

“Watch out, your freshness, your happiness, all that youthful beauty, it won’t last forever”...

A conversation with Patrícia Almeida, October 26 2009

David-Alexandre Guéniot [D-AG]: In September 2008, the exhibition Portobello opened at the Galeria Zé dos Bois [ZDB] in Lisbon. It occupied six rooms, with roughly seventy photographs being pinned to the walls and distributed according to a graphic and nonlinear scheme. Visitors were welcomed at the entrance by the *trompe l’oeil* image of a photograph printed on wallpaper and measuring almost 3x3 metres: the photograph of pink flamingos behind wire netting (pink flamingos who were themselves painted in *trompe l’oeil* on one of the walls of their habitat). This room served as an antechamber for the exhibition and expressed the idea of an untamed nature that was not only artificial, but also staged (a fresco of painted pink flamingos... In a cage with pink flamingos). This first conditioning of the visitor’s gaze was then followed by a room with a slide show of eighty photographs of desertified wasteland or plots of land waiting to be built upon. There you could see paraded before you the remains of the frenzy of mass tourism: flyers advertising discothèques lying in the dust, a towel stiffened and drained of colour by the effects of the sun, a golf ball in the middle of a dirt track, the plans of a villa under construction, a bricklayer’s tape measure with its tape fixed in a complex trajectory. Above a hedge, you could make out the soft top of a Mini Moke. The other two rooms, which were open to the daylight, contained the bulk of the photographs from the project. The first room with the photographs taken by day and then the second smaller room with those taken by night. Then came a room with video projections of the reflections of hundreds of small squares of coloured light from a silently turning disco ball, serving as a chamber of transition to a last room, poorly lit and without any exit, a sort of crypt in which six photographs were set out in a line, with headless bodies – a sort of low relief of decapitated tombs – being immobilised in a flash: a torso glistening with sweat, a knee sticking out from a crutch, a panther printed on a t-shirt as if it were rising up out of the night... In June 2009, another exhibition of the Portobello project was shown at the Convento de Santo António, in Loulé, at the invitation of Fundação de Serralves. The main body of the project was “reduced” to roughly fifty photographs and occupied the 200 square metres of the nave of a church. The slide show had disappeared, as had the video, but another wallpaper picture appeared (a Tina Turner poster measuring roughly 2.5 metres in height giving the impression of a booted ogress) and the six “cryptic” photographs had found their natural habitat in a small side chapel. All of the central space was occupied by hanging banners on which were printed the photos from the Portobello series... Meanwhile, the book Portobello was published, an artist’s book and a self-publication... With these exhibitions and the publication of the book, one gets the impression that Portobello is a living and multiform project, with sufficient critical mass to be broken down into several objects, but also capable of being redistributed according to different arrangements. There also appears to be a concern and artistic reflection on the way in which the project is displayed, that it’s not

just a question of showing the photographs, but it also invites the reader or spectator to visit different atmospheres...

Patrícia Almeida [PA]: This reflection on the modes of presentation and the fact that they are worked upon individually (the book as a book, with its own logics of narration and reading, and the exhibition in its relationship with the architectural space and the physical presence of a spectator) is the consequence of a better understanding of my artistic practice: making sure that the moment of the exhibition, the composition and publication of the material are appropriate to the nature of this material – such as it was produced at the moment when the photograph was taken. As I don't know what I'm going to photograph a priori, I take all my cameras with me: different formats, compact photo cameras, 35 mm film, but also a video camera... This range of different formats derives from the fact that certain cameras – or certain devices – are better suited than others to the situation that I discover when I want to photograph it. I realised, for example, that if I wanted to take a certain type of portrait – let's say one that is more static or pictorial – then the best thing would be to use the Hasselblad, for it is an imposing object, with a sense of strangeness and a power emanating from it that seem to impress the people being photographed. As a result, they “naturally” become more serious, more concentrated...

D-AG: As if they were “working” harder on their own portrait...

