



**Through controlled chaos, Dutch photographer Sjoerd Knibbeler creates “happy accidents.”**

BY GISELA WILLIAMS

PORTRAIT BY JAMES STOKES

The Festival of Fashion and Photography in Hyères, a town on the French Riviera, may be an intimate affair, but for the Amsterdam-based photographer Sjoerd Knibbeler, who won this year’s Grand Prix du Jury Photographique award, it made a big impact. “Things have been hectic ever since,” the 34-year-old says, while sitting at a worktable in his small studio in an old firehouse on the outskirts of Amsterdam. The festival, which takes place in and around the modernist house Villa Noailles, solely focused on fashion when it was started 30 years ago by Jean-Pierre Blanc, but over time it began to include fashion and fine-art photography. “There’s a very laidback but extremely interesting mix of people at the fair,” Knibbeler says.

In the crowd this year was Chanel’s creative director, Karl Lagerfeld—the fashion label is a supporter of the festival, and its image director, Eric Pfunder, was head of the photography jury. (Lagerfeld was creative director of this year’s edition.) When asked what appealed

to him about Knibbeler’s submitted work, a photographic series called “Paper Planes,” Pfunder says, “It’s a reflection on the limits of the medium: how to capture something that is impossible to capture.”

“Paper Planes” comprises 16 photographs of origami-like works that Knibbeler himself made, each one representing a different historical aircraft that was designed but never actually built. It’s part of a larger project that Knibbeler has been working on for a few years called “Current Studies.” “Several years ago I challenged myself to photograph wind,” he says. “It meant two things: that I had to create something that is impossible to photograph, and I had to examine the boundaries of the medium of photography itself.” The artist showed both series in conjunction as part of his “Digging Up Clouds” exhibition last summer at Amsterdam’s Foam photography museum.

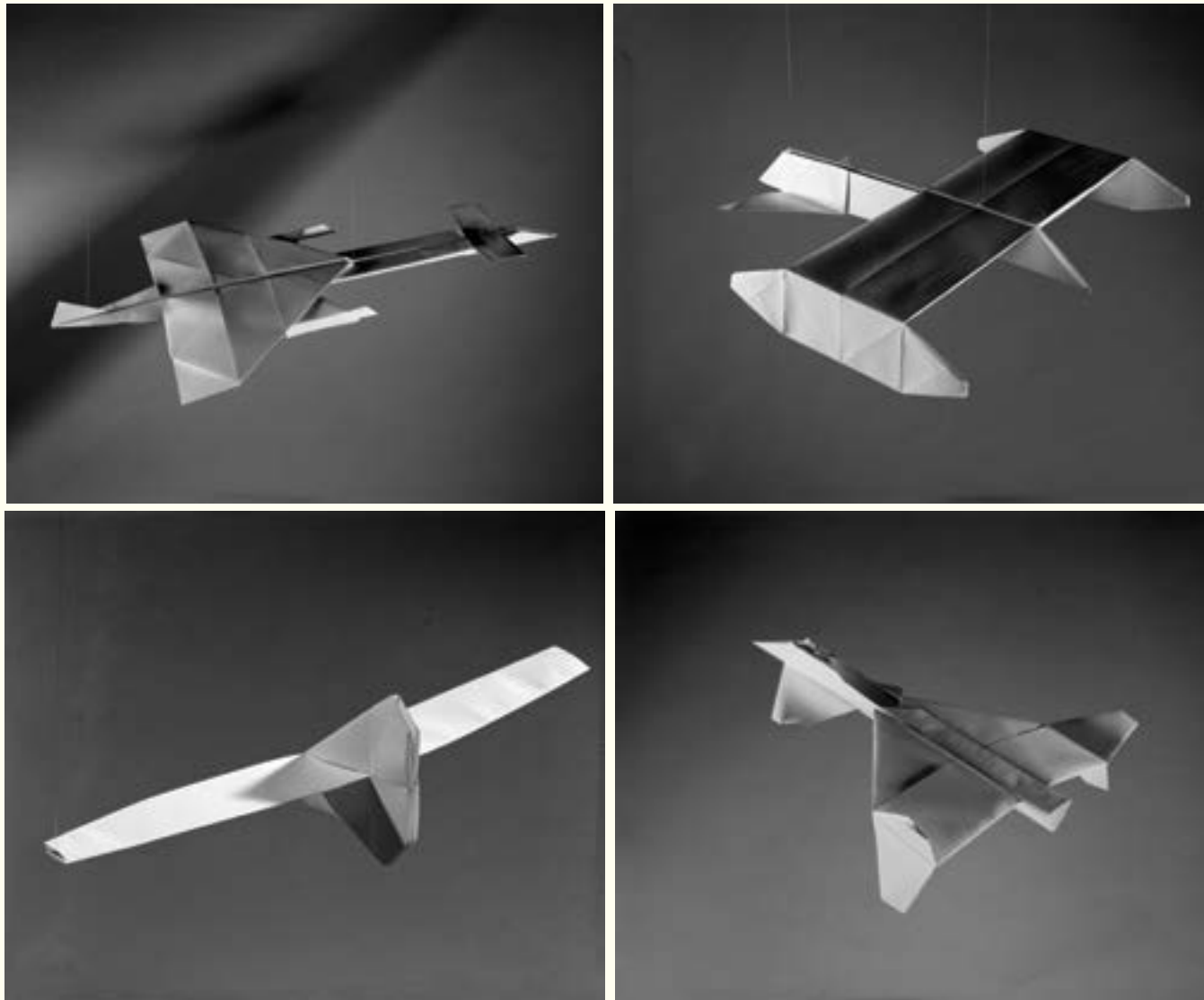
Knibbeler, who studied filmmaking at the Royal Academy of Fine Art in the Hague,

