

PRESS RELEASE

Alexis Cordesse

Rwanda

OPENING RECEPTION

Tuesday, March 27th, 6-9pm

EXHIBITION from March 28 to May 17, 2014

From Wednesday to Saturday, 2-7pm and by appointment

The genocide in Rwanda took place amid general indifference.

On April 6, 1994, President Juvénal Habyarimana was assassinated. The authorities immediately put into practice their extermination plan, which sought to murder all opponents of their regime as well as the totality of Tutsis in Rwanda (and the remaining political authority immediately put into effect an extermination plan designed to eliminate both opposition to the political regime in power and all the Tutsis in Rwanda). In less than 100 days, the military, militias, and civilians murdered between 800,000 to a million people. Then, the genocidaires forced 2.5 million Hutus—a great many of whom had participated in the murders to flee to the borders.

Former photo reporter, Alexis Cordesse went to Rwanda for the first time in 1996, two years after the genocide. On the hills, he questioned the survivors, noted the signs of emptiness and absence, and the traumatic sequels of the aftermath. Confronting the unimaginable, he realized that he had to rethink his approach by questioning the failure of images to inform. From then on, he returned regularly to Rwanda and dedicated several bodies of work to the evocation of these events. His approach connects photographs, archival documents, and witness accounts.

Alexis Cordesse's way of working is far from a moralizing discourse on mass crime, the victims' suffering and the inhumanity of the executioner. Rather it is an inquiry on the power of images to speak out uniquely and by themselves about the essence of what happened.

His approach also invites the viewer to reflect on the crime rather than to contemplate the image.

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Presentation of the work

The exhibition is made up of three sections showing three collections made between 1996 and 2013.

I. Itsembatsemba, Rwanda one genocide later

A film by Alexis Cordesse & Eyal Sivan

Documentary | 1996 | 13mn | B/W | 4:3 | STEREO

Original language: kinyarwanda - subtitles: french

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Itsembatsemba, Rwanda one genocide later, the result of a collaboration between the photographer Alexis Cordesse and the film maker Eyal Sivan, is an experimental short film produced using black and white photographs, sound recordings and archive material from “Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines” (“One Thousand Hills Free Radio and Television”) – RTLM, the famous “hate radio”.

Alexis went to Rwanda for the first time in 1996. He photographed and took sound recordings during ceremonies commemorating the genocide, exhumations and reburials of victims’ remains, in sanctuaries and asylums. On the hills, life is slowly getting back to normal. He recorded the imprint of absence and the after-effects of the trauma. While, in 1994, the flood of iconic images depicting the exile and the suffering of refugees largely took the focus away from the scandal of the genocide, the photographer realised the urgent need to bear witness to the past, to pinpoint the specifics of the crimes perpetrated in Rwanda amid general indifference.

Using the narrative resources of cinematic montage, the images are edited together in sequences with ambient sounds as well as archive material from RTLM. This radio station was launched in 1993 by Hutu extremists and was the most popular of the « hate media ». Mixing popular music from Congo and racist propaganda, it played a crucial role in spreading ethnic ideology, and, subsequently, coordinating and encouraging the killings. The words of the radio provide incriminating evidence against the genocide’s perpetrators. In the film, they come to contaminate and complicate the visual representation of horror by reminding us of the specificity of the crimes. Based on the need to consider a new framework for representation and perception, this experimental essay helps reformulate the question of the “unrepresentable”.

“Itsembatsemba, Rwanda one genocide later” was made for the 25-year anniversary of Doctors Without Borders (MSF). It was presented at the dOCUMENTA 11 of Kassel in 2002, directed by Okwui Enwezor, among many festivals. In 1997 it received a Golden Gate Award at the San Francisco International Film Festival, and a special mention at the International Festival of Documentary and Short Film of Bilbao.



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II – Confession, 2004

Twelve panels, 30 x 40 cm

Ten years later, more and more confessions were being obtained in prisons, with the incentives of sentence reduction and conditional release. Alexis Cordesse travelled to the province of Kibuyé, in the western part of the country, where 59,050 Tutsis were murdered between April and June 1994. He interviewed and photographed Rwandans, both male and female, who had confessed to their participation in the genocide. Some were on conditional release and others were still being detained. Most of them were still waiting for their trial.