PA: On the other hand, the disadvantage of this operation mode is the dispersal of formats and photographic languages... Which makes it more difficult to create a formal unity. Several languages are mixed together: the snapshot, or the “stolen photo”, the staged photo (even if this always begins with a real situation that I've already witnessed and which I wish to see repeated so that I can photograph it), a photograph that is more carefully constructed from the point of view of its aesthetic composition, more pictorial, one that may have more references (to a certain type of use of photography, such as the postcard, for example, for some of the landscapes of *Portobello*) or even the use of a flash in certain circumstances, which gives the image a greater rawness, gives the characters a more distinct shape and makes the action stand out from the background in which it takes place. This diversity of languages is therefore reflected in the work of composing and editing the material. And in the conception of the exhibitions and books. For the *Portobello* exhibition, the photographs were printed with different sizes, ranging from the postcard format to certain prints that were more than a metre wide...

D-AG: This diversity is also found at the level of the printing supports. The photographs are printed on wallpaper and fabric, or projected as a slide show... The aim being – I believe – not so much to show the photographs, but rather to make the spectator enter a universe, to have the experience of a poetics, to suggest a path, to “dramatise” the exhibition space. To make the device of the exhibition reveal its performative qualities: as a certain route that the spectator passes through, and as the experience of a space. It is a path, it makes us enter a mental landscape, a sort of cartography where imaginary relations are woven, whether imagined or real, where visual echoes respond to one another all along the visit.

PA: What I actually find interesting is to work on the relationships between images, and not so much on the images themselves, in isolation. To work on what they can suggest when you put them together, when you place them in relation to one another, is a matter of sense – of meaning – and no longer just a sensitive or visible issue.

D-AG: It seems to me that *All Beauty Must Die* develops over this terrain more consciously than *Portobello*. I'm thinking, for example, of the relationship between the project and its

title. The title “Portobello” worked as the name of a town or region, a sort of land of plenty or a branding, in the Anglo-Saxon sense. In other words, it functioned as a marketing technique designed to transform a proper noun into a common noun in order to be able to cultivate and extend its semantic field, and thus create some sort of spiritual enrichment for a product. The title “Portobello” adopted this technique and cultivated its identity around notions of summer, leisure time, holidays, an exposed and seductive body, but also of artifice, façade, disposability (a place where one comes to consume and not to inhabit or occupy it). The title “All Beauty Must Die”, on the other hand, seems to issue an order or a challenge, with a slightly prophetic tone, or in any case a fateful one... Unless it was meant as a curse...

PA: This title can be read, I think, on several levels. On the one hand, it counterbalances the slightly idyllic, almost smug, aspect of certain photographs. As if it were warning people about these photographs, by telling them: “Watch out, your freshness, your happiness, all that youthful beauty, your *forever young*, it won’t last forever”...

D-AG: I have the impression that it does in fact introduce a certain tension into the landscape. Suddenly, this landscape, which previously seemed so peaceful, so innocuous, so “natural”, becomes charged with something that has to be mistrusted, an echo that gives greater depth and blackness to the darkness of the undergrowth. But it also shows us this other characteristic that marks our relationship with photography: the sensation that we are looking at the faces of people who will be dead in the future. To the extent that this iconography of an idyllic and romantic youth seems to become congealed in its own iconic death. It’s as if these photographs had somehow stepped outside of time, as if they anticipated and simultaneously told a very ancient story, an original myth, of peace and universal beauty, a paradise...

PA: Yes, or else a mixture of well-being and torpor, like in the song by Talking Heads: “Heaven is a place, a place where nothing ever happens”. Heaven is also the name of the club that everybody tries to get into, where they play your favourite music over and over again, all night long... For me, the title “All Beauty Must Die” also represents the possibility of bringing together something erudite and something popular and causing them to coexist without creating a hierarchy between these two elements. This title was taken from a song by Nick Cave, “Where the Wild Roses Grow” [from the album *Murder Ballads*, 1996], sung as a duet with Kylie Minogue, and which tells the story of a tragic love. The video clip shows Nick Cave and Kylie Minogue by the riverside, the image is very blurred and is inspired by the pre-Raphaelite aesthetics of the painting *Ophelia* by the English artist John Everett Millais. But it’s also a reference to a line from a poem by John Keats (“Ode on Melancholy”, 1819). “She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die”. And then, at the time of the heavy metal music festival at Ilha do Ermal [in the North of Portugal], amongst the small group of thirty or so people standing in front of the scene, and who were sufficiently motivated to brave the blistering sun of an August afternoon, I saw a guy with his back to us wearing a t-shirt that says “Slowly We Rot”, written like that, in dripping letters. “All Beauty Must Die”, “Slowly We Rot” is stylistically more brutal, but the meaning is very similar. That’s what I find interesting, being able – in the same project – to bring together these different references: the English romantic poetry of the 19th century, the rock music of Nick Cave in a duet with the pop star Kylie Minogue and the title of an album by an American death metal group; and then making sure that these references can freely interplay with one another without the erudite taking precedence over the

