

# ANTON CORBIJN — 1-2-3-4







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**PRESTEL**

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## “1-2-3-4” — countdown to confession

— ANTON CORBIJN



FOCUS Dressing room somewhere in Groningen province, 1973. Clockwise from top left: Bert, Pieter, Jan, and Thijs

I “wrote history,” I am beginning to realize, and I simply refer here to the fact that this book reveals something that actually no longer exists: a bewildering at a world now long gone. Even if I still photograph people working at the top of their game, I documented a world that was in front of me, and is now apparently behind me. Let’s count off, like the would-be drummer in me, how that came about.

From the mid-sixties to the early eighties, there was hardly any life existing outside of music. It was all-encompassing, my only frames of reference being music and the images that went with it. Magazines or album covers or from wherever, I absorbed it all. My conversations were peppered with my knowledge of

the B-sides of singles, the names of all band members, and who exactly was singing on a particular Golden Earring(s) or Beatles track. I felt I knew everything. And I was proud of this knowledge, no different than other young people of that time. It was exciting, this sense of belonging to a cultural expression that your parents knew little about and much less understood.

In hindsight, it's not surprising I wanted to belong to that magical and, in my eyes, freer and exciting world. My world was a clergyman's family in the deeply Christian village of Strijen, on an island near Rotterdam, where I grew up until we moved aged eleven to the village of Hoogland in the center of the Netherlands. There I got a (mono) record player, and we had a transistor radio that often found its way into my room. Later I bought a reel to reel and recorded as many borrowed LPs as possible. Those were exciting years.

The same magnetic attraction that led me as a teenager to spend almost all my free time in my bedroom listening to music and studying album covers strangely enough ensured that I later saw very little of my bedroom, although no longer the one at my parents' home. What can be labeled as a passive pastime was becoming something very active, causing a huge shift in my head and in my life. Music obviously possesses a force that takes you out of your bedroom, both literally and figuratively.

I took my first active step to my current situation on August 28, 1972. Our family had moved from Hoogland to Groningen, where, just before school started again, the local group Solution gave a performance on an annual public holiday. They were an alternative band with a saxophonist, talking prog-rock here, that was liked on a national level (later reaching an international audience via Elton John's Rocket label). Though a shy and timid boy, I wanted to be there; I even had done a telephone interview with Tom Barlage, the saxophonist, for the school magazine of the Corderius Lyceum in Amersfoort. I simply had to be there.

The performance began at about two in the afternoon, on the city's main square, the Grote Markt. But how could I overcome my shyness, when I would be visible to everyone? I had no idea how to move around in this unfamiliar city. A shy boy's dilemma. Inventive as I was, I asked to borrow my father's camera. With this in my hands I would have, or so I reasoned, a perfect excuse to walk right up to the stage. It was a strange and somewhat contradictory reasoning, but for me it worked.



GOLDEN EARRING Groningen, 1972



THUS VAN LEER (FOCUS) Groningen province, 1972



TOM BARLAGE (SOLUTION) Groningen, 1972



ANTON & JOHN LYDON London, 1986  
(Photo by Nora Forster)



ANTON & KIRST NOVOSELEC (NIRVANA) Seattle, 1993  
(Photo by Anja Grabert)

When I reached the stage I took some snapshots with the black-and-white film in the camera. I pressed the button no less than nine times! Later I sent five shots to a national music magazine that, sure enough, published three of them, under the guise of "submitted by a reader." Without payment, of course, but for me this was a Eureka moment. Suddenly I had a purpose in life, and what a purpose: to be a photographer at concerts was the best way to be part of this exciting world.

During the school year, my parents regularly dropped me off and picked me up at concerts across the province.

Places where, with my father's camera

and flash, I coolly blinded musicians, with otherwise very mediocre results, which no one seemed interested in. During the summer holidays I worked in factories to save up for my own camera. Meanwhile I had already asked permission a few times at concerts to take pictures in the dressing rooms, where I shot precisely one negative per band member. The results were forgettable, but I dared to knock on doors, and they were opened. Thank you Focus, thank you Golden Earring!

As I started to belong to that world as a photographer, I realized that the world was bigger than just music. The blinders came off. I started a personal development that expressed itself in different ways in my photography. I began focusing more on individuals than on groups, went outside my original field of interest, and constantly questioned my way of making images. In this way my work remained fresh and hopefully also relevant for others, and I met many interesting people in other disciplines: actors, painters, writers, models, directors, athletes, architects, scientists, and politicians; bit of a slippery slope that last group, I realize.

I consider myself a portrait photographer who often photographs musicians. Given my choice of subject, the photography and art world defines my work as "rock photography," in inevitably condescending terms, instead of really looking at the work itself. I have had to fight this label for a long time,



arguing that my work elevates it above the status of its subjects and does not deserve this label. For me it's all about what you do with your subject.

