

Scaling Images

Pierre Wat

Alexis Cordesse likes things to be classified, as if they could achieve a stable identity merely by being grouped together in a single unit or under a common heading. So even though he continues to take photos almost everyday, he long ago came to the conclusion that only pictures that are created to be together, or as part of a series – images that are linked to a project – truly exist and are worth presenting. This conviction, this need to bring order to the inextricable chaos of the living world, or at least to give the chaos a nameable form, is embodied in projects that he conceives and presents as autonomous entities. *Itsembatsemba*, *La Bruja*, *fixes tropiques*, *La Piscine* [*The Swimming Pool*], *L'Aveu* [*The Confession*], *Borderlines*, *Absences* are a few such works, composed of a pre-determined number of photographs that are the result of a long selection process, and that are ordered according to a carefully thought-out plan, one which plays an essential role in the work's narrative structure. The artist's initial conviction that the ethical and the aesthetic cannot be separated is a determining factor in setting the shot, the choice of formal elements such as framing, lighting and so on – sometimes adding sound to the image. Then, once the work is completed, Cordesse establishes the terms of its unity, thus allowing himself to satisfy his need to explain *how* he worked, that is, by respecting the constraints he had decided upon.

This sort of approach comes with a price however: the leftovers, all the photographs that eventually find no place in the series and end up in the office where Cordesse files his work, added to boxes filled with other remains. Given the obvious need to choose, these leftovers represent a form of loss, but beside them, beside these visible works, stand others that, far from being definitively excluded from his projects, were never part of them. The photographer has given them a name, for he needs to name everything, even things that are hanging in limbo between birth and existence: they are *latent images*. Everyday images, sometimes taken with his telephone, glimpses of moments of daily life or on holiday. Personal traces of photography as an activity and way of life. He is tirelessly active, for activity is life itself, but the resulting images have long remained hidden, as if in waiting – again, *latent*.

And then came Olympus. The real Olympus, the mountain at the border of Thessaly and Macedonia whose geographic reality Cordesse knew nothing about, seeing in it merely the mythical domain of the gods. There he made a chance discovery that turned into a poetic promise. He had come to Greece on a long-standing project to cover the political landscape, but the weather made his original plan unfeasible. So another project took its place, stemming directly from a friend's suggestion that he climb Mt. Olympus. The new plan presented something of a paradox to him since its unexpectedness necessarily made it impossible for him to come up with a procedure and set of classifications to impose upon himself.

He made the ascent three times. Images came out of what began as a corporeal adventure that tested his limits. I would like to emphasize this corporeal dimension since what was

difficult – the fog, the altitude, the stones that became slippery as rain turned to snow – was also a relief. Earlier, Cordesse had worked as a war reporter, and even though he has left the battlefield far behind him, what has stayed with him from his initial training is a need to impose rules, for rules represent so many ways of dealing with the violence of the world without being destroyed by it. Olympus was a counterpoint, an unexpected way of responding to the tragedy of history by its reverse angle. The Greek crisis, the immigration crisis, the attacks at *Charlie Hebdo* where one of his friends was seriously wounded, and then the second wave of attacks. He took no photographs of those events, having long ago learned of the powerlessness of so-called documentary images in the face of history's stunning turns. Scaling Mt. Olympus was not an escape, but an act of freedom.

As Cordesse told me, "I was carried on by a poetic burst from the mountain." It is he who traverses the images of this mountain like a place where one physically experiences the texture of the world: the roughness of the rocks, the foaming hills, glimpses of sky. It is he who, beyond any documentary logic, establishes a game of secret echoes: a mountain range and an unmade bed, an ear and a mossy tree, as if to say that here one must experience the world with one's whole body on alert. And most of all, it is he who brings forth other images, which he now admits because they are unexpected. A photo of his daughter taken in London, and others as well that were not taken in Greece but that made their necessity felt, in Cordesse's *Olympus*. Something else had emerged like a driving force: latency had become presence, nameless, freely defying established procedures in order to resurface more effectively.

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