PHOTO: COURTESY SJOERD KNIBBELER.



Sjoerd Knibbeler at his studio in the outskirts of Amsterdam. (OPPOSITE) Knibbeler’s “Current Study No. 3” (2013).





says he has a very documentary approach to his work. “I started, as I often do, with a lot of research.” That includes both hours of Googling as well as visits to science universities and libraries. “I like to invite myself over to places involved in the scientific field and bump around and speak to people about the research they’re doing,” he says. “I go back home and think about it for a while and sometimes an idea pops up.”

Early on in the research phase, Knibbeler went to an air show in the middle of Holland. “When I first started imagining who I needed to consult and speak to about wind I thought of course I needed to find a stunt pilot,” he says. “I wanted to watch what they did and how they prepare.”

At one point during the air show, Knibbeler walked into a hanger and saw a large man dancing around. “He was a big guy, your archetypical pilot,” he recalls. “Afterwards I approached him and asked him what he was doing. He told me he was training his muscle memory. He was practicing the flight. I asked him to come to my studio, and I filmed him doing a preparation routine. It’s hard to say what the links were, but this project led me to the paper planes.”

Knibbeler knew that he wanted to focus on replicating planes that were designed in different countries during a time period that spanned 1930 to 2006. “I wanted to represent something from the past,” he says. “I wanted to work with paper, but I wanted to give the planes a grandeur that they deserved—to lift them from paper to something beautiful.”

To do that, Knibbeler, who works with large format cameras, shot each image with old film. “It gave the pictures an old grainy aesthetic,” he says. “It looks as if someone might have found them in an old trunk. If you look closely, you can also see how things are made.” He adds that he doesn’t manipulate the image at all. “An important factor of my work is that it might look like something is happening in post-production but it’s happening in pre-production.”