The collection consists of twelve diptychs each made up of a full frontal colour portrait and an extract of their confession. Information about the perpetrator's identity (name, age), activity prior to arrest and legal situation (date of arrest, charge, date of confession, sentence if applicable) is displayed near each piece.

The photographer worked at eye level, closely with his subjects. Without resorting to dramatic staging or lighting effects, he concentrated on revealing the ambiguity and complexity of these people without reducing the relationship to a moral judgment. This process of showing evil embodied in an individual is emphasised by the layout of the exhibition space. The diptychs are made up of small pictures displayed at eye level; the small character size of the texts forces the viewer to get closer in order to read them. The deliberately small scale of the display contrasts with the enormity of the crimes. An intimate connection is created with the images and testimonies, leading the viewers to consider the distance from which they should look at these men and women.

This work was published in 2004 in a special issue by the daily newspaper Libération.



"I oversaw a group of 6 people. Installed at a barrier at the crossroads of two busy routes, we had orders to verify identity cards and to arrest the Tutsis wanting to flee the hills. We also looked at faces. You can tell a Tutsi from his nose which is longer and thinner than that of a Hutu. When we caught one we killed him on the spot."

*Ntare Alexis
Former militiaman, arrested on September 12th, 1994 for crime of genocide, freely temporary since May 5th, 2003.*



"The two children were hiding amongst the banana trees near my home. When Claver found them he was quite pleased with himself. He said : "Come and have a look, I've caught two little cockroaches". I killed them with a club. For the first one I hit him three times; the second one was smaller so I only had to hit him twice. Killing Tutsis was a popular thing to do, so killing those kids didn't mean anything to me."

*Ndagamiro François
Mission, arrested on February 10th, 1996 for crime of genocide, freely temporary since May 5th, 2003*



"I lived with Balthazar, a Tutsi. After the first attack on the mountain where we were hiding, Balthazar asked me to leave in order to save our three children. After two days of walking, we managed to reach the house of my family. The next day, they told us that they didn't want Tutsi children in their home and drove us out. We stayed hidden near the house for three days. It rained and we were hungry. Then, I decided to commit suicide with my children. I threw them into the river and just as I was about to join them my younger brother stopped me. He said : " Why kill yourself ? You've just solved your problem with the Tutsi"."

*Aynkamiye Collette
Farmer, arrested on May 9th, 2000 for crime of genocide, imprisoned to the central prison of Gisozi, awaiting trial.*

