



Valentin Goppel's *Between the Years* series takes a look at his friends and acquaintances, from his own concerned perspective. The insightful images manage to convey the feelings of an entire generation in times of Corona. The outcome is a kaleidoscope of individual moments that, when put together, aims to reflect the experiences of the younger generation in Germany.



“If I can’t do justice to an objective truth,
then maybe a subjective truth.”

The Corona pandemic officially reached Germany at the beginning of the year 2020. One of the containment measures put in place was a general lockdown, which began on March 22, and lasted for seven weeks. Valentin Goppel remembers the beginning of that period very clearly: “I had just completed my most recent photo project. I was visiting my parents in Regensburg to have a rest, when the daily news announced that the universities were closing. Delighted by the news, I wrote a message to my parents and left it on the kitchen table: ‘Uni closed; I may stay a few days longer.’ In fact, I was so eager to get going that I didn’t even finish the sentence. The words on the paper just said: ‘stay a few da...’” The delight of a few free weeks quickly turned into a state of challenging boredom: “I seemed to have gone through my whole Netflix watchlist, and listened to all my favourite albums; so that I actually wanted to go back to university.” The photographer shared this experience with many of his contemporaries. Some, having just gained their independence, were being pushed into a previously unknown isolation. They were experiencing the sudden break away from habits, having to come to terms with feelings of insecurity, and were being obliged to abandon all their short-term plans.

Goppel, who was born in 2000, had just begun studying Photography. He found himself taking part in online seminars, but quickly realised that he did not manage very well with that form of study. “I need the walk to university, and the irritated exchange of glances with others, if the class is dragging on.” Quite appropriately, he received an assignment at the end of the year, to photograph his generation during Corona times. It was a moment of liberation and a change of perspective. As the photographer recalls, “I now really understood the significance of the topic, and acquired an appetite for the full story. It suddenly felt as though I had a particular take on matters; as though my perspective might even be relevant.”

The first picture was taken on New Year’s Eve. The series then quickly expanded to include his whole surroundings: “Any young person had the potential to be a protagonist. All of them had a story to tell; all of them experienced the pandemic as an exceptional situation. Even the pleasure at finally having found their feet in life suddenly began to waver. It wasn’t hard to explain to them the kind of pictures I was looking for; they were all right in the middle of it, and they knew how the others were feeling.” Even after the first lockdown, the “new normality” was hard to define.

“For many, the summer brought back a feeling of great freedom; for me, it meant restlessness. I dove into a state of insane productivity. Within a few weeks, I’d photographed as many motifs as I’d managed in the previous half year. Following the winter months, some of my friends had difficulties reconnecting back into social life; and it was no different for me. The ‘not knowing where to take yourself’; not knowing what to hold onto, when everything is shaking; of course, that may well be part of the state between childhood and adulthood, anyway. In this case, Corona acted as a catalyst.”

Goppel’s pictures oscillate between observation and staging. The photographer’s sensitive eye captured shattering motifs which can already be seen as a witness of the times. The message to his parents, mentioned earlier on, also stands as a testimony in a picture frame: “It’s in a box in the new shared apartment I moved into half a year ago,” Goppel explains. “I haven’t really set up my room yet. Sometimes it still feels as though I’m rarely there.”

Was there a starting point for your series?

The impulse came at the end of 2020, from the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, when I was asked to work on a project about German youth in times of Corona. The title, *Between the Years*, appeared already in the first email.

Did having a camera help you to get through Corona times; did it give you a purpose?

Definitely! The series helped me feel firm ground beneath my feet again. Photography helps me to either find clarity, or accept the lack of clarity. Things I can make tangible by means of photographs are easier to understand. Furthermore, photography was an excuse for me to meet my friends, despite the Corona measures; otherwise, I would never have been able to explain myself to my flat mates! Showing my friends in moments that reflect my own feelings, rather than focusing on self-portraits that express my feelings, is a great tool against loneliness. It's good to know you're not alone. Time and again, young people tell me that they recognise their feelings in my portrayal of the pandemic – and that's great!

What has your photographic path been like, so far?

I was born and grew up in Regensburg, Bavaria. My father awakened my interest in photography, very early on. For a long time, photography was something I didn't share with anyone else. As a teenager, I began taking portraits of my friends, which I kept secret from my father's severe eyes. When I was 18, I had my first exhibition of those pictures. That led me to an internship with the photographer Florian Hammerich, who has been one of my most important mentors, ever since, and who sensitised me towards storytelling with pictures. I've been studying Photojournalism and Documentary Photography at college in Hanover since 2019.

What does documentary mean to you?

How do you see the role of documentary photography today?

I have my doubts about the possibilities of photography to do justice to the requirement for complete honesty. The choice of how to frame a picture; the decision in favour of one motif over another – even the moment chosen, which in the end is the “right” one in the mind of the person

behind the camera – all this forces a certain subjectivity. That's why I decided to try and capture my own perception of recent years in pictures, with all the means that are offered to me in front of the camera. That also includes the possibility of staging, when manipulation can't be avoided, anyway. Ideally speaking, the viewer doesn't know where the picture is placed, along the spectrum between observation and staging. Sometimes I repeat movements from the previous moment; sometimes I photograph scenes that my friends have experienced; sometimes, one of the people in the picture knows they're being photographed, while another one doesn't; and sometimes, I just hide in the corner, waiting for the right moment. I only draw the line when it comes to the processing. I don't retouch, but stick to the steps that used to be followed in the darkroom.

Your own view is particularly important to you – what is the relationship between closeness and distance?

The thought of being able to capture only your “own” view of things also answers the question of personal involvement to some extent. Even so, I believe that photography can function incredibly well as an emphatic approach to the “alien”. You shouldn't let your own “alienation” prevent you from exploring a subject photographically. The question of how much distance is necessary is easier to answer: just enough so that the unique features are still recognisable.

What does the Leica Oskar Barnack Newcomer Award mean for you, and what happens next?

I can't yet grasp it all. Time and again, I'm overwhelmed by the value suddenly attributed to my work. Above all, I want to go on taking pictures of things that feel right to me – not things that allegedly promise success. I don't know what will happen in the coming years. The award allows me to hope that my own way is the right one.