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Photographing America's Cup Sailing,  
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# TO SEE IT ALL

## Arne De Winde

John G. Zimmerman (1927-2002) was a man of many faces: a technical innovator who knew no limits (nor wanted to know any), a 'Mad Man' who produced whimsical ads and commercials, a documentary maker who for decades travelled the world shooting exclusive stories for magazines such as *Life*, *Time*, *Sports Illustrated* and *Paris Match*, a visual artist who produced carefully balanced *tableaux vivants*. What makes Zimmerman so extraordinarily fascinating is that for him all this was not excessive multitasking, no, *he was just doing his job*. For Zimmerman, being a photographer was not in the first place about artistry, it was a way of living. A lifestyle that required you to be away from home 300 out of 365 days, hopping from a swimsuit fashion shoot for *Sports Illustrated* in Bora-Bora to a disastrous fire at a General Motors plant, from a state visit to West Berlin to a New York Yankees baseball game, from a TV commercial for Hamm's Beer to a Beatles concert. No matter, you might think, a job is a job. But then you miss the point: what drove Zimmerman all the time was maniacal precision, an exuberant desire to see, to see more, and indeed I'd say, to see it all – right now. It is precisely because of this comprehensiveness that John G. Zimmerman's massive oeuvre gives a unique panorama of America in the second half of the twentieth century.

At the John G. Zimmerman Archive in Pacific Grove, California hangs a frame that says it all: at the top are the words "This looks like a job for Zimmerman", below a drawing of Zimmerman, hauling several cameras simultaneously (and a crate of Hamm's Beer), wrapped in blue and red Superman cape blowing wildly in the wind. This image refers to his reputation of wanting to do the impossible and doing it. His are also the legendary words: "There's no such thing as an impossible picture. If you can visualize a picture in your mind, you can make the camera do it." It is precisely this fanatical belief that what is conceivable is actually achievable, that made Zimmerman a 'mad scientist'. As if possessed he manipulated and converted equipment, tested out mechanics and machinery, (re)built scaffolding, lenses, diaphragms and motors, and sought out 'hotspots' "where no man had gone before". All this in order to create the ultimate image, or as his former assistant Pierre Kopp once said: "He's an extremely demanding person, letting nothing stand in his way of getting the picture, whether it be a person or an act of God." To do so he hung from helicopters, skied (equipment and all) the steepest slopes, dived without aqualung under water (imagine bubbles distorting the picture) and mounted a 45-metre high crane to give the best possible impression of a cohort of 550 freestyle swimmers. He was also the first to place cameras on the noses of aircrafts, inside ice hockey nets or just above basketball hoops. In the tradition of Eadweard Muybridge this urge to experiment was rooted in a desire to capture movement, but always in a single frame: Zimmerman had a patent on so-called 'multiple-exposure images'. In 1979, for example, he devoted nine and a half days solely to

the technical preparation of a shoot of a horizontal bar session of famous gymnast Kurt Thomas, including bringing in two tonnes of material (mainly strobe lights and batteries). To record a night dive from a ten metre platform by high diver Greg Louganis, lasting a grand total of one and a half seconds, he took twelve days. For a contemporary audience, used to juggle apps and Photoshop, such visual showpieces may seem banal – but at the same time they illustrate the radical experiments with hardware that underlie new software, and how tampering with equipment can lead to new ways of looking. Not coincidentally Zimmerman also involved his family in this fervent search for a new visual language. Once he had his children cycle to and fro for hours in front of the house to test a device of his own making with which he thought he could capture the essence of movement. When he wanted, for an advertising campaign, to reproduce a car seen through a kaleidoscope in order to highlight its brilliance and elegance, he first tested out the technique on himself and his children, giving an eccentric family portrait. In this way any final result was the outcome of an endless series of tests, tests in which Zimmerman also sounded out the boundaries of the absurd and the surreal. On the one hand baseballer Pete Rose had, for an advertising shoot, to follow meticulously Zimmerman's instructions, so that in the final ad the club logo would also be clearly visible on his chest; on the other hand the shoot resulted in a series of images in which the superstar ultimately dissolves into an amorphous spot. There is no question that Zimmerman forced technological breakthroughs that left a lasting mark on photography, and in particular sports photography, where the display of movement and action – in short, the sum of momentum – is so crucial.

But, as Rudi H. Niedzielski already noted in 1979, Zimmerman's fame as a technie had played and continued to play tricks on him, with his reputation as a technological innovator "often obscuring the fact that he has an excellent eye for shooting straight. In fact, most of his assignments call for precisely that raw visual skill." It is exactly this rough and uncut visual ingenuity that we want to highlight in this publication, which focuses primarily on Zimmerman's black-and-white work from the 1950's to the 1970's. Without falling into the 'origin of the artistic genius' genre, a look at Zimmerman's earliest work is revealing. His first picture, a portrait of his family while grace is said at table from 1941 (when he was just fourteen years old)<sup>p.29</sup>, exhibits certain traits that would determine his entire oeuvre: it is a *tableau vivant* that seems at once very authentic and staged. We have, it seems, exclusive access to an intimate, modest atmosphere which in fact has already been disrupted by the presence of the photographer and his equipment (is not his empty plate there in the foreground?). Have his relatives forgotten him? Or are they following his orders here? It is a still life full of tension. As in a palisade, vectors hold each other in balance: between two items of equal width, the strip of wall and the table top, we are caught in a tangle of lines. Both the closed eyes and the cutlery are directed at an undefined gravitational point somewhere between the chicken legs. Opposing this gravity effect, two candles rise perpendicularly. Outside it is daylight. Across from the white, slightly wrinkled tablecloth is the mother's flowered apron. But it is the water container in



Zimmerman directs Cincinnati Reds outfielder Pete Rose for experimental photo, Tampa, Florida, 1969. Photo by Al Bailey



Pete Rose caught in his signature hustle with a strip camera, 1969

the corner that absorbs all the attention: almost as if this banal object has a key role to play in this ritual moment. Moreover, this (un)thing, or rather this gadget, emblemizes a certain (consumerist) modernity.

