



The Happy Misfits / Los inadaptados felices

An autobiographical novel by Marcel Demeulenaere, a brilliant Flemish inventor
/ Una novela autobiográfica de Marcel Demeulenaere, genial inventor flamenco

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The Happy Misfits

An autobiographical novel by Marcel Demeulenaere,
a brilliant Flemish inventor



Marcel Demeulenaere: Engineer, Inventor, Novelist, Happy Misfit Nomad

José-Ramón Alcalá-Mellado, Editor

The figure of the Flemish inventor Marcel Demeulenaere (1901, Blankenberghe, Belgium, – 1987, Cornersville, Tennessee, USA) can be included by his own merits in the genealogy of the great contemporary myths of invention, such as the Austrian Nikola Tesla or the American Samuel Morse. Brilliant, versatile, visionary inventors, who were too advanced for their time and often surrounded by controversy and numerous personal difficulties. They are the B-side of the celebrity colleagues of their era such as Thomas Alva Edison and Chester F. Carlson.

Fortunately, we live in times that are more attentive to local adaptation and discovery of alternative stories. This gives us access to the vision of excluded, out of the ordinary people, who the mainstream often labels as misfits and losers-in-life. Their stories encourage us to expand and complete the limited vision of hegemonic stories, always referring to the winners-in-life as proclaimed by the dominant powers. Through their histories we can gain access to the thoughts and philosophies behind the creation of those invisible, ignored, or rejected personalities. One of them is definitely Marcel Demeulenaere – or rather, the team of Marcel and his wife Simonetta. In this case, and by pure stroke of fate, we are fortunate to be able to hear them through their own words. This is a unique gift. It is also worth knowing the astounding way this has been possible, as this is yet another fascinating aspect regarding Marcel Demeulenaere's own autobiographical account and of his beloved wife Simonetta.

Despite falling into oblivion or, even worse, the fact that history has not dedicated a single line to him in its hegemonic account of the winners-in-life, Marcel Demeulenaere was responsible for a multitude of inventions of enormous importance for its wide application in society including: a cash register, a push-button telephone, a numerical printer (1967), and an air position indicator. Last but not least, he patented the first known electrophotographic reproduction procedure. Later in the hands of the American inventor Chester F. Carlson and the Haloid-Xerox company, his work would take on a different form and give rise to the invention and industrial manufacture and commercialization of the photocopier. Invention is the fundamental reason why the MIDECIANT of Cuenca (a museum of contemporary art) has supported international research in this arena since the 1990s, which now culminates with this essay in one of its publications.

In 1932 Demeulenaere patented the first known “instantaneous procedure for taking photographs” - like his patent claims. Several decades later, his research would lead to the development of an automatic process for graphic reproduction on plain paper – the xerographic copier. Starting in the 1960s, this would become a resource for the innovative artists, designers, and advertisers. This group generated graphic languages that gave rise to avant-garde artistic movements, such as Copy Art, and stimulated others already established movements, such as Mail Art. In turn, this assisted the conceptual and technical development of digital artmaking.

Why is highlighting the link between Demeulenaere’s pioneering, technological idea with these avant-garde artistic movements important? Thanks to this intriguing relationship between scientists and artists, we can experience an autobiographical book that will engage experts and the curious, offering researchers abundant original material required to incorporate the voice of one of the field’s distinguished “invisibles” into the history of science. The incredibly bizarre history of these unpublished stories, included in this publication *The Happy Misfist* (a novel, a short story and several biographical and autobiographical reviews), covers their creation in the 1970s to their publication in the *Media Art Notebooks* collection of the MIDECIANT in Cuenca in 2022.

To understand this history, we need to go back to 1989 and the creation of MIDE (today MIDECIANT: International Museum of Electrography -

Center for Innovation in Art and New Technologies), which was originally headquartered in a seventeenth century Carmelite Convent owned by the Cuenca Provincial Council.