III. *Absences, 2013*

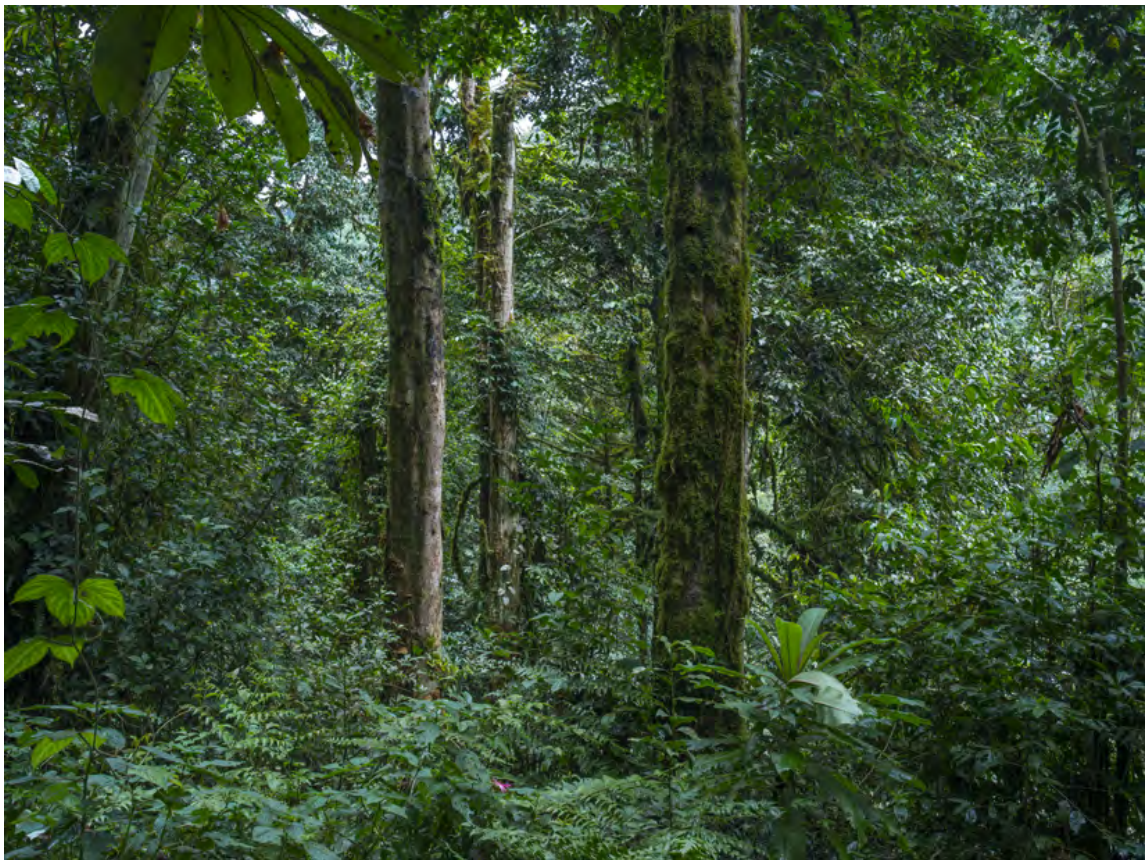
In May 2013, Alexis Cordesse returned to Rwanda to photograph nature in which all human presence is absent. These photos take us on a journey from the rolling hills of Kibuye, to the Nyungwe rainforest, via the marshy plains of Bugesera and muddy waters of the Nyabarongo. The images dialogue with landscape painting (from Friedrich's fluffy mountains to Douanier Rousseau's teeming jungles), all the while readily playing with colonialist clichés portraying Rwanda as an « Eden of a thousand hills ». The landscapes, in extreme contrast to the horrors of genocide, seem to have regained the peace and quiet that once characterised them.

Absences borrows from earlier photographs (images from *Itsembatsemba* as well as from the press) to make us uncomfortably aware that, twenty years earlier, these places of original beauty were home to such horror. Confronted with the ambivalence these landscapes reveal, it is not so much about admiring their irrepressible beauty than probing the cracks, the invisible mark that history has left behind on them. They are trompe-l'œil, traps not refuges, open graves where luxuriant nature is shown stubbornly going about its job of living. Nature that, in appearance, is deaf to man's story.

This body of work is completed by two photos of memorial stones, in Ntarama and Gishwati, with victims' names engraved on them, as well as witness accounts from three survivors and a "righteous" Hutu collected by the photographer while in the country. Faceless portraits reduced to a mere audio presence, these recorded accounts will be available to listen to at the exhibition itself. This set-up opens a new space for perception where viewers will have to use their imagination, their ability to picture the event by measuring the discrepancy between these silent landscapes and the accounts of what people lived through.

"(...) My parents lived near here. They had seven children. Everyone was killed, I am the only survivor. As I was alone, I didn't get the chance to finish my studies. We live with the killers as we have no choice. Of course it's better to forgive, but only those that ask for forgiveness once they have confessed to everything they did and why they did it. Then you can forgive, as forgiveness is necessary in life. But when you are unlucky enough to live with them again, and they haven't told the whole truth, there is still something hidden, especially when it is where the bodies of our loved ones are so we can bury them, then I say that it is like a rocky road that you must learn to endure. We say hello to them, some reply willingly, others pretend that everything is ok. We try and live together. (...)"