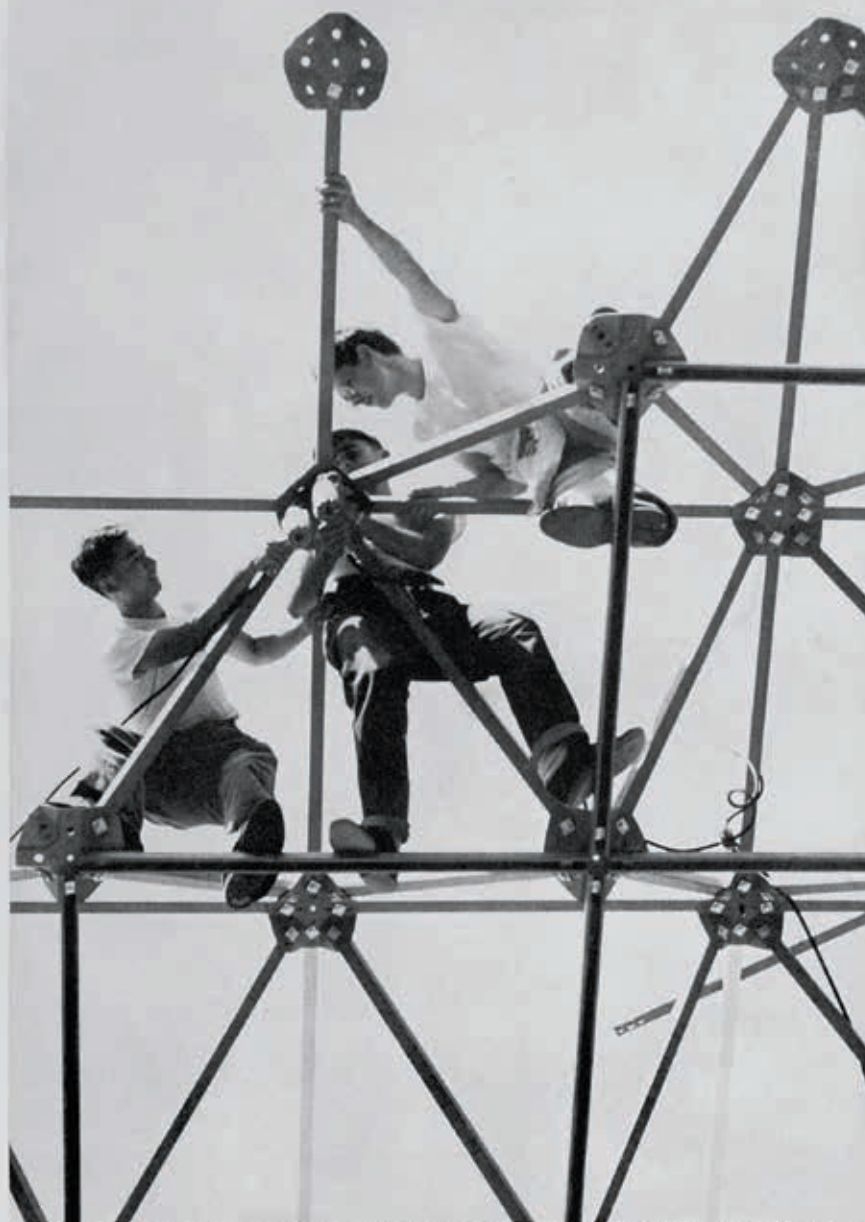
That this dinner table ritual was for Zimmerman a kind of primal scene is illustrated by the way he repeated it twelve years later, in 1953, this time not with a white but a black family, no chicken wings but a stack of bread, no water container but a stove<sup>p.31</sup>. Back to the same (staged or not) domestic modesty, around a meal and an oil lamp, back to those introspective looks – were it not for the almost distrustful expression on the face of the father of the house. This man experienced like none other the power of the gaze. Matt Ingram was his name and he was charged with “reckless eyeballing”. If a black man at that time even dared to look at a white woman (or if that woman imagined him doing so), he could be accused of sexual harassment and even rape. It happened to Ingram who had apparently frightened his seventeen-year-old female neighbour by looking at her from some twenty yards away. He was given a sentence for, in the court’s words: “looking at a person in a leering manner, that is, in some sort of sly or threatening or suggestive manner”.

That Zimmerman was struck by Ingram’s story, which he shot for the African-American magazine *Ebony*, is not surprising. Running through

his entire oeuvre is a fascination with the look. His images capture a complex interplay of looks, in every direction. From scattered and evasive over surprised and curious to sharp piercing gazes. Some characters look into a mirror, others are blindfolded. Some look away in an almost embarrassed way, others stare at the photographer – and therefore at us – as if to disarm us. Whether one likes it or not, they appeal to us, telling us to mind our own business or seeking empathy. Think of the black girl getting a polio treatment and apparently finding no consolation from her doll<sup>p.37</sup>. The looks we get from the big bosses in *Board meeting*<sup>p.139</sup> tell the photographer and us to get out fast (though there is a seat free): what they are arranging should remain behind closed doors. At the other end of the table sits a man with an eye patch.

