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## **PRESSBOOK**

**Henk Van Rensbergen**  
亨克·范·任斯伯格

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## A playful new turn for famous abandoned spaces photographer



by Lisa Bradshaw, editor-in-chief, Flanders Today. **Date:** April 2017

### SUMMARY

Henk van Rensbergen is one of the pioneers of abandoned places photography, but the urge to do something else has led him in a different and delightful direction



### ANIMAL INSTINCTS

People always ask Henk van Rensbergen the same questions. “Is it legal to go inside? Do you take someone with you? Is it dangerous? Have you ever found a dead body”?

The answers, he says, are: “No, sometimes, yes and not yet.”

Van Rensbergen isn’t just a photographer of abandoned spaces; he’s quite possibly the first one. A world-renowned pioneer in the genre, he was the first to build a website dedicated to his photographs of long-empty factories, hospitals, mansions and numerous other buildings – back when most of us didn’t know the internet existed.

Having spent three decades travelling the world in search of “new” material – made easier by his job as a pilot for TUI – the 48-year-old is now taking a new direction. A small sample of it is on view in the Concertgebouw cafe in Bruges.

He's moved on partly because he's completely mastered the art of photographing abandoned places and partly because the field has become saturated with copycats. "The urban exploration scene that I helped pioneer has grown, and a lot of people are now having fun exploring abandoned buildings," he says. "And that's fine with me. But with Facebook and Flickr and all the other websites, everybody is just copying each other. People see photos of the building, and they find out the address and go and take the same photos. There's no artistic challenge to that."

## WALK WITH THE ANIMALS

He's seen plenty of photos similar to his own work. "That makes my photos all of a sudden possible copies as well, because you never know who has copied who. So that's the situation I wanted to get away from."

In the Concertgebouw lobby is a retrospective of van Rensbergen's photographs of abandoned spaces, but in the cafe hang five altogether different works – part of van Rensbergen's [new series \*In No Man's Land\*](#). The first to greet customers is "Arlette", a creature who seems at once out of place and right at home.

*Humans have disappeared overnight. No dramas, no nuclear wars. We're just gone*

**- HENK VAN RENSBERGEN**

Arlette is an orangutan, and I think I have never been more disappointed in my life than when van Rensbergen reveals that he did not, in fact, simply happen upon her in this abandoned hotel lobby. The same is true of the other images on the eatery's walls: chickens wandering across a hallway, a vulture lurking in a dilapidated caravan; flamingos sunning themselves amid the remains of a long-disused terrace.

Van Rensbergen has created the images by superimposing photos of animals and abandoned spaces. Technically, the images are perfect; it is impossible to find evidence that the animals are not where they appear to be.

The five prints in Bruges are just a small taste of the more than 50 that van Rensbergen has made in preparation for a book he's working on together with local publisher Lannoo. "My starting point is that humans have disappeared overnight," he says. "No dramas, no nuclear wars. We're just gone."

## FANCIFUL, WHEN NOT CREEPY

And then, what would happen to the animals? In terms of domestic animals, “some of them would starve to death,” he admits, “but some of them would escape. At some point, many animals would survive in a world without humans. And many of them would end up wandering through our houses and shopping malls.”

A few more images of *In No Man's Land* can be seen on van Rensbergen's website – including a cow at the top of an escalator, in what could very well be an abandoned shopping mall. The photographs tend to be amusing, such as this one, when they are not foreboding, such as a chimpanzee hunkered on one of dozens of creaky-looking cots in what could be an old hospital or asylum.

The images, says van Rensbergen, form a story that the viewer can make up for themselves, using their own imagination. As for the end of humankind, he quite likes the idea.

“Imagine the world if we're no longer there. The silence. The instant end to pollution. No more religion, no more wars, no more arguments, no more traffic. I mean, the world would be perfect. Except of course that we wouldn't be there to enjoy it. So can something be perfect if the creatures judging it as perfect are no longer there? Do animals think in terms of perfect?”

*Until 16 April, Concertgebouw, Bruges*