

Erwin Olaf, Photographer With an Eye for the Theatrical, Dies at 64

With exquisite precision, he used costumes and sets in staging many of his pictures, letting his subjects, whatever their social status, express themselves.



By Nina Siegal

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Erwin Olaf, a contemporary Dutch photographer known for the precision of his staged photographs of both countercultural figures and Dutch royalty, died on Wednesday in Groningen, the Netherlands. He was 64.

Shirley den Hartog, his business partner, said the death, in a hospital, was caused by complications of a recent lung transplant. Mr. Olaf had struggled for years with hereditary emphysema, she said.

Mr. Olaf began his career as a photojournalist documenting the gay liberation movement in the 1980s before becoming one of the first photographers in the Netherlands to stage photos using theatrical costuming and sets. His subjects were often nonconforming to both gender stereotypes and cultural norms — people with unusual bodies, alternative lifestyles or a penchant for bondage gear.

“He made explicit images or very suggestive images that became iconic,” said Taco Dibbits, director of the Rijksmuseum, which owns and displays Mr. Olaf’s work. The photographs, he added, “showed to a larger public how important it is to let people be who they are, and to let them express themselves.”

Mr. Olaf’s work evolved over 40 years to embrace high-end studio and fashion photography as well as formal portraiture. The Dutch royal family commissioned him to shoot their portraits several times.

He became recognized internationally as one of the Netherlands’ three most important contemporary photographers — along with Rineke Dijkstra and Anton Corbijn. To the Dutch he was seen as a national treasure.

“We consider him a ‘Hollandse meester,’” a Dutch master, said Mattie Boom, photography curator at the Rijksmuseum, the national museum in Amsterdam. “He was making paintings with the camera.”



Mr. Olaf in his studio in Amsterdam in 2019. Ilvy Njiokiktjien for The New York Times

Erwin Olaf Springveld was born on July 2, 1959, to Simon Jacobus Springveld, a sales manager for an office supplies company, and Lydia van 't Hoff, a homemaker, in Hilversum, about 20 miles west of Amsterdam. He graduated from the School for Journalism in Utrecht, intending to become a documentary photographer.

He moved to Amsterdam when he was 19 and lived in a squat, a building taken over by artists, while volunteering for the Dutch magazine *Sek*, the official publication of the gay and lesbian activist organization COC Nederland.

He got his first paid job as a photographer in 1984 chronicling Amsterdam nightlife and the gay community with his Nikon 35-millimeter camera for *Vinyl*, a new wave music magazine. He jettisoned his last name, Springveld, and went by Erwin Olaf thereafter.

“He started off being a major photographer of the gay scene, but that was too limited for Erwin,” said Wim van Sinderen, his former editor at *Vinyl* who later became a curator of the Fotomuseum Den Haag, in The Hague, where he exhibited Mr. Olaf’s work. “He was hot then, and he continued to be very hot for a long time. He managed to keep up his reputation throughout 40 years.”



“Ladies Hats — Hennie, 1985.” Erwin Olaf, via Galerie Ron Mandos



“Dance in Close-Up — Live I, 2022.” Erwin Olaf, via Galerie Ron Mandos

In 1983, *Sek* magazine assigned Mr. Olaf to shoot portraits of Hans van Manen, a leading Dutch choreographer who was also a photographer. The two men developed a close friendship that would last for decades.

Mr. van Manen broadened Mr. Olaf’s artistic horizons, introducing him to artists such as the designer Benno Premsele and the art photographer Paul Blanca. “In those years, our relationship was like a master and a pupil,” Mr. Olaf said of Mr. van Manen in a 2021 interview for a book of dance photographs the two produced together, “Dance in Close-Up.”

The most important influence on Mr. Olaf’s work was Robert Mapplethorpe, the

paragon of studio photography, whom Mr. Olaf met while Mr. Mapplethorpe was visiting Amsterdam. He was especially taken with Mr. Mapplethorpe's use of square format images, a technique also employed by Peter Hujar and Diane Arbus for their portrait work.