Uwababyeyi Odette, grower



Nyungwe Rainforest, 2013

© Alexis Cordesse / Courtesy Les Douches La Galerie

Chronology

- 1898** Germany colonises Rwanda, a small kingdom made up of two socio-ethnic groups – Hutus (farmers, the majority group) and Tutsis (shepherds, the minority group) – and ruled by a Tutsi king.
- 1921** Belgian mandate over Rwanda.
- 1931** Introduction of an identity card stating ethnicity (in effect until 1984).
- 1959** Death in mysterious circumstances of the last great Tutsi King Mutara Rudahigwa. Hutu peasants revolt, leading to the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis.
- 1961** Hutu parties win the first parliamentary elections.
- 1962** The independence of Rwanda is proclaimed.
- 1973** Military *coup d'état* by Major Juvénal Habyarimana, who takes power as president for twenty years.
- 1990** First military successes of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), made up of Tutsi refugees in Uganda. Its progress is provisionally halted by a French military intervention.
- 1993** With RPF troops at the gates of Kigali, the Arusha peace agreements are signed, providing for a power-sharing deal. Hutu extremists set up a weekly paper called *Kangura* and the “Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines” (“One Thousand Hills Free Radio and Television”) – RTLM – in order to spread their propaganda calling for a genocide of the Tutsis.
- 1994** *6 April, 8pm.* President Juvénal Habyarimana is assassinated above Kigali airport. The circumstances of the attack remain controversial to this day and the perpetrators have never been identified.
- 7 April, morning.* Prominent democratic figures, including the Hutu Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana, are assassinated. Areas of the capital are taken over by *Interahamwe* militiamen. The genocide, which is to last 100 days, begins. RPF troops immediately deploy inland. Civil war resumes.
- 22 June.* Operation Turquoise is launched. At the end of the genocidal killing, awaiting reinforcements from the UN peacekeeping forces, the French Army receives a UN mandate to enter the Northwest of Rwanda to set up a protected zone, known as “Zone Turquoise”. This rather ambiguous mission (was it to protect the population or open up an escape route for the genocidal regime figures and militiamen?) is to last until August 21st.
- 4 July.* The centre of Kigali is taken by the RPF.
- 15 July.* 500,000 Hutu refugees spill over the Congolese border. In the following weeks, three times more join them in refugee camps in the East of the Congo.
- 3 October.* The UN Security Council endorses a report designating the massacres in Rwanda as genocide.

- 1996** *November.* The East of Congo is invaded by the RPF, leading to the return of two million Hutu refugees to Rwanda.
- 1997** *17 May.* Rwandan forces loyal to Laurent-Désiré Kabila march 1,500 km through the Congo to overthrow Mobutu Sese Seko.
- December 17: Publication of the report of the parliamentary investigation committee
- 1998** Parliamentary fact-finding mission presided by Paul Quilès on the role played by France in Belgian Rwanda relating to the events in Rwanda and the role of Belgium. Beginning of the inquiry by anti-terrorist judge Jean-Louis Bruguière on the assassination of Juvénal Habyarimana .
- 2001** Publication of the organic law on Gacaca courts, former Community Courts used again to speed up the trial of hundreds of thousands of individuals accused of having participated in the genocide.
- 2002** *1st January.* The Third Republic of Rwanda is proclaimed, putting into place the regime of President Paul Kagame.
- 2003** *1st January.* A presidential decree concerning those guilty of genocidal crimes allows the provisional release of second and third category prisoners who have confessed to their crimes and completed half of their prison sentence.
- 2006** Judge Bruguière demands legal proceedings against Paul Kagame and members of his government for their alleged involvement in the attack on April 6, 1994. Rupture of diplomatic relations between France and Rwanda. A commission of inquiry on the role of France in the genocide is created in Kigali.
- 2008** Judge Bruguière's case is undermined by the withdrawal of his principal witness.
- 2009** Rwanda joins the Commonwealth.
Re-establishment of diplomatic relations with France.
- 2010** Re-election of Paul Kagame with 93% of the vote.
- 2012** Investigative missile inquiry by anti terrorist Judge Marc Trévidic contradicts the hypothesis of Jean-Louis Bruguière that the missiles were to have been shot from the Kanombe camp, bastion of the hutu army.
The State of Rwanda officially ends the Gacaca Courts.

