

KAZERNE DOSSIN

MEMORIAAL, MUSEUM
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OVER HOLOCAUST
EN MENSENRECHTEN



MÉMORIAL, MUSÉE ET
CENTRE DE DOCUMENTATION
SUR L'HOLOCAUSTE ET
LES DROITS DE L'HOMME

MEMORIAL, MUSEUM AND
DOCUMENTATION CENTRE
ON HOLOCAUST
AND HUMAN RIGHTS



Rwanda: Wounded vision

Introduction

The genocide in Rwanda took place amid general indifference. On April 6th 1994, Rwandan 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. In less than a hundred days, soldiers and militiamen, with the help of a section of the civilian population, killed between 700,000 and 1,000,000 people. The 2,300 troops of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) proved unable to halt the genocide. Their failure to act effectively reflected a lack of consensus among members of the UN Security Council. Belgium decided to withdraw its peacekeepers as early as 7 April, after ten Belgian paratroopers were killed that same day by Rwandan soldiers.

Two years after the genocide, young photographer Alexis Cordesse went to Rwanda. Cordesse (°1971) is an independent photographer based in Paris. He worked for several years as a photo-reporter, in France and abroad (Iraq, Kurdistan, Afghanistan, Bosnia, etc). Between 1996 and 1998, he worked on a series of short films made from his own photographs and sound recordings. The film *Itsembatsemba*, on the genocide in Rwanda, was shown at various festivals around the world. Since then, Alexis went back several times to Rwanda. In 2004, assigned by the French daily *Libération*, he produced *L'Aveu* (The Confession), a series of portraits and interviews of genocide perpetrators. Since 2009, Alexis has been travelling regularly to the Middle-East to complete *Border Lines*.

The exposition

The exhibition is divided into three sections, corresponding to three sets produced between 1996 and 2013.

- **I - Itsembatsemba, 1996:** video, 13 min (VO: Kinyarwanda, English subtitles). produced using black and white photographs, sound recordings and archive material from the 'Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines' (One Thousand Hills Free Radio and Television).
- **II - Confession, 2004:** 12 diptychs each made up of a full frontal colour portrait and an extract of their confession.
- **III - Absences, 2013:** Large colour photographs and three interviews with survivors

The temporary exposition Rwanda: Wounded Vision is on display from April 5 to September 14 at the fourth floor of Kazerne Dossin: Memorial, Museum and Documentation Centre on Holocaust and Human Rights (Mechelen).

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I - Itsembatsemba, 1996

Itsembatsemba, Rwanda un génocide plus tard
Eyal Sivan en Alexis Cordesse – 1996 – 13 min
OV: Kinyarwanda – ondertiteling: Engels
VO : Kinyarwanda – sous-titres : Anglais
OV : Kinyarwanda – subtitles : English
© État d'urgence (FR) Memento production (FR)

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 the '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 the RTLM. This radio station was launched in 1993 by Hutu extremists and was the most popular of the 'hate media'. Mixing popular music 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'.

II – Confession, 2004

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 Kibuye, 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 a series of diptychs, each made up of a full frontal colour portrait and an extract of their confession. 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 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.

According to the Rwandan justice, 800.000 people (roughly 10% of Rwanda's population in 1994) were condemned to have directly taken part in the murders or in the sexual violence during the genocide.

“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.”

Colette Ayinkamiye , Farmer.
Arrested on May 9th, 2000.
Now awaiting trial.



III - Absences, 2013

In 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 a photo of a wall from a memorial, with victims' names engraved on it, 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. 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.

More information

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