

Conversations On A Banquette: DIDIER LESTRADE

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Here at *The EP* headquarters, we have a previously professed fondness for remembrances of great things past, especially when it comes to excellence. From 1980 to 1987, during our all-too-brief coming-of-age period in Paris, we were big fans and readers of *Magazine*, Didier Lestrade's still-influential-today underground queer cult 'zine. Launched by Lestrade and a friend, *Magazine* was beautifully produced on a limited budget with chic creative know-how and well-connected enthusiasm. It was one of the first publications to show, alongside Lestrade's elegant snap shots of the famous and infamous subjects he met while cruising the streets of Saint-Germain, images by and interviews with such artists and contributors as Gilbert & George, David Hockney, Keith Haring, Sylvester, Zandra Rhodes, Edmund White, Ned Rorem, Paul Bowles, and Divine. Un- or moderately-known at the time, many would go on to become major international stars. Today, Lestrade, who also founded ACT-UP, Paris, as well as *TÊTU*, France's number one gay magazine, lives in Normandy where he works as a journalist and activist. Now he's ready, and in our estimation long overdue, for his own Hollywood-style close-up.

Ricky Lee: Why did you launch *Magazine* and what were your goals for it in the beginning? What inspired it?

Didier Lestrade: I guess I discovered I wanted to write when I first joined a few friends at *Gaie Presse*, a punky funny, beautiful little fanzine that started in 1977. Before that, I didn't really know what I was going to do in life. As a teen gay guy, I was reading everything in Andy Warhol's *Interview* and also *Playgirl*, from the little details of the ads to the very fine print of each page, even the most boring ones. But I hadn't made the connection between being a fan and wanting to write. Being part of a group at a fanzine made it suddenly clear. I could learn how to write AND be the boss of what I was writing. So when *Gaie Presse* folded (no money), I went ahead and decided to be my own boss.

Magazine was like a collage of people we loved. It was all very conceptual, as a lot of things had to be in the eighties to cover up the lack of money. There were three separate parts in the publication: the first, with 10 interviews, then the short stories on erotica, and then the portfolio with pages and pages of photography

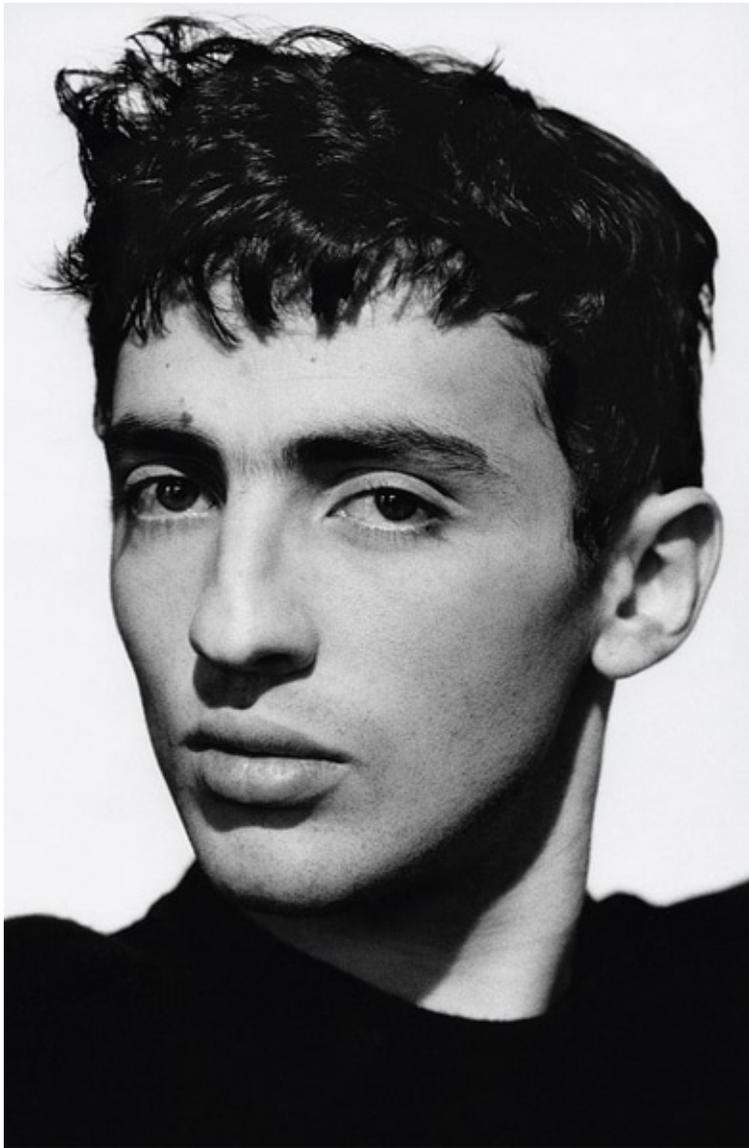
Visual excellence: Opening page (clockwise, from left): An image by Didier Lestrade; The cover of *Magazine* N°2; Sylvester in concert by Lestrade; *Magazine*'s logo. This page: A Divine photo shoot by Lestrade; Portraits by Michel Arnet and Rudiger Trautsch. Following page: A portrait by Michel Arnet.