This was ceded in 1989 to the University of Castilla-La Mancha (UCLM) to be its first headquarters in the city. It is located in the upper part of the historic center of the city, an extraordinary natural setting that hangs over the rocky wall of the canyon that forms the valley of Huécar. The commissioning of the museum allowed, as in the medieval times of the convents of Cuenca, to gather existing knowledge as it relates to their mission. As in the Middle Ages, the information that provided knowledge to its holders had to travel physically from one place to another, being transported by travellers, who went from convent to convent (from art center to art center) sharing old and new information. At the beginning of the 1990s, artists and researchers of these new practices came to the MIDECIANT to meet face-to-face in its labs and workshops to share ideas.

They brought their knowledge expecting to receive in return what was accumulating on the museum's shelves and store rooms. The artistic heritage of the MIDECIANT was being built by the most avant-garde artists and by specialists in their most relevant techniques and processes of the moment. This was how the French artist Christian Rigal (the eminent expert in Electrography of the time) and the German artist Klaus Urbons (a connoisseur of electrographic techniques and processes and founder of the Museum für Fotokopie in Mülheim/Ruhr), led Cuenca's valuable research into the technical origins of the electrophotographic reproduction procedure. Their aim was of broadening of the technical culture of Copy Art artists through their collections and creative experiences of MIDECIANT. These efforts facilitated the discovery and development of the work of Chester F. Carlson and the North American Haloid-Xerox corporation, as well as Edith Weyde and the German Agfa-Gevaert company plus the Flemish Belgian Marcel Demeulenaere.

Another coincidence linking the relationship between the city of Cuenca and avant-garde ("Miracles of Cuenca"), involving both inventors was Dr. Roosens, a Belgian photography historian. Roosens findings mentioned that the first inventor of the electrophotographic reproduction procedure was the Belgian engineer Marcel Demeulenaere, who was residing in the Spanish city of Cuenca at that time. Roosens had already written to Demeulenaere

at Calle Colmillo 2, where he lived with his wife Simonetta. Knowing about this correspondence between Dr. Roosens and Demeulenaere, Klaus Urbons wrote him a letter in 1986 to the same address. But apparently, he no longer lived there. Through MIDE, this became known to Carmen Flores (a distinguished lady, ex-partner of the abstract art painter Bonifacio Alonso, both from San Sebastián and living in Cuenca), who knew the Demeulenaere's during their stay in Spain. As confirmed by the biographical sketches of the protagonists themselves (published in this edition), after a series of failures and professional and economic complications, related to some of Marcel's inventions, both decided to leave Belgium and spend a camping season in Spain. Traveling in their old car, they had a major accident near Tarancón, which left them badly injured and hospitalized in the Cuenca hospital. After their recovery, and not having resources, they decided to settle in the city, being assisted by Flores, with whom they became close. Flores provided me with initial details about their life in the city, and a United States mailing address in Cornersville, Tennessee. After ten years in Cuenca, they had moved there in 1980 to be near friends. I wrote to Demeulenaere there in my capacity as director of the MIDE. Fortunately, the Cornersville post office provided the address of their new residence in Mexico, where they were contacted. Unfortunately, Simonetta replied that her husband had died two years earlier.

Klaus and MIDE staff began a copious correspondence with Demeulenaere's widow, which resulted with the invitation by the UCLM to Simonetta Demeulenaere to participate in the inaugural events at MIDE on May 7, 1990. Among the events was an unveiling of a plaque paying homage to Marcel on the facade of his former Cuenca home from 1970 to 1980. As a thank you for this honor, the visibly moved Simonetta donated a collection of her husband's original documents to the MIDECIANT library. In 2022, MIDE and Klaus Urbons, began compiling, translating, revising, and ordering this material for publication in this book. These texts and unpublished graphic materials constitute an unpolished jewel in the history of science, culture, and art. This publication aims to do justice to the true story of the life and work of this under-recognized Flemish inventor, who was the co-author of one of the most widely utilized technological inventions of the twentieth century. Additionally, this joint effort posthumously gives thanks to the generous gesture of Simonetta Demeulenaere and acknowledges her role in this historical narrative.

