

100

The People, The River, and The City

An interview with Julia Knop and Jan Siefke about their exhibition in Hamburg, “100 People”

Both Julia Knop and Jan Siefke took portraits of 100 people along the Elbe and the Huangpu. But what do these 2 x 100 faces tell us, and what meaning do they have for the exchange between Hamburg and Shanghai? In an interview with Linny Bieber, the two photographers tell of walks on the riverbank, yearning to see places far away, early morning exercises, and amused photo models.

people Hamburg, Elbe – Shanghai, Huangpu

Ms. Knop, this exhibition arose in collaboration with Jan Siefke. How did this joint project come about?

Julia Knop: Last year I got the idea to photograph many people in different places around the world. For the CHINA TIME 2006 event, the idea came to me to make an exhibition with this concept and in doing so to present two such “100 People” collections next to one another. Jan and I have known each other since we studied photography together in Dortmund. After the completion of our degrees, he went to Shanghai and I went to Hamburg, that being about eight years ago. We are good friends and have always kept in touch. I really value his photography, and he lives at present in Hamburg’s sister city, Shanghai. It was an obvious choice for me to ask Jan.

What connects you, as a Hamburger, to Shanghai?

Julia Knop: I have been there to visit Jan and his wife twice. It was my first encounter with the Chinese world.

And what did you think of it?

I have pleasant memories of it. I find Shanghai very impressive – but a bit too big for my taste.

Mr. Siefke, you are from Germany, were raised there, and studied there. Why did you go to Shanghai?

Jan Siefke: Love and a photography project lead me to Shanghai. I received a travel scholarship for a photo book project, and at the same time my girlfriend, now my wife, received a job offer in Shanghai. It just made sense to take the plunge and move to China together.

What allure and what meaning did the work on this exhibition have for you?

Jan Siefke: The whole thing had something of a walk on which, although you have already seen the scenery a thousand times, you finally take a closer look. It was interesting for me, and was a challenge to meet and win over people for this project without any knowledge of the Chinese language. I enjoyed the playfulness and randomness about it all. Just to spend a week along the river, on the ferries on the Huangpu, on the Nanpu Bridge, and of course on the area across from Pudong. To meet the people there, to approach them about interests and moods, and to hope that a photo shoot would be possible. Rather than a throng of people, it’s about individuals who signify my city, Shanghai, symbolically and representatively – as well as it is about a week in summer.

The exhibition is named “100 People: Hamburg, Elbe – Shanghai, Huangpu”. What meaning do the Elbe and Huangpu Rivers have for this exhibition?

Julia Knop: We wanted to find a common thread in celebration of CHINA TIME 2006. Both cities lie on the river and are harbor and trade cities. The river is a connecting element and shapes the atmosphere of a city. We wanted to give these specific factors a place in the series. People stroll along the river, sit on the beach, look at the harbor, the water, the ships, and let their thoughts wander. We wanted to capture this feeling in the portraits. From a Hamburg perspective it is of course interesting to find out: What do the people in Shanghai who spend time at the the river look like? What are their facial expressions? How are they dressed?

And why then exactly 2 x 100 people?

Julia Knop: Most of all, 100 represents a large amount to me. Such as 100 percent is a representative amount with which one can give a place a face. For me, two is a symbol of encounter. Consequently these 2 x 100 portraits are a big encounter between two different crowds of people, or portraitures of people. The viewer meets the respective people through these pictures.

Why have you exhibited the pictures in the old Elbtunnel? That is certainly a quite out of the ordinary place.

Julia Knop: I want to display the photos in a public space. A friend of mine had the idea of the old Elbtunnel. I was immediately excited about it. The place is ideal for the idea of the exhibition: People at the river are now being shown under the river. There are two tunnels, just like there are two cities in which we photographed. Here there is again the number two as a symbol of encounter. And there are two directions in the tunnel: The visitors walking in the direction of Steinwerder view the Hamburgers. Walking in the other direction visitors view the people of Shanghai. I find it fascinating just to know that you are walking underneath the Elbe! I was lucky that the head of the port authority was also excited about the idea and gave me approval. They really supported me with all of the logistics.

Will there be a possibility to show the 200 works in Shanghai? That would be truly a real symbol for the exchange between the two cities.

Jan Siefke: We're working on it and would be really happy if we could show this exhibition soon in Shanghai as well. I can imagine the exhibition there at the riverbank or on both sides of the bridge, gladly on the waterfront. But it is worth it to keep looking for a suitable place. The goal was first of all this exhibition for CHINA TIME 2006 in Hamburg.