But Zimmerman is interested not only in the way his characters look in every direction, but also in what they are looking at. In his photos people do not just look, they also look at *something*. Hence Zimmerman's fascination with groups and crowds looking as if paralyzed at one and the same object: a globe, a bust, a Bible manuscript, a baseball, a belly dancer or a baby's buttocks. Or yes, even stuffed animals, if this is what it takes to *distract* the child's attention at the hairdresser's<sup>p.82</sup>. Maybe this is the crux of Zimmerman's exploration of the gaze, namely the question: what is able to distract us? What captivates us and draws our attention? In this sense Zimmerman's oeuvre is also a genealogy of twentieth-century pop culture, based on the enigmatic, even magnetic force which persons and objects can and do exercise. What makes Zimmerman's work so intriguing is the ambivalent double role it played: as a magazine photographer Zimmerman of course cultivated the charisma and the enigma of the things he reproduced, but at the same time he revealed how this mesmerizing effect comes about. He photographs the Beatles, but at the same time shows how they are being photographed, how they are captured and constructed by cameras<sup>p.117</sup>. He portrays the cheerful crooner Liberace, but at the same time shows him besieged by women with languishing glances, holding magazines with portrait photos (ideal for autographs) at the ready<sup>p.135</sup>. Like the Citroen DS (or *Déesse*) in Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, Zimmerman's 1956 Lincoln seems to have descended from heaven<sup>p.106-107</sup>: an angelic figure only reinforces the divine brilliance that surrounds this object. As an adman he understood like none other how to give objects a tinge of uniqueness and desirability; after all, he produced campaigns for Marlboro and Pepsi-Cola. That Zimmerman himself, however, was fully aware of the politico-ideological dimension of this magnetism is evidenced by his series on politics, in the narrower sense of the word, showing how Nixon and Eisenhower could grab audiences like no one else. And above all he also exposed how media and technology contribute to this charismatic effect. About the fascination of looking at what is essentially inaccessible to us, Richard Nixon's daughter Julie maybe has the most to tell us<sup>p.102</sup>: how dearly we want to look with her through the peephole, to stand tiptoe on the cobblestones to see what is happening on the other side of the Wall.

ARCHITECTURE



STEEL MEMBERS FOR ROOF ARE BOLTED TOGETHER BY STUDENTS WHO SAY THEY WORK LIKE GIANT MECCANO SET

## SPIDER WEB BUILDING

Students erect steel structure which is put together like a Meccano toy

Building with steel is usually a complicated matter that requires expert drillers, riveters and welders. But in the past few months, 20 students at the University of Michigan have erected a steel building using no special skills and only one tool—a wrench for tightening nuts. They worked with a new kind of steel rod called Unistrut, four-foot-long members that bolt together in a pattern like a spider web.

The university used Unistrut as an experiment in erecting light, cheap buildings that go up quickly and easily and can also be taken down easily. The structure has already passed all the strain and weight tests run by the university's Engineering Research Institute. Now being used as one of the architectural school's buildings, it could serve as a model for new schools which are so much needed through the U.S.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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The complex interplay of divergent glances makes Zimmermans photos into *Vexierbilder*, as they call in German pictures that arrest and deceive us, which invite us to examine again and again what exactly is going on. *Washing dishes* <sup>p.74-75</sup> for example, is traversed by a diagonal axis that causes the image to vibrate again and again: from basketball to mother – and in between a child staring into a bowl, a toddler lying on the floor and looking straight at us, and a cumbersome jute potato sack. Another such inconvenient diagonal can be found in *Funeral Procession* <sup>p.89</sup>, where we cannot avoid the feeling that the photographer (and thus we) are shamelessly blocking the funeral procession, almost climbing onto the coffin. In other words, Zimmerman's images are tight with tension. On the one hand this derives from his desire to make “the dynamite photograph” (Zimmerman) and to go looking for the ultimate moment when things are about to happen. It is significant, therefore, that Zimmerman's real breakthrough came in November 1950 when he was the only photographer in a position to photograph for *Time* the failed attempt on Harry S. Truman's life by Puerto Rican nationalists. He got a buzz – just like any sports photographer – from momentum. In this respect Zimmerman's photographs of the arrival of the Finn Antti Viskari in the Boston Marathon <sup>p.148-149</sup> are exemplary: full of dynamism and vibrancy – chaos frozen forever. On the other hand Zimmerman also looked beyond the momentum. His perhaps most famous picture shows not how Bednarik knocks out Gifford <sup>p.156-157</sup>, but more importantly, how he, a fraction of a second afterwards, stands triumphantly above his victim. Often what Zimmerman's figures are looking at is also outside the picture: we do not get to see the action, but only the effect of that action: a boisterous crowd, ecstatic cheerleaders. In this sense, Zimmerman's *tableaux vivants* create confusion among viewers, since it's unclear whether certain scenes are 'captured' or 'staged'. Zimmerman's special sense for theatricality and staging are exemplified by *Waiting Room* <sup>p.173</sup>: What at first sight seems an incidental snapshot of a group of people waiting, is actually a sophisticated composition based on preparation, preparation, and yet again preparation, or as the photographer himself put it in 1960: “In a way, that's all good pictures are – planned pictures, good ideas perfectly executed.”