With this book I want to celebrate my work in the music world, without having to apologize for it. I'm proud of it. Proud of the long-term relationships and friendships with bands and musicians, proud of what it has meant, and still can mean, in that world, but also outside of it.

I used the same arguments for my first film *Control*, a love story, and therefore suitable for a large audience. Categorize it as a music film, as happened in America, and you limit your audience enormously. I'm aware that I've followed the footsteps and tradition of the greats of music photography (David Gahr, Jim Marshall, Michael Cooper, and the like). But I'm also influenced by many other areas of photography and I've never limited myself to a specific, music-loving public. I believe I've found a form of photography that suits me, and holds its own. Time will tell, even if that time is long gone.



PEARL JAM with ANTON Seattle, 1997  
(Photo by Anja Grabert)



ANTON & TOM WAITS  
Sebastopol, 2011  
(Photo by Sullivan Waits)

# A Great Love Dissected

— WIM VAN SINDEREN

"It's a lot more work than I thought," sighs Anton Corbijn. He's sitting in his office in Berlin, leaning forward as piles of contact sheets pass through his hands. For Corbijn, systematically rummaging through his photographic archives does not come from the innate need, now that he's sixty years old, to look back and contemplate calmly and nostalgically on his career of over forty years. He must forge ahead though, because his busy life with new ideas and exciting projects continues. Nevertheless, over the past six months he has taken the time and trouble for once to pause for thought. Corbijn continues to stress the one-off nature of this exercise, even if it gradually emerges what surprising yet previously unnoticed treasures he's been able to dig up from his vast archive,<sup>1</sup> an archive which is otherwise very complete and orderly. It hardly has any gaps or omissions, unlike that of the great Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908–2004), who in the 1930s cut up his negatives as "he would 'cut his nails', preserving individual images and sequences that he deemed successful or valuable and discarding the rest."<sup>2</sup>

Many photographers who have worked as long as Anton Corbijn reach a point at which they live entirely from their archives. They have such a variety of material in stock that they can still deliver anything, vintage or digital. They themselves, as it were, have become archives. The delightful reproducibility that is so peculiar to photography and that gives it its ubiquitous quality often leaves the makers belittled and forgotten. This notion and practice doesn't apply to Corbijn however. He conscientiously cherishes the history of his artistic production, because this contains his unique DNA as a visual artist. His tendency to keep up his archive is not for the purpose of selling his work but rather to build upon it, so that everyone can see and follow Corbijn's progress as a photographer, both now and in the future. The helix along which his artistry develops is still in motion and mutates constantly. The multitasking Corbijn has progressed in parallel careers related to photography, namely film, video clips, art directing, set design, and graphic design. There has often been some cross-fertilization

between those different forms of expression, such that the image is diffuse and one can only conclude that this is "an Anton Corbijn." Thus we see his photographs in his films, and now, after four feature films, we see his films in his photographs.

This book and the exhibition at the Fotomuseum Den Haag, which share the title *1-2-3-4*,<sup>3</sup> definitely signify a new step in Anton Corbijn's artistic practice. Of the thousands of negatives from the period 1972 to 2013, printed on contact sheets, he selected about four hundred photographs.<sup>4</sup> The negatives are then (often for the first time) digitally scanned and output in inkjet (so-called pigment) prints. The challenge for Corbijn as he reflects for the first time on his history as a music photographer is to demonstrate precisely how inadequate that concept is. It's been a long time since he was a "music photographer," and he probably never was one. Those who view the work of *1-2-3-4* are submerged in an achronological myriad of photographic approaches. In 1976, Corbijn did indeed intern for a few months with the Dutch music photographer Gijsbert Hanekroot (b. 1945), who, like Corbijn, is an autodidact, but, apart from that, what we mainly see in the vast array of photographs is how Corbijn often subconsciously retains his own style, independent of trends. For example, as he rummaged through his archives he discovered how often he chooses a bare wall as a background or how much he loves the masquerade—instigated by him or suggested by the artists themselves.

Through the decades, the photographer has elaborated on a number of preferred styles that are far removed from the history of international pop photography. Corbijn's inspiration, deliberate or not, is still found in the 1970s, his formative years. The Dutch weekly *Vrij Nederland* stood out in that period for the rather hands-off style of its image editing, meaning that photographers were given great freedom in providing photo illustrations. This yielded a weekly treasure of autonomous images from figures such as Willem Diepraam (b. 1944), Dolf Toussaint (b. 1924),

and Oscar van Alphen (1923–2010), photographers who, in turn, were influenced by the raw, candid street photography of Ed van der Elsken (1925–1990).<sup>5</sup> In particular, the “dramatic and incisive reportage” of Diepraam, the overexposed subjects standing out against dark, burned-in skies,<sup>6</sup> made an impression on Corbijn. He notes that in the mid-seventies, Van der Elsken, the aforementioned *Vrij Nederland* photographers, and himself were enthralled by the dynamic, confrontational black-and-white style of street photographers belonging to the New York School (1936–63), a loosely defined group including Diane Arbus, Robert Frank, and William Klein that was then reaching international renown.<sup>7</sup>