without credits, without text. It was connected, or not. You could see in the photo sections some photography from a guy who was interviewed in the first part. You could see erotic drawings near the interview of the artist. But all was supposedly random, even if it wasn't. All photography was paired, and there was a way of presenting the flow of those pictures that was following a pattern. Like a DJ mix.

RL: Tom of Finland, Pierre & Gilles, Paul Morrissey, David Hockney, Copi, Keith Haring, Bronski Beat, and Sylvester were a few of the artists that did work for *Magazine*. Many of them were not internationally known at the time. How did you go about selecting contributors for the publication. What was the collaborative process?





DL: Why, the list you gave me has all names of people who were famous at the time we did interviews with them. They didn't work for us. We begged them to give us an interview! But it's true. Some of them were just starting, and some of them never really broke away from the underground. We really wanted to get the feeling of the times. We were publishing very seldom, so we really had the time to really think this over! We were snobs, too. We knew that some names were going to draw attention. But it was all

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very random. I was relying a lot on the trust I had in friends, who were contributing (for free, of course) to *Magazine*. They wanted to push their ideas, too, and they were all young, trying to impress people and themselves. We were trying to develop connections. It was all “I know this guy who knows this guy, who might get us an interview of Andrew Logan or Quentin Crisp.” And as I said many times, we were meeting people on the streets of Saint-Germain-des-Près and, at that time, famous people were saying “Hi!” They

were willing to say “Yes” to some 22-year-old kid who was so eager to meet older men. There was a gay brotherhood thing still going on. It was a masculine magazine, all about men. So the collaborative process was a mix of luck, snobbery, being smart, and having no money and no agent. It did work!

RL: Can you talk a bit about your own work for the magazine? You shot snapshot images for it using an instamatic Kodak camera, correct?

DL: Yes. When I was out in the streets, I always had a camera with me, in case I met a beautiful boy or somebody famous. But I was shy, too. Once I saw Cary Grant near the Lipp Brasserie and he was so tall and so famous that I knew he was out of my league. Basically, I was doing *Magazine* with my friend Misti. We went out together in 1977, when he was doing the lay-out for *Gaie Presse*. Then we broke up, but he was the real artistic director of *Magazine*. The lay-out was his, even if we were talking about the tiniest details. He taught me everything about design. In the beginning, he was part of the process of getting pictures from photographers but he got hired as an artistic director by the main French gay weekly of that time, *Gai Pied*, and then he got so busy that I ended up doing everything myself. In the end, we were seeing each other mostly when he was putting together the lay-out of the issue and when we were sorting out the order of the photographs in the third main part of *Magazine*. Interviews, drawings, photographs, bills at the printer, looking for ads and collecting money, distributing the issues, taking care of subscribing, I was doing it all. And I was just a bell boy working in a hotel to pay the bills at the printer.

RL: What's on view in the exhibition that just opened at 12 Mail Gallery in Paris?

DL: It's a funny thing. I never did an exhibition in my life. It's a small place, only two walls for display. I didn't see it coming, as I haven't been cashing in on this 80's revival and God knows I should have. So I told the guys from the gallery that I had only those snapshots I was doing in the streets and the clubs when I was meeting people like David Hockney and Edmund White and said that we could make nice prints of them, as I have never seen those portraits in real life. They stayed on contacts sheets in *Magazine* boxes for 25 years. And

then I told the guys from the gallery, “I’m gonna do a collage of all the photographs and erotic drawings that we published in *Magazine*.” And they made a face, because collage is so old-fashioned, but I was smiling inside because I knew that there were so many great pics in *Magazine*, by photographers so good, that all those pics would be talking for themselves. And when you stick drawings of Tom Of Finland, Etienne, Bastille, Rex, Bill Ward, Nigel Kent, and all the great erotica artists of that time on a wall in 2010, it really kicks off. It’s all Taschen stuff now, but it was still very, very porn [back in the ‘80s].