Composition, however, was not an end in itself to Zimmerman. Everything was designed to increase the suggestiveness of an image. He himself spoke of “symbolic pictures” (Zimmerman), by which he referred to the narrative potential of his images. Whole stories, big and small, are condensed into them. This certainly applies to the pictures he took in the early 1950's of the segregated Southern States of the USA. With their highly refined and evocative interplay of black and white, each documents a unique story. One should not forget that Zimmerman's pictures were intended in the first instance for magazines, in this case the Afro-American magazine *Ebony*, in which they had to play an illustrative or documentary role. Moreover, they were often printed small and squeezed between cartoons and ads for bourbon and bustiers, pistols and Vienna sausages.



What this book does is to detach Zimmerman's work from this context and present Zimmerman as the artist he was – something that possibly would not have pleased him. Although, if you examine the black-and-white portfolio with which he completed his training in 1945 at Fremont High School, the first secondary school in the US with a full photography course, you can already recognize his artistic signature, which consists of linking technological innovation, refined composition and narrative suggestiveness. And above all, you already notice in this end-of-course work his fervent desire, as a chronicler, to depict every sphere of society, to see it all.

To see all of Zimmerman will be the work of many years to come. This book presents only a selection of a massive corpus of work spanning a total of five decades: It focuses on Zimmerman's black-and-white work between 1950 and 1975. The selection presented here is built on the long years of work of the John G. Zimmerman Archive, which has collected and ordered not only several hundred thousand transparencies and negatives, but also contact sheets, magazines, letters and contracts. The fact that this book has come into being we owe to a large extent to the support and enthusiasm of the Zimmerman family.



At Ebbets Field for the World Series,  
Brooklyn, New York, 1956. Photo by Art Kane

# JOHN G. ZIMMERMAN

## A NEW REPUTATION FROM AN ESTABLISHED CAREER

Francis Hodgson

John G. Zimmerman, whom the distinguished historian of photography Gail Buckland recently described as the “leader of the pack” of sports photographers,<sup>1</sup> was as competitive as the athletes he was so good at photographing. There is a good story from the time he covered the 1968 winter Olympics – Jean-Claude Killy’s Olympics – in Grenoble. A number of photographers wanted to find a spot to shoot the downhill practice. Zimmerman’s *Sports Illustrated* colleague Marvin Newman appeared at the top of the lift, with an assistant, both laden down with heavy knapsacks of camera gear. Newman made some likely looking callisthenic moves, strode down the steep hill, and fell spectacularly on his face. Next came John Zimmerman. No assistant; even heavier rucksack; no callisthenics. He just pushed off and skied supremely elegantly down the mountain to his chosen position. The story is told by Neil Leifer, another colleague, who wryly acknowledged Zimmerman’s apparently effortless superiority.<sup>2</sup>

That was one aspect of John G. Zimmerman’s career in a nutshell. He covered ten Olympics in total, starting in the mid-1950s. If professionalism required him to ski competently well, he would ski beautifully. His reputation is for perfectionism, manifested mainly in the technical advances he was constantly researching and making. He famously put a camera above the hoop for the ultimate basketball shot, using then very new techniques of remote control to fire it. He experimented with stroboscopic lighting, sequenced photographs, underwater pictures – really whatever he could use to make a picture that was not a cliché but fresh and full of impact. It is of the essence of sport that its high moments look much like one another; and it is of the essence of John Zimmerman that he understood that and wanted always to come back with a fan’s dedication: closer, faster, nearer the action. He would experiment to get a better picture, and if a technique didn’t exist he was happy to invent it. Multiple exposures, new kinds of shutters, faster motors... He put cameras high, low, in the back of ice-hockey nets. Once – generations before the Go-Pro – he fixed a camera to the mask of the umpire behind the catcher in baseball practice. (White Sox, spring practice in 1959. The pitcher was Billy Pierce; the batter his teammate Earl Battey.) Technical advance – and perfect control of every piece of equipment, including his skis if necessary – was Zimmerman’s trademark. He was known and respected for it, and it drove him forward. Numbers of former colleagues have testified that he was forever taking equipment apart and putting it together. If you didn’t know him in a crowd of photographers, all you had to do was

1 Buckland, Gail, *Who Shot Sports? A Photographic History, 1843 to the Present*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2016, p. 239.

2 Interview with Neil Leifer. The John G. Zimmerman Archive has put the interview on Vimeo, where it can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/85586529> (last accessed July 2016).

find the one with a camera in pieces in his hands.<sup>3</sup> As a specialist sports photographer, he believed in having the imagination and the daring to find a new way to make the photograph, then the planning and execution to get it right. Slow, thoughtful work behind the camera leading to perfect immediacy on the page.

So much of that search for immediacy has become the common currency of sports coverage – witness the competitive season-by-season improvements in televised coverage of such specialists as Sky Sports or ESPN – that it is easy to forget that at one time such unconventionality was risking the job. At the bottom line, you might not get the shot. I remember (it must have been the early 1970s) there was a noticeable frisson in England when the specialist cricket photographer Patrick Eagar started using remote controlled cameras. At first he couldn't use them for color at all, because until the Nikon FE his cameras had no built-in meters and he would have had no idea of the exposure. He could only have got the idea from Zimmerman. There was a fine specialist sports photographer in the UK, Gerry Cranham, who sometimes got work for *Sports Illustrated* in the 1960s but Eagar's information on remote control seems not to have come through him.<sup>4</sup>

Zimmerman's technical advances went around the world as solutions to problems. Other photographers noticed, and consistently they admired the professional excellence of Zimmerman's perfectionism. But that is not all. His conviction that there was always a better way to get the picture, that cliché and convention were the enemy to be beaten as often as possible, contributed (far more than is acknowledged) to the increasing marketability of sport which has reached such astounding levels today. I even wonder whether the repeating tropes of sport would have been able to be sold so well without the ever-changing originality and imagination of the coverage. It took a pioneer to establish that.

