

It is a contradiction in terms: using words to describe the meaning of the work of German photographer Jutta Benzenberg (1960, Munich, Germany) is just as paradoxical as a fluid mountain or dry water. Writing has been associated with reason since its inception. The Ancient Egyptians used symbols to create an administrative system based on their complex economic structure. It became impossible to memorize everything and thus led them to invent a trick: a system of writing. The rational act is contained in it. When looking at the work of Jutta Benzenberg reason is not the first thing that comes to mind: "I don't see myself as an intellectual. I am a woman who feels. Every picture I take is about emotions and feeling." Her photographs need to be seen and felt. It should not be so much considered as it should be experienced. Language barely plays any role in this experience and here it is only a tool for referring to her work. If you still want to associate Jutta's visual language with written language, you will probably end up with the French surrealists and their *écriture automatique*. A method of writing that is intuitive, depending on the circumstances of the moment, without a preconceived plan, and without taking into account the meaning of words and their context in a sentence. This is the nature of Benzenberg's working method. After studying photography at the Staatliche Fachakademie für Photo Design in Munich and commissions for magazines, Benzenberg, and television, Benzenberg intuitively made a major decision in 1991 that determined the rest of her life. Three years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, she reads in the newspaper about Albania, a forgotten country on the edge of Europe. Its final fall of the communist regime creates a vacuum that fills with chaos, turbulence, and directionlessness. Benzenberg wants to capture how people manage to cope in this situation. She is looking for someone who is familiar with the country and who speaks the language. With writer, linguist, Albanologist, and activist Ardian Klosi (1957–2012) she makes her first trip through the country. This journey results in the book *Albania Ueberleben* (1993), many other trips, a

marriage, and a family with Klosi. Her way of working reflects this period: black and white, chaotic, harsh, fast, and intuitive. At first, she was a committed passer-by who was captivated by the plight of the Albanians, with a good eye for composition and the beauty of the everyday, but now she has lived and worked in Albania for more than thirty years. Photography, especially portraiture, has become a way for her to access the people she lives with. Her camera functions as an 'excuse' to satisfy her own curiosity as to who the Albanians really are. In essence, Jutta Benzenberg's photographs are a visual search of the Albanian *condition humane*. What does it mean to be human in Albania? What challenges does (wo) man have to overcome during their lives? What is the influence of the circumstances of the land on the identity of its people? It has resulted in a rich body of work that is not only moving but also important as a document in a time when imagery is mostly superficial and fleeting. For her forthcoming books *Sombre Beauty* (2004), *Ahead with the Past* (2011), and *God in Albania* (2020) she still puts them in a quickly improvised portrait studio on location: against a dark background or in the landscape, always with the right falling daylight. Faces, eyes, souls. For an instant, she makes real contact and thus comes close to their essence: "I open myself through photography and people open themselves in front of the camera to me." Her portraits express pride, liveliness, dignity and grace. Through her photographs, she establishes meaningful connections between the portrayed, the photographer, and the spectator. Benzenberg often gives a stage to people who are often not seen but need acknowledgment. People who do not live in the city but in villages and mountains, people who do not conform to the norms of a patriarchal society, people who live

nomadic lives, people who deal with individual or collective traumas. Her ability to connect with people from different backgrounds is key in this: "Albania is a bit forgotten in Europe, and these forgotten people in turn, forget the forgotten. It's absurd". This exhibition forms both their Albanian biography and that of Benzenberg, in which her professional and private life intertwine. Together, the photographs form a subject narrative with highs and lows, broad horizons, and details, which elaborated on Albania's identity through Benzenberg's eyes and that also revealed her personality. You are looking to categorize Benzenberg's style, you're on thin ice. She is not very fond of the concept of style. "Do you always have the same chairs at the table? It is chic but boring. The moment that I am photographing I am another person. I have different personalities in myself and I express these through art. After I see the picture and I ask myself: how could you do this?" It is the mystery of creating. Life doesn't go neatly along lines and boxes and neither does an artistic career. Yet there are four important characteristics of her working method that are reflected in her photographs and these could be determined as her style. First, there is the aforementioned ability to connect with people. This results in a difficult-to-describe but palpable deeper layer in her portraits. The key to another characteristic lies in her love of painting in her spare time. For creating an image from nothing into something. In fact, she sees the viewfinder of the camera as a blank canvas, as a stage on which she is the director and will determine what the scene will look like. She makes use of the circumstances. An aesthetic hunter in control. Once the loot is in, she leaves. Her photos, therefore, move between the decisive moment and staged photography. Some go in the direction of a snapshot, a captured moment in which there is a lot of movement. Others are fully constructed with the model fully aware of the camera. Her in-betweenness could be called the next characteristic that has an effect

on how she photographs. When you move to a country you never become an insider, someone who belongs, but when you live there for thirty years you transcend the outsider's gaze. Close enough to sense circumstances, read people, and put emotion into a photograph, enough distance to be critical of things that are ingrained, and seem normal. Finally, the use of light has a major role to play. Because of her experience as a camerawoman for television, she is able to perceive the blue, yellow, and green tones of light without a light meter. This allows her to make quick decisions regarding the dramatic light that is often embedded in the image. The exhibition starts on the ground floor in the present and takes the visitor loosely chronologically back in time on the first floor, to a more turbulent recent past that seems far away but sometimes still shines through the cracks. Benzenberg's books are on display in the video lounge. In addition, attention is paid to the commissioned work that Benzenberg did for UNICEF and MAPO that focuses on the topic of human rights. In 2011, her photos from January 21, appeared in the newspapers. Tears of Anna became an Albanian icon. Also, her photographs of Edi Rama's election campaign are included. Jutta Benzenberg herself talks in the exhibition about the backgrounds of her series and the way she conducts photography. About the special encounters she had, about how her house burned down in 2007, including her photo archive. About how she switched to a digital camera in 2008 and started shooting in color. About the one time, she felt like a war photographer. About her involvement in human rights and the position of women. This can be listened to (English) via the QR codes near the series or read (Albanian) via the handout. Together her photographs and stories form a biography of Albania through her eyes. At the same time, they are a reflection of her own biography and testify to the extensive career of one of Albania's most active photographers.

HOURS
Monday – Sunday: 09:00–19:00

ADMISSION

→ Adults (reception desk)	700 Lekë
→ Adults (www.myticket.al)	600 Lekë
→ Groups over 12	600 Lekë
→ Orphans, people with disabilities, seniors	350 Lekë
→ Students, pupils (ages 12–18)	210 Lekë
→ Children under the age of 12	0 Lekë
→ War veterans	0 Lekë
→ Former political prisoners	0 Lekë
→ Paraplegic and tetraplegic invalids	
→ Albanian students and pupils visiting the museum during lesson hours or the program "Education through culture"	0 Lekë
→ ICOMOS – ICOM members	0 Lekë
→ Staff of the Ministry responsible for cultural heritage and subordinate institutions of the above mentioned Ministry	0 Lekë
→ National delegations	0 Lekë

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