get bored of their spouse’s face, never get tired of each other’s mannerisms. Their staring contests would last forever.

“We are perfection”, Seal says in his deep, sexy, masculine voice. “We are the perfect couple, we are what the world is striving to be.”

“We are Europe”, Heidi says, “we are what Europe always wanted, we are ambassadors of the European ideal, two races coming together as one. We are the colonies and the empires finally living in peace, without land or gold getting in our way. We are love, compassion, tolerance.”

“We are modernism”, Seal says, almost finishing Heidi’s sentence.

They both look at the airport screens to see when their flight leaves.

“Heidi, we both know that mankind has a tendency to outdo himself, that progress is constant even through tragedy and disaster. But I ask you Heidi, what will the world be after us? What is more than this that we have here? There is no denying that one day we will get old, and die, like all things do. Will the world have another Seal and Heidi Klum? Will we have left our mark on this place, and contribute to mankind just as Walter Benjamin or Fredrick Douglass did?”

“Seal, my love, our perfect children are the children of Europe, they are the seed of our fruit. They will grow into beautiful plants and their flowers will blossom. They will then create fruit of their own, and will always carry the memory of our beautiful, sexy, multiracial relationship. With us, the melting pot has melted and there is only fire and gas.”

Seal and Heidi Klum got up and out of their seats. They were happy about being here in the Old Continent. They were happy.

Sitting right by Seal and Heidi are two young guys, they appear to be American or something.

“I thought we still had to make that transfer to Terminal B, but we’re already here,” said the first guy.

“I know”, says the second one.

“It already happened. It was just, easy. That’s the thing about me, and time, I’m, well we’re, easy. I’m an easy guy. I forget about time, and then, all of a sudden, I’m in another place. Time is easy, easy like me.”



“Mmm-hmm,” says the other guy.

“Damn! D’ju see that girl in the blue cardigan? Damn, that was a pretty mouth. A real pretty mouth. You don’t see many of those these days. She also had pretty eyes, pretty hair. And her lips, they were pretty too. I’m not sayin that her other features weren’t pretty or anything, but her mouth, her mouth was just beautiful. See, I’m the kinda guy that can appreciate that kinda stuff. I look at things, easily. Beauty, it’s in the eye of the beholder, y’know. When you see somethin beautiful, it’s only you that’s feelin that. When you see something beautiful, it’s the beauty inside you that you’re seein. That’s the way I am. Easy.”

“Yeah.”

“Time and I, we really get along.”

So as a token of good faith, I want to finish this text with a song. The song that I will show you was written by Kurt Weill, and it is about his homeland, and yours, (kind of) the Rhineland. Now I know that maybe Antwerp isn’t technically part of the Rhineland, but it’s pretty close. So, this is a song about the Rhine.

I sing you the song of the Rhineland,
Europa’s beauty spot.
O never was there such a fine land,
Each man’s a fighter, a lover, and so whiter.

That wonderful pretzel and stein land,
can never be forgot.
And so on that basis we say to your faces
On earth are no places like that.

Ya ya on that basis we say to your faces
On earth there’s no place, like that!

Life is milk and honier,
Where the sun is sunnier,
And the rain is rainier,
And the brains is brainier.

Where the heart is mellower,
And the hair is yellower,
And the girls are cutsier,
And the goose is goosier.

Where the stork is storkier,
And the pig is porkier,
And the beer is beerier,
And the soup, soup-perior.

Where the wine is whinier,
And the Rhine is Rhinier,
And the time is tinier,
And what’s yours is minierrrrr.

We sing you no more of the Rhineland,
But more is to discuss.
O father-land mother-land sister and brother-land
No other land is for us.

NO OTHER LAND IS FOR US,

NO
LAND
FOR
US