So Zimmerman deserves distinguished credit for advancing his profession in ways that he couldn't predict but that we with hindsight can see have been expanded to great effect across the entire field of sport, sports coverage and sports marketing.

Lots of photographers experiment with their gear. I remember David Hiscock coming back from the Barcelona Olympics (where he had been an official artist for one of the sponsors) and making his own photo-finish cameras (from record turntables, among other bits and pieces). With these Heath Robinson things he made successful commercial pictures that had the characteristic distortions of form of the photo finish,<sup>5</sup> but allowed him

3 Buckland, op. cit, p. 237.

4 See interview with Patrick Eagar, N Photo, 2 July 2015, p. 109.

5 William Heath Robinson (d. 1944) was a British cartoonist known for drawing primitive machines of comic complexity to accomplish tasks so simple they needed no machine. He is the approximate equivalent to British ears of Rube Goldberg (1883 -1970) to Americans.



Zimmerman poses for *Hawk or Dove*, an experimental series on political clichés, Midtown Manhattan, 1970

studio levels of control. Stretching the possibilities of his equipment like that was certainly a part of John Zimmerman's constant attitude. It was his way of competing with himself, of making every job as fresh as it could be.

To some extent, he was born to that. His father was a gaffer for the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio in the 1920s, a job – in the technically adventurous days of that industry – which demanded constant imaginative invention or the picture wouldn't happen. Further, Zimmerman himself attended the John C. Fremont High School in Los Angeles. That is an important institution in the history of photography which richly deserves research in its own right, as so many graduates of Clarence A. Bach's ground-breaking photojournalism course there later became staff photographers for *LIFE*,<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For example: Bob Landry (d. 1960); George Strock (d. 1977); Dick Pollard (d. 1994); Mark Kauffman (d. 1994); Hank Walker (d. 1996); John Florea (d. 2000); John Dominis (d. 2103)... On the extraordinary influence of Clarence Bach's course at Fremont High, cf. Morris, John G., *Get the Picture: A Personal History of Photojournalism*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 55.

and many others got photographic jobs elsewhere. There is no doubt that Zimmerman was among those on the very high peaks of his profession when it comes to technical mastery, and the imagination to see how technique could improve a photograph. Yet perhaps his reputation has rather unfairly stalled there. He was a brilliantly effective technical problem-solver. But he was rather more than that, too.

In 1952, Zimmerman covered an astonishing event, a shoeshine competition in Wilson, North Carolina. The idea was that shoe shiners would dance and move, and most particularly they would 'pop the rag'. This was snapping the shoeshine cloth in such a way as to make almost a percussion instrument, the sound not far from that of the tap-dance. Shoe shiners had long done this, as a sassy way of attracting attention and maybe a tip, but it had been picked up in a hit song of 1950, *Chattanooga Shoe Shine Boy* (by Red Foley) and then turned into a big public spectacle. The story was perhaps offered to *LIFE*, for whom Zimmerman worked as a freelancer at the time, but it was not published, and the pictures remained unseen until 2014 when Linda Zimmerman, the photographer's daughter, carefully researched them. These pictures are utterly different from those on which Zimmerman's reputation mainly rests.<sup>7</sup> Full of human interest, anchored more in the photographer's sympathy and curiosity than in any technical expertise, they (and many others that he made with the same sensibilities) put Zimmerman in a very different light.

The first question may be the most difficult to answer. What was Zimmerman doing wandering around the Jim Crow South as a photo-journalist? Is it enough merely to notice that he periodically seems to have got restless throughout his career and to have left one job for another just because he could?<sup>8</sup> We know that he deliberately moved to Atlanta in search of work. For some reason, unknown to me, but surely central to an appreciation of Zimmerman, he found the manifest inequities of the racially-divided South – and then, following that, the racial tensions elsewhere in the country – a spur and a key subject. It's as though Zimmerman found within his own country the great almost ethnographic subject matter that other photographers found elsewhere. Something of what Paul Strand found in Italy and Ghana, or Cartier-Bresson found in China and India, Zimmerman

7 Some of them are here, but a number more of the pictures can be seen – and a full account of their rediscovery can be read – on the website of North Carolina Public Radio WUNC, at <http://wunc.org/post/breath-taking-images-discovered-1950s-shoeshine-competition-north-carolina#stream/0> (last accessed July 2016).

8 "My father never settled comfortably in one job, as he was always looking for a challenge. He left *Sports Illustrated* after only six or seven years to pursue other types of photography with Time/Life Inc. For instance, he did architectural photography and took it as far as he could, then moved on. I remember my father telling me that 'if you want to like your boss, you should work for yourself.'" Written by the photographer's son, Darryl Zimmerman in an obituary notice published online. Mangin, Brad, *A Tribute to John G. Zimmerman, the Mayor of Spanish Bay: 1927-2002*. <http://www.sportsshooter.com/news/760> (last accessed July 2016).