It seems important to mention here the environmental portraiture of Arnold Newman (1918–2006), even though Corbijn explains that he had never really studied his work. Newman, one of the most influential portrait photographers of the twentieth century, is regarded as the pioneer of the so-called environmental portrait. For Newman, a simple portrait was never enough; the inclusion of a person’s familiar surroundings was necessary in order to capture the essence of the subject’s profession and personality. His famous 1946 picture of Igor Stravinsky depicts the composer in small scale in the lower left corner, while the rest of the picture is literally overshadowed by the lid of an open Steinway. This iconic image has always been a horror for photo editors, who are unable to crop the image without disturbing the photo’s perfectly balanced composition.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from the grainy, Dutch documentary photography of the seventies and the serious portrait photography of Arnold Newman, the British theater and celebrity photographer Angus McBean (1904–1990) is also worthy of mention in connection to Corbijn’s visual imagery. The little-known McBean crafted staged portraits in settings of his own creation. Having started out as a mask maker and set designer for the theater, his photographs possess a lightheartedness and creativity that we often also recognize in Corbijn’s work. Angus McBean is the only

photographer to whom Corbijn has ever made a literal tribute. In the 1984 video clip for David Sylvian’s “Red Guitar,” which Corbijn directed, the old, bearded McBean makes several appearances.<sup>9</sup>

With the book and exhibition 1-2-3-4, Anton Corbijn says something of a farewell to photography in order to continue on as a filmmaker. Compared to the complex production process of film, photography now represents for Corbijn primarily a relaxing activity, but never without a certain intensity. He says, “Photography will always be my great love, but for now film is my big challenge.”<sup>10</sup>

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- (1) Anton Corbijn estimates that there are some 25,000 contact sheets in his archive (see note 4).
  - (2) Kristen Lubben, introduction to *Magnum Contact Sheets* (London, 2011), p. 9.
  - (3) The title is a reference to a drummer counting off a rock song played in 4/4 time.
  - (4) Contact sheets are contact prints with typically all the negatives of a roll of film printed on a single sheet of photographic paper.
  - (5) See Ursula den Tex, *Fotografen/Journalisten. De fotogeschiedenis van "Vrij Nederland" 1966–1990* (Amsterdam, 1995).
  - (6) Mariëtte Haveman, foreword to *ibid.*, p. 5.
  - (7) See Jane Livingston, *The New York School: Photographs, 1926–1953* (New York, 1992). Apart from the influence of the New York School, Corbijn also mentions as a source of inspiration the work of American photographers Dorothea Lange, W. Eugene Smith, and Garry Winogrand.
  - (8) See William A. Ewing, *Masterclass: Arnold Newman* (Minneapolis, 2012).
  - (9) In the 1983 video clip for Depeche Mode’s “Walking In My Shoes,” Corbijn refers to the “cracked-mirror” portraits of photographer Irving Penn (1917–2008), intended more as a style quotation than as homage.
  - (10) Anton Corbijn, in a public interview by Carel van Hees and Edie Peters, *LantarenVenster*, Rotterdam, February 11, 2015.