The content of Marcel's novel, which could be classified as a travelogue (set between the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth century), is actually a passionate autobiographical account of his life with Simonetta during their almost decade long stay in Spain. His descriptions of the Castilian cities and their neighboring natural environments are the result of the trips they made together as creators of entertainment and their nomadic lifestyle. The plot celebrates an eccentric and socially misplaced couple who found happiness in the margins of society, who lived in a state of perpetual motion and enjoyed communing with their ever-changing environment. As Marcel wrote: "This book is like the vigorous crowing of a rooster that sees the light of day coming."

Furthermore, the publication adds an unpublished short story, *A fairy tale / Un cuento de hadas*. Barely a page long, written in English and Spanish and typed by Simonetta, Marcel imagines himself as an elderly supernatural sage who gives testimony of a misunderstood genius who has accumulated enough wisdom to find personal happiness with Simonetta. Additional materials include an unpublished autobiographical review and a biography created by his wife.

Completing this edition are two research texts by Klaus Urbons and university professor Dr. Beatriz Escribano-Belmar, a regular MIDECIANT collaborator. Through these materials, amateur readers can immerse themselves in the technical inventions that encompassed the life of Marcel Demeulenaere while being guided though the reproductive technologies of electrophotography and its effects on contemporary artistic practices.

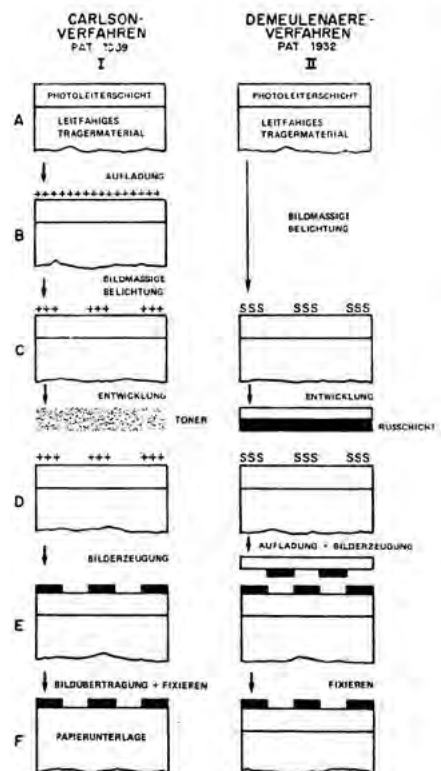
The texts are supported with an abundance of reproductions of original graphic and photographic material. This provides a deeper understanding of their contexts, based on the research carried out by the authors of this publication over the past forty years. Some of the previously unpublished portraits of Marcel and Simonetta that illustrate this edition were made by the photographer Cristóbal Hara, who was a friend of the couple during their time in Spain. Through their visual force, readers will be able to appreciate how this endearing couple of "Happy Misfits" lived their unconventional lives. This publication hopes to serve as an essential reference that precisely documents the humble strength of the Demeulenaere's accomplishments. Ultimately, it is a tribute to a way of thinking and a philosophy of life at this moment in time in which reality is urging our world to alter its course and change its vital paradigm to one that embraces a sustainable future.

Memory Effects. Marcel Demeulenaere and his Electric Photography

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Introduction

I first read about Marcel Demeulenaere's invention in the early 1980s in "MFM - Moderne Fototechnik Magazin" (1979, pp. 588-90), a trade journal. The article was written by Dr. Laurent Roosens, photo historian and head of the archives of the Belgian photo company Gevaert / Agfa-Gevaert. First of all, he gave a rough outline of the Belgian inventor, then went into detail about the patent literature and directories and later compared xerography, the process that based on Chester F. Carlson's electrophotography and was developed since 1946 at the Battelle Memorial Institute, with Marcel Demeulenaere's non-chemical photography patent of 1932. In the schematic comparison, they seemed to be similar as they use selenium as a photoactive element, electrical charging, toner or soot for developing an image, and a paper support for developing an image.



1. Comparison scheme from MFM, 1979. M.F.F. Archive.