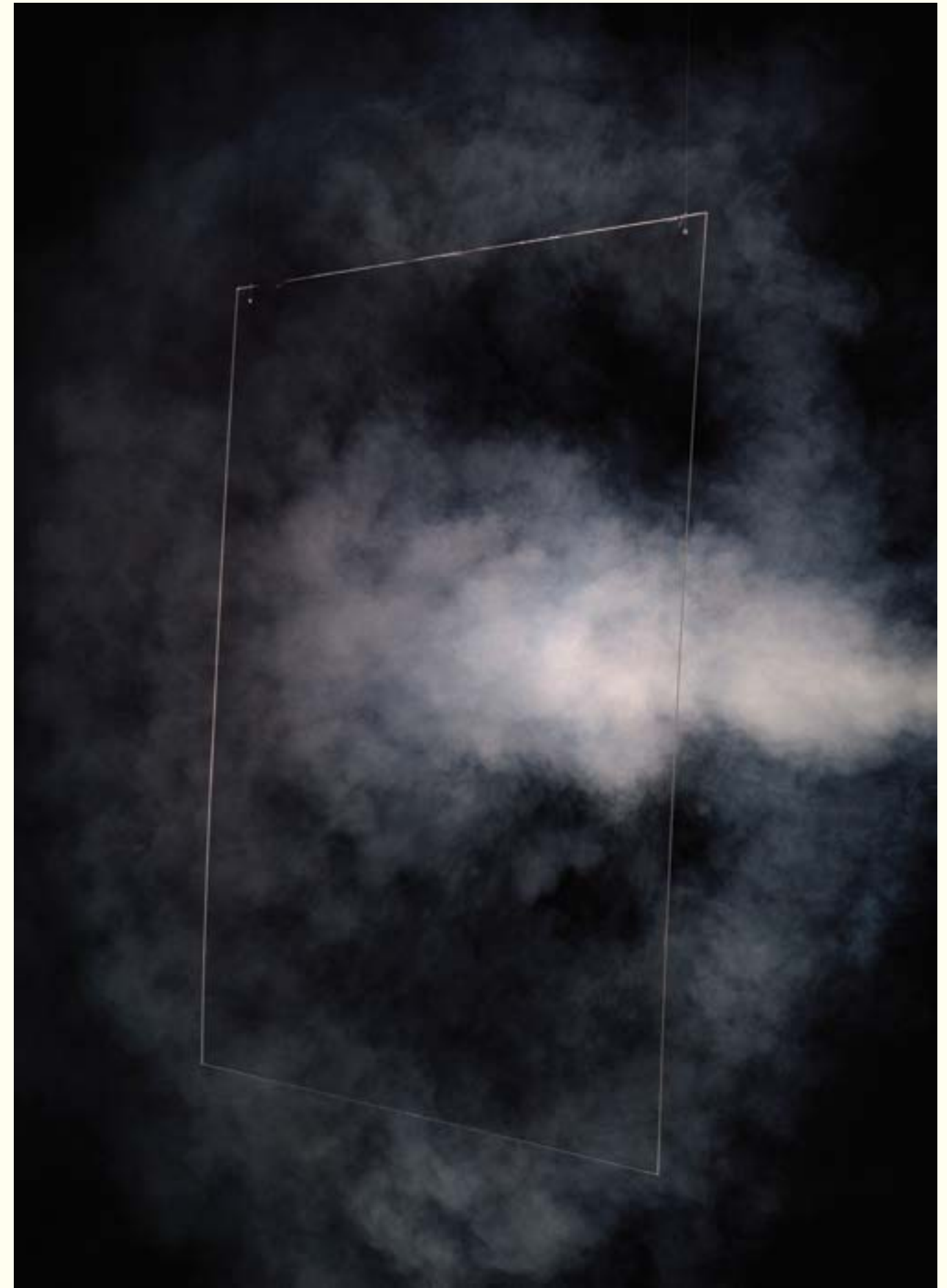
Also important for Knibbeler is the documentation of a project. As he was working on the series he knew he wanted to publish a book on the process. “It was about more than making the photographs,” he says. “It was also about the history and the research I had done.” Knibbeler worked with Hans Gremmen of the small publisher Fw: Books. “The book was a true collaboration,” he says. “At one of my

shows I presented the planes unfolded, as pieces of paper. Hans said that we should add it to the book, so we decided to incorporate the images of unfolded paper planes in the publication.”

Knibbeler loves what he calls “happy accidents” in his work. “I appreciate that there’s something out of my hands that I cannot control despite the extremely controlled setting in my studio.”

(THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) Photographs from Knibbeler’s 2014 “Paper Planes” series: “Avro 730,” “P.170,” “IFV-12,” and “XBDR.” (OPPOSITE) “Current Study No. 2” (2013). (PREVIOUS SPREAD, LEFT TO RIGHT) “Triebflügel” (2015). “FB-22” (2015). (FOLLOWING SPREAD, LEFT TO RIGHT) “Current Study No. 1” (2013). “Current Study No. 4” (2013).

PHOTOS: COURTESY SJOERD KNIBBELER





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