RL: Please tell me a little about your background.

DL: I’m a man who feels compelled to do things. I didn’t graduate. I grew up on the farm with my father and my brothers (Mom divorced my father when I was four) and I’m proud of it. It was hard but I love nature. That’s why I left Paris eight years ago to live in the countryside in Normandy. I started things in life that I was unsure would go anywhere because I’ve been dirt poor all my life, so there was no way out. *Magazine* was really that. “We don’t have a dime. Let’s see what we can do to make it beautiful without a dime.” Then I became HIV+ in 1986 and thought that I was going to die, just like everybody else. I started ACT-UP in Paris and that was a smash. Then I was the first one to write about house music in *Libération* and that went well, too. I became a “real” journalist. Then I started *TÊTU*, the main gay and lesbian mag in France and it was a smash, too. I spent 13 years at ACT-UP and worked mostly on treatment issues and it was also a smash: France was the first country in Europe to get broad access to HIV drugs. Then I wrote four books that didn’t sell but made me happy. The only nagging bit is that I did it all to be translated, at least once, into English, and never got even close. It’s kinda unfair. I write and live and create for America, and never got the chance to show my American friends what I’ve been writing about for all these years.

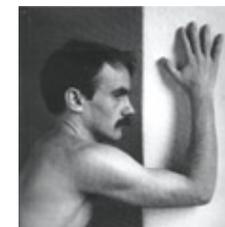
But I’m doing good. Making little money, having my Thoreau life with a 28 year-old-boyfriend.

RL: Does a gay underground exist today? Where can we find it?

DL: Sure, it is everywhere. I’m not into the gender



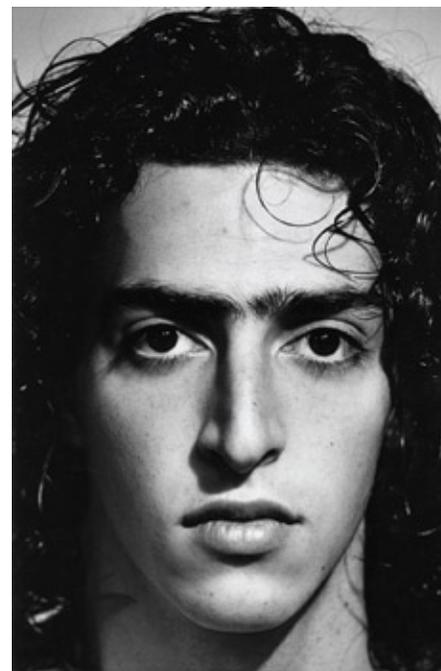
Masculine excellence (clockwise): A leather queen dans la rue by Rüdiger Trautsch; image by Hajo Corsten; Jimmy Somerville in Paris by Didier Lestrade; A portrait by Michel Arnet.

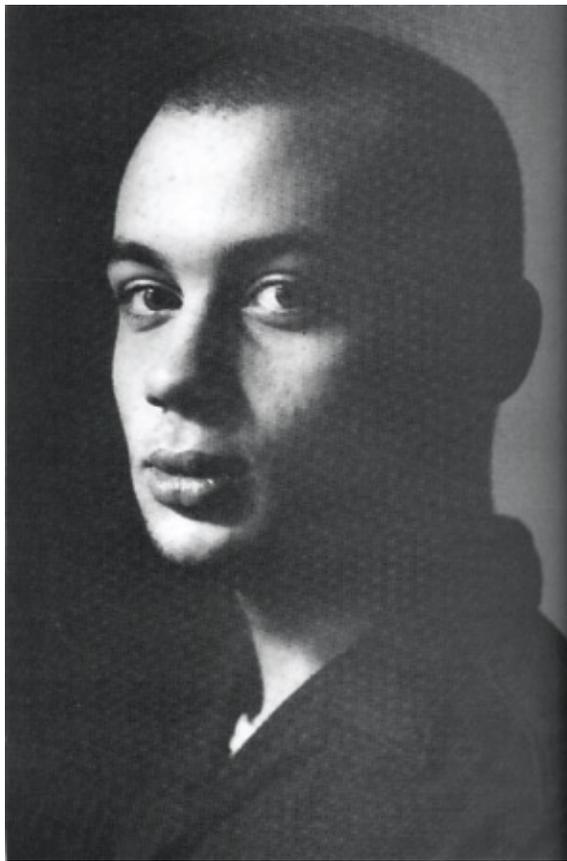


agenda, but it’s there. It’s in China and other Asian countries, where gay life is exploding and nobody is writing about it. In Africa, in South America. Look at all the gay guys from those countries on Facebook. They did catch up with gay life in a matter of... months! The gay underground is in art and queer fanzines with young guys and girls, trying to push the old queens that I am part of. It’s on Tumblr and Flickr. It is around all the crowd that surrounds guys like Gus Van Sant. You want the underground, follow him.