Covering baseball from the bleachers, Wrigley Field, 1960

found in the South. This is not the place to tell the history of the US Civil Rights Movement; it is enough to note that the landmark Supreme Court Case *Brown v The Board of Education* rejecting segregated public schools was not heard until 1954, and that various other public institutions such as public libraries were not integrated for many years after that. The shoe-shine competition in Wilson in 1952 was a segregated affair; indeed the three judges were all middle-aged white men.

It is possible – but it is only my speculation – that Zimmerman had found in his brief military service some shared qualities in African-American people that moved his curiosity. It is possible – still speculation – that he found in sport one of the few forums in which those same people could do well. We simply don't know the answers to these kinds of questions. But it does seem clear that there is a larger element of human interest, even perhaps of social interest, in his work than any of the professional shooters who so admired his sports coverage realized.

As a staffer for *LIFE*, *Time*, and *Sports Illustrated*, Zimmerman ran a distinguished and eminent career tending the most central imagery of the American dream. See here, as only one example among many, the view of the cleaning of the flag. Another example would be his frequent commissions to make the famous swimsuit pictures for *Sports Illustrated*. Zimmerman brought to them the same brave technical expertise as he brought to his other work. Being entrusted with those is almost an official job. The modern equivalent would be the hoo-ha about the Victoria's Secret underwear shows: great absurd almost-official displays of the prime femininity of the nation.

Zimmerman did his share of other nearly-official work, too. As it happens, just as many years later the career of Sebastião Salgado was kick-started by his pictures of the survival of President Reagan in an assassination attempt, so Zimmerman's was kick-started by his own pictures of the survival of President Truman.<sup>9</sup> He was then on a White House beat. In a long and varied career, in which he sometimes even made fashion photographs, he covered numerous presidential and celebrity appearances. The word is never used of photographers like him in the US, and we should apply it with great caution, but in other countries one could say that the bulk of Zimmerman's work in these all-but official circumstances was in effect mild propaganda. That is what it means to work for *LIFE* and *Sports Illustrated*, journals which both had the right to produce just enough occasional questioning or 'negative' stories' to color their overwhelmingly positive take on life in the United States. Zimmerman's reputation has been founded upon his undoubted eminence as a great contributor to that 'official' pageant of America – principally athletic events

9 1 November 1950, the attempted assassination of President Truman by Puerto Rican nationalists outside the Blair House (the temporary office of the President while the White House was refurbished). Zimmerman's pictures were used in both *Time* and *LIFE*. *Time Magazine*, November 13, 1950, p. 17, 21; *LIFE*, November 13, 1950, pp. 25-27.

and pretty young women, in mass circulation magazines, in color. In 1963 and 1964 he even made some of the classic cowboy images for Marlboro (cigarettes): just about as 'official' a job there can be in US commercial photography, and intimately concerned with the nation's image of itself. As it stands at present, his reputation takes no account of the very different work he was able to do when he could, as in that wonderfully-photographed shoeshine competition in Wilson, North Carolina. And it is (at least) arguable that the sensitivities he was able to make use of in that kind of work are just as impressive as the better-known strictly professional expertise he is admired for. Certainly, they add another dimension to what we knew.

Zimmerman's career took place after the Second World War, in the precise generation in which radical imagery of a questioning or even liberal kind was really much harder to get published in the mainstream magazines that he worked for than it might have been before the war. It seems possible to construct a tentative view that he subsumed some of what he had learnt in the South into the humanistic element of his work that is precisely the extra material that is being rediscovered now. That element is really very much more complex than had been realized, and it gives the depth and weight to the more mechanically proficient work that we used to be asked to admire. In other words, Zimmerman used to be regarded as the supreme professional. I think now, thanks to the gradual ordering of his archive and the new research that enables, we can make a different assessment. Zimmerman could do the routine work of a successful all-American photographer easily and well. He did it for years, and became preeminent at that. But he seems to have had a humanist sensibility bursting to get out as well. Zimmerman the technician had an admirable professional reputation among his fellow-photographers, but has hardly been well known to the wider public. It is principally photographers whose admiring quotes are appended to Zimmerman's name ("I put him up there with Avedon, Leibovitz, Penn, and Adams").<sup>10</sup> The welcome inclusion henceforward within his reputation of his more personal vision will reach wider, to add another dimension to a photographer who was admired and well-known but not yet appreciated in all of his facets.

10 A tribute by former colleague Neil Leifer in *American Photo*, January 2003, p. 24.



# “AMERICANICITY”

Oliver Kohns

In *S/Z*, Roland Bathes memorably coins the word *italianità*. The term describes a seemingly essential Italian atmosphere by evoking a web of clichés and received ideas surrounding Italy. Even while *italianità* is supposed to express the essence of the Italian nation, it is in fact an assemblage of ideas, images, and associations that are not only constructed, but perpetually reconstructed. In this sense, we can argue that John G. Zimmerman’s photographs first and foremost represent *Americanicity* (*Amerikanizität*). It might be more accurate to say they *construct* this *Americanicity*, as Zimmerman’s pictures have decisively contributed to the formation of a new image of the United States. This is especially true for the U.S. of the 1950’s and 1960’s – the ‘*Mad Men* era’, eponomously named after the television show that has popularized the period’s style and feel once again. However, Zimmerman’s photographs reveal a different America than the one on display in the series: They show not only the glossy dream world of New York, but also the everyday life of the Jim Crow South and Midwest. What the TV show and these photos have in common, however, and what also constitutes their *Americanicity*, is that they both draw on a certain *flair* or *style*.

