

## Thomas Kern – Haiti. The Perpetual Liberation

Since his first trip to Haiti in 1997 Thomas Kern (\*1965) has repeatedly returned there to capture the turbulent history of the former “Pearl of the Antilles”. Reserved and at the same time close to the people, he documents everyday life in one of the world’s poorest countries in a classical black-and-white. His photographs testify to the great individual efforts made and the tiny joys experienced in a country marked by natural catastrophes, political instability and a creeping ecological disaster. Furthermore, they tell of the history of slavery and of the apparent escape into the spiritual world of voodoo.

Thomas Kern, co-founder of the Swiss Photo Agency *Lookat Photos*, made a name for himself in the 1990s with reportages on the impacts of war and conflict – in Northern Ireland, for example, or in the former Yugoslavia. In 1997 he travelled to Haiti for the first time on a commission from the cultural magazine *du*, shortly before he moved to San Francisco, where he worked as a freelance photographer for the following eight years. Since that first encounter, the country in the Caribbean has not let go of him, a country whose widespread image is marked, above all, by American media reports on catastrophes there. As Haiti is only about one hour by plane from Miami, political unrest, riots with burning car tyres, or the annual storms are always worth a cover story, although the complex political, economic and social background is often faded out.

Thomas Kern reacts particularly sensitively to the common clichés, aware that he too is just an outsider who can never really do justice to the country’s complexities and contradictions. Above all he does not wish to just foreground Haiti’s scandalous poverty – it is always present in the background, one way or the other. On the contrary, he prefers to lead us into a chaotic scenario full of strange phenomena. And he does this by simple deliberately chosen means – using a Rolleiflex without interchangeable lenses and analogue black-and-white film. In instantaneous takes that often exhibit surreal traits, he renders everyday life perceptible in all its facets. Kern takes his photographs spontaneously, yet always in a square format that suggests stability and peace, even if confusion prevails within the image: different pictorial levels are superimposed, movements are not sharp, figures are cropped or only visible as dark shadows. This precarious balance between standstill and explosive dynamism is a central theme that runs through all his photographs. The photographer does not become involved in the events, he observes them, allowing himself all the while to be guided by his own impressions. Despite this apparent distance, Kern’s photographs draw us directly into the real happenings of everyday life in Haiti, a field of tension between resignation and irrepressible vitality. The Haitian writer Yanick Lahens comments on Thomas Kern’s photographs: “In Haiti you have to accept it all: the shade and the extremely beautiful lights. They continually guide us back again to the shadow and light in ourselves. The creativity keeps us alive; it is our oxygen. We turn the world upside down, like at Carnaval. Through mockery, beauty, and grandeur. Some photos say that in their own special way. We open up unexpected brackets and thumb our noses at the misfortune.”

This misfortune extends far back into the 19th century, when Haiti won its independence from the French colonial power, eliminated slavery and thus became the first free state in Latin America. Since then, the country’s history has been accompanied by violent struggles, and the governments and dictators that replaced one another in swift succession have contributed little or nothing towards stabilising the country or advancing it economically. Instead they have used their power shamelessly for their own personal enrichment. To this very day, the political system of the first “black” republic is marked by opportunism, nepotism and corruption.

### **Permanent Crisis**

Before Haiti was colonised by Spain and France, the island state was a kind of tropical Garden of Eden, almost 90% of it covered by trees. Today it is only 2% and still declining, because wood, made into charcoal, is and will continue to be one of the country's most important sources of energy. The progressive clearing of the forests leads to increasing soil erosion, reducing the amount utilisable for agriculture and thus greatly restricting the production of food. Then there are the regular natural catastrophes, such as drought, hurricanes and flooding.

In the acute emergency after the earthquake on 12 January 2010, in which more than 300'000 people lost their lives and more than a million were made homeless, the state also proved to be unable to respond appropriately. It left management of the crisis to countless international organisations who inundated the country to provide the urgently needed emergency aid. But despite the additional billions promised for reconstruction, of which a large part never arrived in Haiti or else seeped into the mire of corruption, a food shortage and widespread unemployment still prevail today. Clean drinking water is scarce, environmental pollution is increasing rapidly, and the population – except for a small wealthy minority – is suffering from extreme poverty.

### **False Hopes**

Today the country that was once among the richest territories of the French colonial realm is totally dependent on foreign aid. A dependence from which Haiti has not been able to free itself. The country has preserved a kind of slavish mentality, preferring to hold others responsible for the misery rather than taking things into their own hands. The voodoo religion does not offer a way out of this tragic and paradoxical situation. The cult of gods and spirits brought by slaves from Africa during the colonisation period, and in which rituals of sacrifice and purification play a major role, is still practiced by a large part of the population today, parallel to Catholicism. Voodoo offers people the possibility of escape into a spiritual world that gives them comfort, at least for a certain time, but in which they can also lose themselves. It is above all an escape which helps them to endure the real problems of life or at least repress them for a while.

Martin Gasser

The exhibition at the Fotostiftung Schweiz brings together more than a hundred, partly large format images taken over the past twenty years or so. They were produced this year as inkjet prints by Christian Spirig, Zurich, and mounted on aluminium and framed by the EMSA company, Villmergen. Also part of the exhibition is a projection of portrait photographs entitled "Rap Creole", accompanied by a poem by Yanick Lahens (production Thomas Kern, Swissinfo, January 2011).

**In the Seminar Room:** a film about Thomas Kern in Haiti from the "Top Shots" series by the broadcaster SRF (produced by Beat Häner, Bernard Weber, 25 mins. 2016).