popular, without any prejudice about the interest or depth of the one in detriment to the other, but also without creating an irony (the erudite making fun of the lack of taste or subtlety of the popular). The important thing is that these references share in the same movement, in the creation of an atmosphere, an imagery that, in the case of *All Beauty Must Die*, is composed of a mental map whose main coordinates are nature, community, freedom, adolescence and romanticism.

D-AG: And what about music? The photographs of *All Beauty Must Die* were taken at rock music festivals. What is the project's relationship with music?

PA: I think that the relationship with music is more functional than thematic. Music serves as a catalyst for bringing together the different coordinates of this map. Because I'm not especially interested in the relationship between photography and music, photographing concerts, the machinery of a festival, the identification of young people with a musical style, the live meeting between a rock group and an audience, the guitars burning on the stage... It's not music as a phenomenon that I'm interested in, but the fact that it acts as a social catalyst in a given time and space. The festival as an agent of transformation of a given time and a given space for the benefit of a given population. A microcosm in which there temporarily exists a social bond of a very particular nature that visually creates an atmosphere of community. For the three or four days that a festival lasts, a kind of time capsule seems to be formed all around the festival site. Time seems to stop. People live at the rhythm of the festival, camp on the festival site, eat, sleep, let live, freed from their home-based routine, their family, their studies. It's a form of escape... Nothing else exists but these hours peacefully stretching towards the evening concerts, the alcoholic haze of a summer afternoon, lying on the grass, your skin hot from the sun, with your loved one squeezing the blackheads on your back...

D-AG: The notions of community and freedom probably form the basis of this project, just as they also lie at the heart of the notion of utopia. In other words, at the heart of the creation of a social order according to which people freely decide to form a group and share what they have to offer. Like a kind of mythical fraternity between men, and between men and women too. Like Joe Strummer's camp fire singalongs project, which consisted of people getting together around a camp fire to play music, to hang out together and share something, just that, nothing more and nothing less.

PA: For me, the festival fulfils this function of a camp fire to some extent, but on another scale, and in a natural setting, with the desire to renew our contact with nature.

D-AG: Which is where you get this feeling of utopia from that's already present in *Portobello*, this sense of time that has stopped, this time capsule. It seems to me that, in utopia, there's this idea of finding an ideal and eternal model for society, one on which history would no longer have a hold. Time would glide over the transparent shell of this society under glass, in the image of the Biosphere, a scientific experiment in the 1990s, which consisted of shutting a team of scientists away for two years in a "100% natural and recyclable" environment, a kind of Noah's ark without any animals, just with plants, trees, water, rocks... In search of a lost (ecological) paradise...

PA: The nature that appears in *All Beauty Must Die* appears essentially under the form of landscapes. Primitive, wild landscapes, which have nothing to do with the idea of the sublime, of the total landscape; these are not landscapes that will "take your breath away", transformed into idiomatic expressions of global imagery, which have become marketable items, like the Iguazu Falls, the Amazonia...

D-AG: Landscapes that you no longer see... Whether you have eyes open or closed, you see exactly the same thing...

PA: In *All Beauty Must Die*, the landscape doesn't impose its authority, it's seen in its human dimension. We find ourselves on the edge of a wood, on a footpath, sitting on the banks of a stream or caught in the rays of light shining through the leaves. We're in the landscape, we're part of it, lost in the middle of the vegetation. These are leaves and branches intermingled with one another. The landscape describes the organisation of a chaotic mess of plants, trunks, branches, leaves, shadows, stones... It's the organisation of a mysterious chaos.