This becomes manifest, for example, in *Shoeshine contest* (1952)<sup>p.32</sup>. The picture shows a young bootblack shining a customer’s shoes in the foreground with two young men behind. At first glance, the focus of the picture appears to be on the seated figure, since he is the only one facing the camera – the other figures look outward, at something beyond the picture frame. However, the true focus of the picture is neither the bootblack nor his customer, but rather the customer’s hat. It rests on his right hand; together with his half-closed eyes and cigarette, the hat evokes a casual composure, a certain nonchalance. The scene now becomes readable as an expression of artistry, of ease and elegance – in short, of style. The fact that the customer is the only one not looking at the invisible reality to which the other people in the picture attend indicates an attitude of indifference, superiority, and calm. In Zimmerman’s picture, this artistry is specifically African American, and evokes an artistic ease not unlike that of jazz. It is precisely the visualization of this artistry that accounts for the picture’s *Americanicity*.

Many of Zimmerman’s pictures capture the American way of life in an almost classic way. This is certainly true for his sport photographs, which form an important part of his oeuvre. These pictures are not just aesthetic glorifications of a fabricated American dream. To be sure, sport has always been a key aspect of *Americanicity*: competitive and dramatic as they are, team sports such as football, basketball and baseball time and again inform stories of victory and defeat. Zimmerman’s photos always endow the world of sports with the same elegance and casualness that we find in *Shoeshine contest*; they make it possible to appreciate the more mundane

side of sports, and the virtuosity that is inherent in this seemingly banal dimension. In *Night harness racing at Roosevelt Raceway* (1957)<sup>p.152-153</sup>, for example, we see the aftermath of a night of harness racing at Roosevelt Racetrack in New York. Spectators make their way to the exits; countless ticket stubs and newspapers litter the ground like confetti. The focus is on the fans and their milieu rather than on the horse racing action. Similarly in *Overall view of Pancho Gonzales vs Ken Rosewall at Madison Square Garden* (1958)<sup>p.130-131</sup>, Zimmerman captures a stunning improvisation: a professional tennis match taking place on New York City's famed sports arena. Rather than focus on the match action, Zimmerman presents a wide view of the arena in order to dramatize the transformation of a hockey rink into an impromptu tennis stadium.

Zimmerman's *Americanicity* is never naïve. His photos typically offer an unflinching look at social realities. *Families divided during polio epidemic* (1953)<sup>p.87</sup> can easily be read as an allegory of racial segregation in 1950's America. We see two families in Montgomery Alabama, one white and the other African-American, seemingly in front of a church. Because the white family on the left stands in deep shadow and the black family stands in full sunlight, their tonalities appear almost reversed. Yet this visual chiasmus leaves them as segregated as ever: the column in the middle visually divides the two groups into completely separate worlds.

Zimmerman's way of seeing the world extends to American politics. His series on President Dwight D. Eisenhower's inaugural address from January 1953 is a most intriguing example<sup>p.46-47, 122-125</sup>. He depicts Eisenhower himself only at the margins: all we see are people – the 'demos' who elected Eisenhower to the presidency. We see a number of pictures in which ordinary citizens – patients of a hospital together with their nurses, military staff, people in a department store – appear (without exception) spellbound by TV screens transmitting the inaugural address. Zimmerman's camera focuses only on the viewers, not on the screens themselves. As Marshall McLuhan wrote in *Understanding Media*, the medium of television enabled a new form of social organization because it made it possible for its users to participate more actively than previous media did. "TV will not work as background. It engages you. You have to be with it," as McLuhan puts it. Zimmerman's pictures reflect this immersive engagement: By watching the same events on the screen at the same time, the viewers appear united as one people – at least for a short fleeting moment, which is captured in its simultaneity in Zimmerman's series. These pictures also function as medial *mise-en-abymes*: as photographic observations of people watching televisions, they are technical pictures of technical pictures, and this underlines that this unity is an effect of media technology. In this sense, Zimmerman's pictures not only actively construct *Americanicity*, but also reflect upon the media mechanisms underlying it.

# AMERICAN RUST

**Daniel Peña**

If John G. Zimmerman's lens teaches us anything in 2016 it's that American rust prevails. It bends, it breaks, it sloughs off into the breeze. Little glittery bits of painted iron and steel that litter the wind, that take the shape of it so that even the wind, too, becomes part of the rust, which is to say everything this American rust touches and inhabits, new and old alike: the contemporary prison industrial complex, the contemporary vaccine debate, the contemporary implosion (and revival) of General Motors, the enduring plague of American racism. All of it can be linked back to something Zimmerman found in his lens first. And in that sense Zimmerman wasn't so much casting his gaze on the present or past but the future too – all three together.

From American rust we were born; into American rust we'll devolve, have devolved, are devolving no matter how brilliantly we paint it – this last point more poignant than ever amid the 21<sup>st</sup>-century rise of populist nativism in the United States. I wonder sometimes: what are these two Americas we're seeing right now? What is this darkness? What kind of rust is this?

Of course political winds change. The wind becomes the rust it carries. But this new wind, this new 21<sup>st</sup>-century American chapter, seems to be something beyond left-right politics. Sloughed away from the national dialogue is all the brand-conscious paint (or talking points) typically associated with the American right and exposed is all the rust behind that rhetoric, which (if we're honest with ourselves) too is quintessentially American, though something I thought we'd buried long ago – this nativism, this undying desire for violence against people of color which has been rekindled. In my mind this makes John G. Zimmerman's photography all the more poignant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Through John G. Zimmerman's lens we see who we were, as Americans, though we also see who we are, which is to say the American rust from which we were built.