JIM KERR  
newcastle  
1982







BONO new orleans 1982



MICK JAGGER london 1960

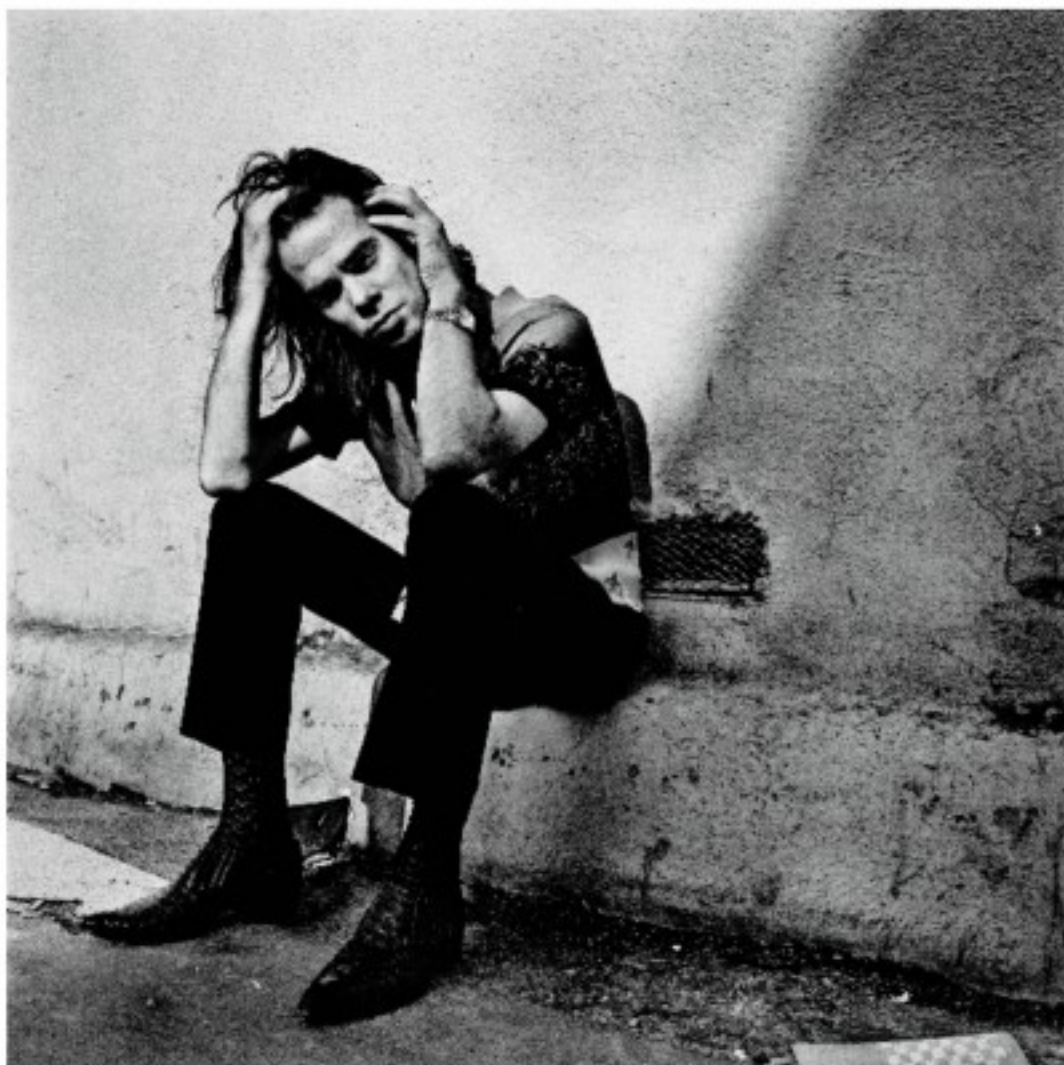


DEPECHE MODE new orleans 2018





LARS ULRICH & JAMES HETFIELD san francisco 1997



HICK CAVE santa monica 1991



DEPECHE MODE santa barbara 8005



FAD GADGET London 1981



PET SHOP BOYS london 1993

I love Anton's photograph of me and my son, Luke, standing beneath the willow tree. Wearing a suit and smoking a fag—old-school parenting par excellence—I hold the hand of my little boy, who scowls straight at the camera, hating photographers and being photographed almost as much as his old man. Anton had not gained his trust. Anton was the guy with the camera, shooting his daddy and taking him away. But I understood that. Trust was a commodity few photographers ever won with me. It was always such an imposition! I always felt I was the subject of someone else's wet dream. I remember turning up at Anton's studio for a shoot and demanding that Anton photograph me, not outside as he wished, but under studio lights in a straight, controlled, portrait style. Nothing left to chance! I told him I didn't want to go outside, it was too windy, it was too wet, my hair, etc. He agreed and cranked out a few rolls of desultory "studio" shots that neither of us liked. Eventually, he managed to coax me outside into the dark English weather. Within a matter of minutes he had shot the stark and powerful photograph that became the cover of *The Boatman's Café*. In time, I learned I was in safe hands with Anton, that his unique vision of the world transcended my own insecurities, and I let Anton do as he wished. Over the years we amassed some truly beautiful photographs.

Time has moved on and I still squirm and scowl in front of the camera, but there is something that happens between the strangely satisfying double-click of Anton's Hasselblad and the horror of one's own self-image, where Anton, like a master thief, snatches that moment of time—truth-time—the meeting place of awareness and vulnerability, of the conscious and the unconscious, that speaks to us with such eloquence and poetry across the years.

— NICK CAVE



NICK CAVE & SON london 1993



PATTI SMITH new york 1999





TOM WAITS sebastopol 2011



SINÉAD O'CONNOR dublin 1968



REGINE CHASSAGNE & WIN BUTLER new york 2005





< JOHN LYDON new york 1983 / DEPECHE MODE new york 2006



BONO new york 2005



GANG OF FOUR new york 1980



R.E.M. los angeles 1992





TRENT REZTOR chicago 1995