

Two men stand in the foreground of this photograph. The man on the right has a full beard, dyed a glittery blue. His face is ornately painted around his eyes, and he wears a gold-and-black patterned jacket, and toy plastic antlers on his head.

The other man, on the left, holds a drink in his right hand, and wears sparkly bunny ears on his head. Sunglasses cover his eyes, and a rainbow sits on top of them, arching across his forehead. His arms are covered in tattoos, and a gold bracelet twinkles on his right wrist.

The two of them stand in the living area of their houseboat in Utrecht, the Netherlands, and the lack of light shining through the skylight above them suggests it's nighttime. Lamps dotted around the room, the wood paneling on the ceiling, and lush houseplants create a relaxed and inviting ambience.

They're positioned in front of an open laptop, as you would do when on a video call. We can't see the screen, but its dim light illuminates their faces. The man with the blue beard is closer to the screen, and holds several colourful cartoon characters, printed on bits of paper, up to the computer. Lit by the glow of the lamps and the screen, the two men look engaged and excited by what's happening on the other side. They look like they're having a wonderful time.

But it wasn't a wonderful time in the world. Taken in April 2020, I named this photograph "Saturday Night Pandemic Style", and I believe it showcases the adaptability and strength of human spirit amidst one of the darkest times in our history.

The Netherlands was in the midst of the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic, and since March 2020, tight social distancing guidelines were in place. Schools and childcare centres were closed for the foreseeable future, as well as cafés, bars, restaurants, sports clubs, saunas, and coffee shops. The streets were deserted, and public spaces were off limits. The country was in the eye of the storm.

I took this image while on an assignment for the New York Times. I was documenting the different ways in which people spent their Saturday nights while the pandemic forced us all to stay home to stop the spread of virus.

I began the evening of 11<sup>th</sup> April 2020 taking photographs of students, who were partying while locked down in their accommodation. Later, I visited this couple on their beautiful houseboat, capturing this magical moment with my Canon 5D Mark IV, just after midnight.

Their names are Ivo Verburg and Pepijn Zwanenberg, and both are in their fifties. Ivo is the man with the rainbow on his forehead, and Pepijn has the glitter in his beard. When I walked aboard their houseboat and into their living room, they were there, partying online with lots of people on the other side, partying too. It was fun seeing them having such a joyful Saturday night, while adhering to social distancing guidance at the same time.

The party is called Cruise Corona, and is organised by Cruise Control Queerparty, who usually host these events bi-monthly in Utrecht. These parties began more than 20 years ago, in 2001, and Pepijn is one of the three DJs in the collective.

Together with the two other DJs, who were all in their own homes, he made a playlist to play during a Cruise Corona event unlike the ones that came before it.

I feel as though this image helps reframe what this challenging period meant to us.

It encourages us to see the pandemic not simply as hardship, but also as a transformative time. Even though rules prohibited physical contact, people were coming together in

these new and exciting ways. It's an example of how the pandemic forced us to think outside of the box, and to make the best of even the worst situation.

To me, this isn't just a photograph of a party. Because it shows both the durability and the flexibility of human beings in the face of such adversity. It shows how new ideas were championed, how our creativity and technology helped us change the ways we work, come together, interact with one another, and even party. This photograph shows that you can still have fun in difficult times. Even a once-in-a-lifetime global pandemic couldn't stop humans from having a good time.

I also have a soft spot for this photograph because of the nostalgia it evokes in me. I grew up in a houseboat very similar to Ivo and Pepijn's home, where you have to go down a few steps into the "belly" of the boat.

As well as showcasing the enduring human spirit through the pandemic, I would love for this photograph to inspire people in a different way. I hope Ivo and Pepijn's relationship – how close they are, how much fun they have, and their love for each other – uplifts the LGBTQI community in countries where the acceptance of relationships like theirs is not a given.