Mr. Olaf soon bought a secondhand Hasselblad camera that, as Mr. van Manen said, made these "nice 6-by-6 neat format images, with no grittiness, very clear and very informative."

Other influences included the raw New York street photography of Weegee and the staged grotesque tableaux of Joel-Peter Witkin.

Not long afterward, Mr. Olaf found a small studio in another art squat, hung up a curtain and began to shoot his first staged photographs, using people in his immediate circle, such as disco queens and punks. He favored gender-bending costumes reflecting the queer, S&M and drag culture of his era. The Hasselblad gave a "classical touch to his very nonclassical imagery," Mr. van Sinderen said.

"We call it visual activism," Ms. den Hartog said. "Erwin always tried to express his anger and his criticisms of society through his work."



“Pearls (Sabine),” 1986. Mr. Olaf favored gender-bending looks reflecting the queer, S&M and drag culture of his era. Erwin Olaf/Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York

Ms. Boom, of the Rijksmuseum, said that staged photography was atypical of the era, especially in the Netherlands, where documentary photography was in vogue.

Mr. Olaf achieved international attention for the first time in 1988, when he won the Young European Photographer of the Year award for his series “Chessmen,” black-and-white images of humans transformed into baroque chess pieces. An exhibition for “Chessmen” followed at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany, his first major solo exhibition.

In the mid-1990s, Mr. Olaf switched to digital photography, producing a number of photographic series. During that time he also established a career as a commercial photographer, making ads for fashion brands like Diesel and Bottega Veneta and the companies Heineken and Nokia.

Mr. Olaf’s main work was always portraiture, even if his subjects were positioned in

elaborate sets and wearing fantastical costumes. The Dutch author Arthur Japin, whom Mr. Olaf photographed as a lion, said sitting for him could feel liberating.

“When you were with him you were aware that he saw absolutely everything about you, but that he did not judge,” Mr. Japin said. “That’s why people opened up to him. Some people would really go far when they were photographed by him.”

Mr. van Sinderen said that in the early 2000s Mr. Olaf’s noncommercial photography took on “a kind of uber-kitch made possible by Photoshop,” but that he changed direction after an American museum curator criticized his work as “Eurotrash.”



“Grief — Irene, 2007.” Mr. Olaf became known for a kind of exquisite stillness and perfectionist polish. Erwin Olaf, via Galerie Ron Mandos

He began to explore the works of Norman Rockwell and contemporary painters, especially Lucien Freud, as well as the cinematic realism of the Italian filmmaker Luchino Visconti, whom he admired for the “incredible sadness” of his movies, Ms. den Hartog said.

Ultimately, Mr. Olaf became known for a kind of exquisite stillness and perfectionist polish, traits that were highlighted in a double exhibition in The Hague on the occasion of his 60th birthday in 2019.

That same year, the Rijksmuseum exhibited a dozen of his works in conversation with an equal number of Golden Age master paintings by Rembrandt, Gerard ter Borch and others. They were selected from more than 500 photographs of Mr. Olaf’s that the Rijksmuseum acquired the previous year.

Over the years Mr. Olaf made friends from a broad range of social circles, including that of King Willem-Alexander and Queen Máxima of the Netherlands, who in a statement said they mourned the loss of a “quirky, exceptionally talented photographer and a great artist.”



The Dutch royal family commissioned Mr. Olaf to shoot their portraits several times. This is the official portrait of King Willem-Alexander and Queen Máxima in 2018. Erwin Olaf for Government Information Service (RVD) of The Royal House of The Netherlands

Mr. Olaf is survived by his husband, Kevin Edwards, whom he married in 2016, and his two brothers, Jos and Ron Springveld.

Mr. Olaf was hopeful that his lung transplant last month would add years to his life, said Ms. Boom. “We talked quite recently, during the summer, and he was full of plans,” she said. “After the operation, he thought he would continue for another 10 years, and he had lots of ideas.”

Nina Siegal has been writing about European art, culture and history for The Times from Amsterdam since 2012. [More about Nina Siegal](#)

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