Alexis Cordesse

Born in 1971, lives and works in Malakoff (FR)

Solo shows (selected)

- 2014 Rwanda, wounded vision, Kazerne Dossin Museum, Mechelen, Belgium
Rwanda, Les Douches La Galerie, Paris, France
L'Aveu, Galerie Ikono, Brussels, Belgium
Rwanda, blessures d'images, Armenian Heritage Center, Valence, France
Border Lines, Atlantic Center for Photography, Brest, France
- 2013 La Piscine, Confluence Gallery, Nantes, France
Border Lines, Sakakini Center, Ramallah, Palestinian Territories
- 2012 Border Lines, Artothèque de Caen, France
French Instituts, Jerusalem, Gaza, Ramallah, Naplouse, Palestinian Territories
French Institut, Jerusalem, Israel
- 2010 Border Lines, École Spéciale d'Architecture, Month of photography, Paris, France
- 2007 Rencontres photographiques, artist in residence, Saumur, France
- 2006 Du Beau Travail! Atlantic Center of Photography (CAP), Brest
Agora theater, Evry, France
- 2005 Du Beau Travail! Ancienne Poste Gallery, Le Channel, Calais, France
La Manufacture, Nancy, France.
Theater 71, Malakoff, France.
- 2004 La Peripherie Gallery, Malakoff, France.
Elsa Triolet Library, Pantin, France.
- 2003 Nikon Images House Galerie, Zürich, Switzerland. 1994
- 1994 World day against AIDES, Trocadéro, Paris, France.
- 1993 World day against AIDES, Saint-Eustache Church, Paris, France.
- 1992 Festival Visa pour l'image, Perpignan, France.

Collective shows (selected)

- 2013 20e Rencontres photographiques, Lorient, France
Jérusalem, Izmir, Alger, Les Douches La Galerie, Paris, France
Urbi & Orbi, Sedan Photo Biennale, France
- 2012 Usages et convivialité, Maison des Arts de Malakoff, France
- 2010 Clichy sans clichés, French Institut, Berlin, Germany
- 2006 Clichy sans clichés, Espace 93, Clichy-sous-Bois / Paris Town Hall.
- 2005 Prisonniers de l'image, Centre d'histoire de la résistance et de la déportation, Lyon.
- 2004 2/15 – The day the world say no to the war, Paul Smith, New York, USA.
- 2004 Europa the soul of the cities , Septembre de la Photographie, Lyon, France.

- 2003 Strangers, Triennial of Photography and Video, ICP, New York, USA, with Eyal Sivan.
- 2002 Dokumenta 11, Kassel, Allemagne, with Eyal Sivan.

Books and catalogs

Border Lines, limited edition portfolio - Nicéphore Niépce Museum & Artothèque de Caen, text by Michel Poivert

Lucien & Rodolf Hervé Prize, catalog, Vimagie, France.

Clichy sans clichés, Editions Robert Delpire - Acte Sud

Du Beau Travail!, with Zoé Varier, Editions Trans Photographic Press

Europa, l'esprit des villes, catalog festival September of Photography, Editions Lieux dits

Generation X, World Press Photo Masterclass – First Decade, Gijs Stork Publisher, Neetherlands

2/15 – The day the world say no to the war, Editions Hello, New York, USA

Strangers : The first ICP Triennial of Photography and Video, Editions Steidl, Germany

Prizes and awards

- 2011 Arcimboldo Prize
- 2010 Lucien & Rodolf Hervé Prize
Shortlisted for the Academy of France in Rome
Shortlisted Neuflyze-Vie Foundation Award
Grant of research, National Center for Visual Arts (CNAP), France
- 1995 3rd prize Observer Hodge Award.
- 1993 World Press Photo Joop Swart Masterclass
- 1992 Agena Prize

Films

- 1997 *Foca, Absolut Serbia*, with Eyal Sivan, docu – 13' – Momento!
Kaboul, de guerre lasse, with Eyal Sivan, docu – 13' – Momento!
- 1996 *Itsembatsemba, Rwanda un génocide plus tard*, with Eyal Sivan, docu – 13' - Momento! (Golden Gate Award, San Fransisco International Film Festival, 1997/Mention spéciale, festival international du film documentaire et court-métrages de Bilbao, 1997)
Burundi sous la terreur, with Eyal Sivan, docu – 13' – Momento!

Collections

French National Library, Swiss Life Foundation, Nicéphore Niépce Museum, private collections.