RL: You were the founder of ACT-UP Paris and also of the magazine *TÊTU*. Could you discuss your concepts of gay pride and activism, in the past as well as your thoughts on what it means to be an activist today?

DL: One again, I really didn’t have any idea that ACT-UP and *TÊTU* would be such successes. Everybody told me it wouldn’t work in France. All my life, people have been telling me “Didier,





Vintage excellence (left to right):
Walter Pfeiffer for *Magazine*;
The *Magazine* logo; A portrait
by Rüdiger Trautsch; Image by
Michael Lutz.



you're so into the American thing. The French are different. It just won't work." But I knew in my guts that gay activism and AIDS activism just didn't start anywhere. It all started in the States. So the idea that the French can't grasp the idea, that they get involved in different ways, that activism in itself is different in France, I always knew it was bullshit. You just have to go there and grab it and build it bit by bit and, two years later, the same people who didn't believe in it show up at the demonstrations. You see them. Gay people are like that. Basically, they're followers. You have to show them the way, just like people showed me the way. I didn't invent anything. I'm a journalist. I'm just a copycat of somebody great at the other side of the world. Right now though, I really think we're into the "grasshoppers" moment. My generation did the ground work, and now younger kids, they are bored to death with the stuff we did before. That's the way it is. They can't grow up with this idea that they owe us something. So we have to take

a low profile to give them some room. Maybe they will love us more, in the end.

RL: What magazines do you read these days?

DL: None. I used to be such a media junkie. And I hate the state of journalism today, "Make it shorter. Make it shorter!" So I subscribe to the *Herald Tribune* and a friend of mine offered a subscription to the *New Yorker* and I see the world through that. I read everything, with a pink Stabilo, and I keep the good articles, make clippings, the old way. And I have files, dossiers, and collect ideas that end up as concepts. I always start with the idea that I'm dumb, didn't go to university and do stuff despite that. And I know now that it's a strength that puts you above the bullshit. Make it simple. But now I don't read *Libération* or *Le Monde*, as I know what's in there before opening them. *The New York Times* doesn't do that for me. I think it's amazing. French journalists sure don't work that way.

RL: What is excellence?

DL: Tricky one. Excellence is for me craftsmanship. When I look at the Japanese or any manual work, this is excellence for me. Being able to do stuff with hands. I garden a lot. I dig, plant, make walls with stones. But I'm not excellent at it. I don't think I'm into excellence. I work in a sloppy way. I'm not into the perfection of details which is, for me, what excellence is about. I care about the idea, not the very little details of it.

For me, excellence is above all integrity. I don't care if you do a wonderful fashion bag, if you rob, steal, behave awfully for it, it's just crap. You HAVE to behave OK. Excellence is to be 52 and not be ashamed by the choices I made. Excellence is being wary of money, because all the rich people I know are really fucked up. Excellence is saying what you want to say in a world in which you become a pariah if you dare to say what you think. Excellence is being able to die when you want, how you want. It's finding a way to go through life without going to the shrink.

RL: What are some of the projects that you are working on for the future?

DL: I mostly push the development on a website I started with two good friends, Laurent Chambon from Amsterdam and Mehmet Koksal from Belgium, www.minorities.org. It's a website about minorities, putting all the issues of race, sex, diseases, religion together. Especially in France, which is so secular, when you get to see a movement against Muslims. That I can't stand. I don't believe in God, but I have to stand up and defend the minorities against such bad treatment in France, as the French model for integration is such a failure. I have to voice my anger. So I'm a political person, and this is my last fight in life. I'm 52, always hoped when I was a kid that Blacks and Arabs would be accepted in my country. And I worked for gays, against AIDS. Now my time is spent helping other minorities who have been even less privileged. Doing my Jean Genet thing for Palestine.

All images courtesy Didier Lestrade, from the *Magazine* collection.

For additional information on Lestrade, and to read his writings, please visit <http://didierlestrade.blogspot.com/> Art direction by Andrew Hart www.andrewhartstudio.com