D-AG: It's the emanation of a secret harmony. This conception of a nature that must be admired for its wild, organic quality, in permanently changing states – ranging from the most infinitesimal (a ray of sunshine) to the most spectacular (a storm) – is a component of English romanticism. In fact, it was in this period (the early 18th century) that the English-style garden became popular. Its aim is to artificially reproduce a natural order, exploiting the unevenness of the terrain, and giving free rein to a nondomestic vegetation (at least in appearance) that gives a natural impression, drawing tortuous paths that thus leave a great deal to surprise and to the sudden discovery of picturesque points of view or decorative architectural elements (a *grotto*, a small lake, a ruin)...

PA: Romanticism is effectively another of the notions around which this project is being built up. And, most particularly, English literary romanticism. On the one hand, because of certain themes – like the landscape, most notably – that English romanticism treated differently from other romanticisms, but, on the other hand, also because it allows me to introduce a link to the text in this project. Poems, but also songs, in English...

D-AG: Like *Portobello*, the project *All Beauty Must Die* derives simultaneously from a personal experience and an intuition. And I have the impression that this intuition is something that has been gradually revealing itself to you. In the beginning, you had this wish to go and photograph the atmosphere of summer festivals – an atmosphere that you yourself experienced as an adolescent – without knowing if this intuition was going to be confirmed or whether you would find enough material to develop into a photographic project. And then, as soon as this intuition began to be reflected upon, in other words from the moment when you began to be confronted with the first photographs coming back from the lab and you laid them out in front of you, I have the impression that this same intuition began to act on you once again, but by establishing another relationship and moving in the opposite direction. There was no longer that initial impetus that made you move towards things, but it became an enigma that you progressively turned inwards on yourself, that you gradually began to understand, becoming more and more aware of the territory, the universe that was being defined in front of your eyes – while, all the time, you were trying to remain faithful to this original intuition...

PA: The universe of *All Beauty Must Die* is gradually being built up in layers, on successive layers, which are always slightly different in order to enrich the interpretation of the images individually, in other words, in order to construct several possible entries for a corpus of images. But that takes time. This enigma you're talking about, this enigma that has seemingly arisen from an initial intuition, it takes time for it to be understood by the photographer himself; it doesn't just reveal itself suddenly – and I don't all of a sudden find the images that can encapsulate it. You have to “see” the scenes, find the situations... Without knowing – before you see them – what these situations are. Even now, I'm still

caught up in this process of identifying the territory that is covered by this project: where are its boundaries? How can I go beyond them without destroying them? Where should I lay my emphasis? For example, for this exhibition for the BES Photo award, the stress has been laid on romanticism, but I'm not sure whether, at a next exhibition of mine, it might not shift towards the notion of community... or nature. I shall continue to work on each of these notions – nature, romanticism, adolescence, community, freedom – individually, and I know that this will create new correspondences and new interferences for each of them. And it's these interferences that form new paths of reflection and understanding that the material gives me about this initial intuition. And these new paths have to be evaluated and kept going, like in that image that António Lobo Antunes gives us about the writing of a novel, of those Chinese performers at the circus who keep plates spinning at the top of long sticks. They set one of them spinning, and then another, and then another, and so on, and then they have to keep running from one stick to another to prevent them from falling.

David-Alexandre Guéniot

Educated in France in Political Science and Philosophy, he co-directed the artistic programming of Théâtre de l'Usine, in Geneva, between 1996 and 1999. In 2000, he began his collaboration with RE.AL, a production and creation oriented structure directed by choreographer João Fiadeiro, taking on in partnership the artistic direction of the "LAB" project and accompanying the creation and production of works by João Fiadeiro, Tiago Guedes, Cláudia Dias and Gustavo Sumpta. Since 2009, he has been responsible for the Atelier Real (www.atelier-real.org) programme of international artistic residencies, and is the curator of the cycle "Leftovers, tracks and traces". He has collaborated with Patrícia Almeida since 2007 in the production and conception of her artistic projects.