

## Photography

### Michel Comte: 'I'm a chronicler of the moment'

Fashion photographer-turned-land artist Michel Comte wants to help save the planet through campaigning and art



Michel Comte's photograph of Aialik glacier in Alaska, covered in foil after being contaminated in the Exxon Valdez disaster

**Simon Ings** 5 HOURS AGO

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Michel Comte, the fashion photographer-turned-land artist and climate campaigner (though he rejects that last label), is marooned in a Swiss health resort. As far as he knows, he is the only resident. "Take a look!" He tilts his laptop to show the view from the window and there, over the Skype link, his valley — there's nobody else — stretches into the distance, absent all human activity.

"Maybe we'll learn from this horrible pandemic," he sighs. "Maybe we'll learn to slow down. It's good to take time and step back and especially look at whether what we are doing right now is the right thing. Did you know the air pollution round here is down 43 per cent since 11 days ago?"

The isolation of lockdown is a hardship for many, but after a couple of minutes it's clear that the pair of us are having the time of our lives. During the interview — which took place in March — we swap book recommendations. "I'm an avid reader," Comte says. "I upset my family terribly years ago when I said my true home is where my books are."



Michel Comte in the Jungfrau region of Switzerland

Comte was born in Zurich in 1954. Trained as a fine art restorer, in 1979 he moved to Paris to work for Chloé, fell in with Karl Lagerfeld, worked for Vogue and Vanity Fair, and by the 1990s was one of the fashion world's most in-demand photographers.

I earn points for not asking him about what it was like working with Sophia Loren: “You’re the first journalist ever not to ask me about this big change I’m making in abandoning the glamour work, 13 years ago.”

So his past celebrity is a burden? “You carry it on your fucking back,” he says. “It took 10 years for people to notice I was visiting Africa for months at a time. It took 20 years before people started listening to what I’ve been saying since my first gallery show.”

Simply put, Comte wants to help save the world, whether that involves bringing attention to the plight of endangered species in Africa or following, over the course of years, the retreat of glaciers his grandfather Alfred Comte, a pioneering aviator, first photographed in the 1920s.

This was going to be the year when Michel would sail a yacht to the edge of the Arctic and project a new artwork on to the wall of a glacier: an audiovisual spectacular as terrifying as it would be beautiful, visualising 15 years of forecast ice-melt and environmental decline.

But production delays triggered by the Covid-19 outbreak have given him a chance to rethink and regroup. In particular, he has been wondering about the ecological impact of filling Spitsbergen — the largest island in the Svalbard archipelago, between Norway and the North Pole — with noise and lasers.



Glacier photographed by Michel Comte

It would be better, Comte thinks now, to map the natural ice wall that was once going to serve as his screen. In 15 years it will have disappeared, so this is his chance to record it. It is several kilometres in length: big enough to project across a city skyline. Miami, perhaps, or New York — a whole city could be immersed in the reality of the climate emergency. He now hopes to stage such an event in summer 2021 and, while he is staying put in Switzerland for now, he still plans to visit Spitsbergen this August to do the advance scanning and topography.

I wonder how he has the patience for such projects. After all, photographers deal, as Henri Cartier-Bresson said, “in things which are continually vanishing and when they have vanished there is no contrivance on earth which can make them come back again”.

Comte says he can talk about hardly anything authoritatively. “But what I can do is talk about the very few things I have touched. I’ve witnessed a lot. I’m more like a writer or a journalist: a chronicler of the moment.”

In the 1990s, once he began losing interest in the day job, Comte went on photo assignments for the International Red Cross and other agencies. Bosnia, Angola, Rwanda, Somalia, Afghanistan; twice to Iraq. "I covered a lot of wars," he says. "When I pulled out my camera in those places, the decisions I made were always in the moment. 'Can I take this picture?' 'Am I allowed to do this?' Or, 'OK, I have to take this picture to show what is going on.'"



Land-art project in Harran, Turkey

Comte's land-art project in Harran, a Turkish town 50km from the Syrian border, is born out of his war and crisis photography. He is hewing out of the limestone, year by year, a cultural destination for an area whose identity has been almost wholly erased by successive conflicts. This is his huge wager (I mean physically huge; it is visible from space) on the peacetime future of a region currently fraught with security concerns.

The Japanese architect Mitsunori Sano is working with Comte on the complex of kilometres-long interlocking circles that, chiselled into this landscape, will celebrate, complement and promote the preservation of one of our species' most ancient sites. Nearby, I learn, is the site of the oldest stellar observatory in recorded history. Even before humans learnt to plant crops, Harran was where we went to worship the Moon.

Further connections heave into view as we talk: around Comte is a loose confederation of activists, artists, architects and writers who are trying to build bridges between our lived experience and the vast, slow forces of planetary change.

**People tell me my work is beautiful. Well, a glacier blackened by soot looks extraordinary**

In November 2021 Comte is due to smother the Vatican in his projection-mapped vision of the biological future — a work developed in collaboration with an international conference called Ethics of Engineering Life.

Comte is not alone in wanting to depict our planetary tragedy at scale. Edward Burtynsky springs to mind; Judy Chicago; even Olafur Eliasson. What's interesting about Comte is how his sense of the tragic threads it way through such a diverse career, turning up even in (yes) those celebrity shoots.

Comte's work over the years has included sculptures, installations, films and photographs that reflect his 30-year obsession with glaciers, their retreat, and the patina of soot many have acquired from the passage of so many aeroplanes.



Glacier photographed by Michel Comte, from his 'Light' project

“People tell me my work is beautiful,” he says. “Well, a glacier blackened by soot looks extraordinary. There is an incredible poetry and beauty in tragedy.” He rattles off a list of photographers and artists, starting with the Brazilian photojournalist Sebastião Salgado and ending at Goya. “And on, and on, and back, and back. It's why we are interested in looking at violent images and images of desperation and war. There's an incredible sense of aesthetics there.”

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