Ms. Knop, you were underway for a month long on the Elbe between the Harbor City and the Devil's Bridge for your portraits. How did your "models" catch your attention? Why did you choose just these 100 people?

Julia Knop: I noticed the people who appeared to have time and were not in a hurry. Young and old people were intended to be represented, the same as men and women. Of course interesting and attractive faces catch your attention at first, however I did deliberately approach people who did not particularly stand out at first glance. Every person has his or her own very unique expression. I think it's interesting what you can read in a person's facial features. The selection is of course always subjective, and among the many people I approached, not all participated.

Mr. Siefke, you were underway along the Huangpu. How did you choose your models?

Jan Siefke: It is in fact quite varying people that one meets. Just as my colleague Julia, I also tried to select "representatively" as well as also to pay attention to age and gender. But it was basically a coincidence who you would actually meet. In the end, it came down to a feeling in the moment. You encounter someone and decided in a flash if you would like to ask the person or not. Basically every individual was noteworthy in his or her own way; otherwise I wouldn't have photographed them. One time a face impressed me, once a person's walk, once their clothing, or there was a friendly smile.

Which activities do the people along the Huangpu pursue?

Jan Siefke: In the mornings it starts early with gymnastics and other sport activities along the riverbank and the parks – from dance and Tai Chi to flying a kite. Then it becomes livelier, the people go to their work. The tourists come later, and then the people who want to spend their lunch break along the water, and in the evening everything is mixed together again.

The small girl in the red-orange dress with the blue and yellow flowers on it – who is that girl?

Jan Siefke: This girl goes to school and lives with her parents on a barge. She proceeded towards me on the shore and sat down there on a bollard. The river wind blew a little bit, the afternoon passed by, and a group of men were busy with repairs on the boat. The areas surrounding the river are her home, and she was not distracted or intimidated by the camera. That made me happy and impressed me.

In general, how did the people react when you went up to them with a camera?

Julia Knop: Most agreed gladly to participate as figures for this project. Many were just happy to become “famous”. Just a few turned me down, sometimes with the reason that they weren’t photogenic – to which I responded that that also has to do with the photographer!

Jan Siefke: Some were really in a hurry, some waved me away as they walked past, others took the time for the encounter and allowed themselves to be photographed. In general, the people were friendly and just as curious as I was. Once in a while some people would pick at something or adjust their clothing or appearance, but actually I was could and wanted to photograph them if possible exactly how they looked when I first caught sight of them. Some were proud, some amused. Some were simply too shy, thought they weren’t photogenic, or it just wasn’t their day.

How did you try to capture Hamburg in your portrait photographs, Ms. Knop?

Julia Knop: Generally, one finds friendliness, openness, and tolerance in Hamburg. I also noticed people of different nationalities on the Elbe, who I then photographed. I believe you can see the yearning for far away places in many faces, an opening for new horizons.

Jan Siefke: We want to give a city a face through the 100 people. Each person is individual but at the same time representative. On a walk through the Elbtunnel along the respective “100 People”, you can discover your sister city through people “like you and me”. All age classes are there; men and women of different careers. An exciting mixture! From a German perspective, it is nice to see how different all of these people are – and how much they are connected to your own world.

Which connections between Hamburg and Shanghai became obvious to you in the process?

Julia Knop: I find in particular the young people to be similar in their expressions and clothing styles. What is important to me in general for this project and what also becomes clear here is, like Jan already said: People are very similar, even if they are thousands of kilometers apart and live in different cultural circles. That is made clear to me through the portraits. That also leads to understanding and tolerance.

Shanghai and Hamburg will celebrate their 20-year anniversary as sister cities this year. To what extent does this exhibition play a roll in the exchange between Hamburg and Shanghai?

Jan Siefke: Through this exhibition in Hamburg, we would like to extend an invitation to walk among the “100 People of Shanghai” so as to give the sister city of Shanghai a face in Hamburg. One has maybe already heard of Shanghai and China from events put on by both cities. At our exhibition, one has the chance to see and experience something delicate and fleeting: Completely normal people who crossed my path, and who one can now encounter as a viewer.

Julia Knop: On the photographs, passers-by are depicted in a public space; people that anyone would see who visits a city. It is in this respect an encounter of the citizens. The citizens of Hamburg can see themselves – symbolically, of course – and also meet the passers-by from Shanghai in the form of pictures.

Jan Siefke: Connecting people! I believe it is a good partnership that connects these cities, borne by the many people and institutions. It also deserves a lot of attention and even more support in the future. It represents an unbelievable chance to experience and comprehend the unknown and new things about a foreign culture and city, and in the process to develop mutual understanding and to work together productively toward a future.

Ms. Knop, Mr. Siefke, thank you so much for this conversation!