Zimmerman's photography peels the glossy paint from the surface to expose, however subtly, the radical elements from which the American spirit is derived: violence, racism, manifest destiny, the anxiety of the other, the anxiety of the black and brown body, provincialism, the deep desire for dignity, the deep American desire for glory at any cost. But above all escapism, which is, arguably, the predominant trope and luxury of the Enlightenment that we inherited from Western Europe. The same brand of escapism which informs the American origin story, which subsequently informs our notion of American glory via war, sport, and individualism.

This is not to say that Zimmerman's photography is at odds with America. Zimmerman's photography simply sees more dimensions than meets first glance.

In Zimmerman's lens, American rust and American mythology exist side by side. There is no paint without rust; no rust without paint. This is no more poignant than in his sports photography for which he's perhaps most well-known.

One particular favorite of mine is *Kentucky cheerleaders*<sup>p.59</sup> from 1958. In the foreground, five University of Kentucky cheerleaders viscerally react to misfortune on the court in a game versus Temple University. Immediately, the viewer's eye is pulled center-left toward a cheerleader (Pat Phelps) grasping the locks of hair atop her head, her fingers curled into jagged-jointed tension, her face preternaturally aged by the bloat of blood rush to her head amid the emotionally charged game. Center-right, another cheerleader (Susan Bradley) kneels with her arms akimbo, her sullen eyes a lighter shade of the same despair displayed by Phelps though even still exuding a more public display of emotion than the crowd behind her, visibly all white and all male.

Not lost to the lens are the three visible Kentucky K's sewed into the Cheerleader's sweaters to the right of the shot (Susan Bradley, Tracy Walden, and Mary Janet Bond), while to the left, the two cheerleaders (Pat Nallinger and Pat Phelps) cover the K's with their knees.

Not lost to me, from the vantage point of 2016, is everything outside of the shot: the all-white Kentucky Wildcat basketball team playing what Larry Bird would, more than thirty years later, call "the black man's game", the Jim Crow state of Kentucky, the Ku Klux Klan and its historical shaping of Kentucky politics, the incredible oppression of black and brown bodies in the Deep South, and then, of course, the white escapism that accompanies all of those things in a game with no stakes, in a region rife with the destruction of black lives, in a century that would soon see that escapism under attack by the Civil Rights Movement designed to strip the paint – the polite fiction – from the surface of the social fabric to expose the impolite realities – the rust – of the time.

I think the photograph most resonates with me because the characters remind me so much of the characters surrounding my own childhood in Texas, a state at once part of the American South and the American Southwest. I've seen that deep desire for escapism up close. Big bands, barbecues, college basketball, but especially high school and college football, which has its own special gravity in the Texas psyche.

At its most fundamental, Texas high school football is about nativism – our part of the city versus yours – though I'd argue it's also about proving, through the ritual of a game, some basic idea surrounding the mythology of Texas grit. This same juxtaposition of mythology and fact is the thing that fuels college athletic regionalism across the United States, particularly in the Southeastern Conference (which the University of Kentucky is a part of). And particularly Texas college athletics.

There's a saying, in the United States, that everything is bigger in Texas. And the University of Texas being the University of Texas ran with this mythology. There were four Longhorn students who had to handle the drum that day, who spun it around in circles, over and over again, as the Longhorn band blared behind all around them. I remember jets flying overhead. I remember the sea of burnt orange in the stands. I remember the unfurling of the American flag before anything else. And it was in this moment, as the stadium prayed the national anthem, that I began to realize that religion, sport, and escapism were all different facets of the same thing. A ritual self-cleansing. A necessary preservation of American innocence.

I must have been fourteen at the time, which would have been the year the United States invaded Iraq with "Operation Shock and Awe." As everyone knows now, the war in Iraq was a sham that came about as the result of the Bush-era PR machine that spun tales of imaginary weapons of mass destruction paired with some vague fight against the same brand of terrorism that brought down the World Trade Centers, which is to say the brand of terrorism that marred American innocence as we knew it. In the days after 9/11 everyone asked the same question: *how did this happen to us? What did we ever do?* In the days after "Operation Shock and Awe" Americans asked: *Are we avenged yet?*

I'd argue that the same brand of innocence that started that war isn't all so different from the brand of innocence on display in *Kentucky cheerleaders*, though other things are evoked too, most notably the archetype of *white damsel in distress*. An American trope which has historically contributed to such horrific events as the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955, segregated pools and water fountains, the war on drugs, and subsequently, the mass incarceration of black and brown men in America to this day.

Which brings me to the future dimensions of America that Zimmerman's lens caught even in 1958. Is the rust we're seeing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a culmination of all three dimensions – past, present, and future – working in sync within the same moment? Have our anxieties come to a head? Are we surrounded by rust? Are we doomed to crumble under the weight of our legacy?

I'd argue no. Zimmerman's lens teaches us that much too. As there is no rust without paint in his lens there is no despair without light.

Where one could ask, *did Zimmerman's lens foretell native populism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?* I'd ask, *did Zimmerman's lens foreshadow Black Lives Matter?* Where one might ask, *did Zimmerman's lens predict the vestigial elements of Jim Crow in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?* I'd ask, *did Zimmerman's lens predict the first black president?*

If Zimmerman's lens has taught me anything it's that yes, we crumble, we stumble, but we rebuild. Hopefully with less mythology and anxiety and hopefully with more humanity. Of course, we don't always get it right. But we move ahead despite our past. And, occasionally, in spite of it.



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