### **Publication:**

The book *Thomas Kern – Haiti. The Perpetual Liberation*, with texts in German, English and Creole by Thomas Kern, Georg Brunold, Yanick Lahens and Felix Morisseau-Leroy will be published to accompany the exhibition by Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich (CHF 39.-, special price during the exhibition CHF 32.-).

All works shown in the exhibition are for sale. Information is available at the reception desk.

**With the support of the Bundesamt für Kultur, Berne, the Friends of the Fotostiftung Schweiz and the Georg and Bertha Schwyzer-Winiker Foundation. In addition the exhibiton is supported by EMSA Rahmenleisten AG, Villmergen.**

### CV Thomas Kern

Thomas Kern (\* 1965 in Brugg). Trained as a photographer in Zurich; from 1989 he was a freelance photojournalist, active in Northern Ireland, Kurdistan, the Middle East, former Yugoslavia, and the US, among others. In 1990, he co-founded the Swiss photo agency *Lookat Photos*. From 1998–2006 he lived and worked as a freelance photographer in San Francisco. In 1997 he traveled to Haiti for the first time, on assignment with the journal *du*. Kern has since been working on his major photo essay about the Caribbean nation.

In 2006 and 2014 he was honored with a *Swiss Press Award*, and in 1996 with the *World Press Photo Award* in the categories “Daily Life, Individual Photos,” and “Daily Life, Stories.” His photos are present in the Art Collection of the Deutsche Bank, the collection of the Fotostiftung Schweiz and the Friends of the Fotostiftung Schweiz.

[www.thomaskern.ch](http://www.thomaskern.ch)

### Special guided tours with Thomas Kern:

Sunday, 25 September, 11.30 a.m., with Martin Gasser (exhibition curator).

Sunday, 30 October, 11.30 a.m., with Georg Brunold (journalist and writer).

Sunday, 27 November, 11.30 a.m., with Peter Niggli (former managing director of Alliance Sud).

[www.fotostiftung.ch](http://www.fotostiftung.ch)

### Quotes in the exhibiton:

In this town everything is brought outside every day. Because each house is also a shop, everything is brought outside, every morning, and the merchandise spread out on the footpath. And in the evening everything is brought back inside. Even the counters on which the merchandise was displayed. It is quite astonishing to realize that it is possible to store so many things in these tiny houses. And then those empty streets, where all you encounter at night are big scrawny dogs. Dany Laferrière, *Tout bouge autour de moi*, 2011

Who is going to help me break \$4,000 in my effort to bring clean water to #Haiti? Donate if you can at <http://mygenerositywater.com/jozyaltidore> Thanks! Retweeted 8 times Expand ILiveBeyond ILiveBeyond ?@ILiveBeyond 56m

Royal's house was like a house of flowers; wisteria sheltered the roof, a curtain of vines shaded the windows, lilies bloomed at the door. From the windows one could see far, faint winkings of the sea, as the house was high up a hill; here the sun burned hot but the shadows were cold. Inside the house was always dark and cool, and the walls rustled with pasted pink and green newspapers. Truman Capote, “House of Flowers” (1950) in: *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, 1958

When I ask Edgar my first question about these streets, he replies that there's nothing to tell: “Here and only here, the city digests the thousands of souls it swallows every day. You are standing in the middle of its stomach. And here the power is as enormous as the hunger.” Yanick Lahens, *Tanz der Ahnen*, 2010

Sputtering engines, faulty car exhaust pipes, superfluous honking, traders shouting, music full blast on public transport or in the middle of the street, the asthmatic wheezing of generators, the orations of itinerant preachers, the praying of sects who desperately feel a need to share their madness with the local residents, stray dogs barking, the constant crowing of cocks that have lost their feeling for time due to the foolishness of people, angry quarrels between neighbours constantly at loggerheads, children reciting, for them, incomprehensible lessons and chemical formulas, televisions turned up loud when a first league Italian game is being transmitted, and radios blasting out the latest compas or rap hit. Gary Victor, *Saison de porcs*, 2009

*Ici la renaissance* – it is true, a rebirth is coming in the world, a realization that the material is not enough, that we must bring equal discipline to the spiritual as well. And Haiti will be the center of this renaissance. This is the reason for my country, the only slave revolt to triumph in the history of the world. God wanted us free because he has a plan. Ben Fountain, “Rêve Haïtien”, a story from *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*, 2006

An aide to Haiti's prime minister has been slain in a drive-by shooting by two masked men on a motorcycle, the government said Monday. The office of Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe said in a statement that Georges Henry Honorat was killed Saturday evening at his house in the Delmas district in Port-au-Prince. He was 55. Police spokesman Gary Desrosiers said Honorat was shot twice outside his home when the men drove by. He died at the scene. *Associated Press* - by Evens Sanon, March 26, 2013

“Coconut water will do Your Highness Simbi-la-Source good!” He swung his way up a coconut tree on the shore. He reached the crown of the tree swiftly and brought down a bunch of coconuts. With a blow of his machete he split one open and gave it to me, bowing low as he did so. With my head thrown back and my gaze on the sun-drenched bay, I let the fresh aromatic and bitter-sweet water flow into my life in a surge of intoxication. René Depestre, *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, 1998

What art form will emerge first? Poetry, so impulsive, or painting avid for new landscapes? Where will the first seismic images be seen? On the walls of the city, or on the bodywork of the tap-taps? Dany Laferrière, *Tout bouge autour de moi*, 2011

It is announced on the radio that the Palais National has been ruined, the tax and contributions office destroyed, the Palais de Justice destroyed, the shops razed to the ground. The communication system destroyed. The cathedral destroyed. The prisoners escaped. During just one night, there was revolution. Dany Laferrière, *Tout bouge autour de moi*, 2011