

Guillaume Herbaut

Pour mémoire

Photography Exhibition
February 13 - May 13, 2018
Open everyday, 10am to 7pm



Russia - Kotovsk - City park near the railway station - December 19, 2013 - 2:39 pm
What remains of the statue of Lenin destroyed on the night of December 8/9, 2013.

Guillaume Herbaut *POUR MÉMOIRE*

PHOTOGRAPHY AS THE ART OF DYING

FROM NEWS STORIES TO LEGEND

Guillaume Herbaut has made photography embark on a process that is the reverse of current affairs coverage, extending on-the-spot reporting and adding scenes developed on a scale worthy of the narration of legends. To construct such an ambitious initiative, he has embraced the chronological and spatial dimension of both history in the making and History with a capital “H” where mankind grapples with human destiny. Subjects range from the glory of technology (nuclear power), instruments of power (weapons), and aspirations for democracy (revolution in Ukraine), to threats to health, base greed and the scourge of totalitarianism. Guillaume Herbaut has photographed the collapse of the modern-day Empire.

The power of pictures is a pivotal element in the shift from news to legend. Each key chapter written and comprising Guillaume Herbaut’s work stands as an exploration of the esthetic resources of photography and of the references built up over the two centuries that photography has existed; and it is an exploration of the possibility of using raw stories to imagine the world.

Guillaume Herbaut appears to be wondering whether photography can still be a source of edification. Yes, it can, when an original story and specific locations are transformed to attain universal scope. The Zone is the expression of decline, the Square the expression of hope, the naked body an iconoclastic version of *The Origin of the World*, bare breasts the image of future revolution. Guillaume Herbaut has dared; he has dared take photos in a way similar to the writing of tragedy. But catharsis is not for moral pronouncements; it is a means for us to visualize our fears.

As we pursue the photographic fresco, we can read Guillaume Herbaut’s log book, highlighting his role as a narrator. The relevant reference moves away from tragedy and towards the idea of epic theater as practiced by Bertolt Brecht: the actor addresses the audience directly, face to face. Speech creates the distance required to observe the dreadful events occurring on the world stage. The duty which photography has today is to depict events through realism that only photography can achieve, pointing to failings, noting impasses, while also noting prospects for hope, expressing sensuality both harsh and heroic. Guillaume Herbaut’s pictures, all of them, are like bad dreams, but wide awake. There is something deep inside his images that suddenly emerges on the surface: the foundation layer of the images that grips the eyes.

Could this be the final stage of photojournalism in its progress since the 20th century, a secular art, at the meeting point between things imaginary and things political?

CHERNOBYL – FATED TO BE INVISIBLE

In times past there was fire or tempest, but a disaster inventory now needs to include nuclear blasts, catastrophic events that rival the phenomena of yesteryear such as the wrath of the gods. First there was the icon of the evil mushroom cloud; then there was Chernobyl.

The real impact of the drama defies the scope of visual presentation. The threat is invisible, and on the human scale of time, it is infinite. For years Guillaume Herbaut grappled with the challenge of conveying Chernobyl in pictures. There was little in the way of symbols or allegories, and to replace the invisible with things visible, a frontal approach to the story was the prime requirement. Face-to-face confrontation was the visual protocol for revealing the invisible enemy.

The frontal approach presents us with the survivors, and also the dead, present through photographs displayed, through fetishes or samples. Then there are the doors, epitomizing a frontal relationship which, at last, offers the key to the meaning of this perspective on Chernobyl. By facing things head on, there where evil radiates, the story of the victims of fate is produced. The victim of fate is the only being capable of being the face of the inescapable force. The victim of fate is gifted with sight yet deprived of horizons. Guillaume Herbaut thus offers the possibility of using images – images of victims of fate – to address invisible forces.



Larissa lives in Chernobyl Exclusion Zone 3.
© Guillaume Herbaut

THE ZONE, A 21st CENTURY UNDERWORLD

Everything here becomes visible. Everything can be seen, as if danger could add to the excitement. The period of desolation is past, and photography can capture the emergency and the chaos of life. Guillaume Herbaut prefers a style that is realistic without appearing to be naturalistic. It is a distinctive style: images overstate and intensify situations, imposing their own time signature. Nothing exists as it actually is. The photographer's job is to bring substance to what is real.

In the Zone, danger, as seen, has changed. It is no longer toxic radiation, but rather the squalor of the human condition which produces its own effects: victims of fate have disappeared, while the poor and wretched have appeared. Here, in the Zone, Guillaume Herbaut brings photography into the imaginary realm of the Russian novel, of a Dostoyevsky novel. As a photographer, he focuses on people, figures, faces, types. The Zone has provided him with the ideal setting to build his world of feelings: at a loss, conflicting hopes, in a world that can be grotesque.

As always it is the spaces between the images, together with the voice in his log book, that establish a world of legend. As always, Guillaume Herbaut creates a distance. His role might be compared to the position of a stage director who may find emblematic locations where the limits of human life stand out to be observed. This is far removed from any photo-essay intended to expose or even inform. There is not the compassionate involvement of the humanistic or humanitarian tradition. These are simply characters snared in their inextricable fate, as *wretches*.



Larissa (48) is one of the last residents of the town of Poliske inside the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. The town of Poliske (Ukraine), which once had a population of 20,000, was evacuated ten years after the disaster. A dozen people still live there today.

WEAPONS SHOWS – CHOOSE YOUR ARMS!

Defense trade shows presenting arms and weapon systems (their ostentation being equal only to their desire for secrecy) are a showcase for the cynicism of the world. Guillaume Herbaut realizes that a photographer taking pictures of booths featuring military designs will inevitably cause people to hesitate as he reflects what is already being projected as an image. Yet behind the visual tautology, the photographer also realizes that he is revealing the 90% of the iceberg that is not visible. The roots of evil, the evil of the international arms trade is shown here, bare-faced. But what face is it given?

There is the face of death, death in the future yet present in the world of the living. Guillaume Herbaut has photographed arms shows as if they were displays in a waxworks museum. The click of the shutter is the metaphorical retort to the noise of weapons being tested by generals and experts in strategy from so many countries around the world, the weapons being presented in glowing terms by charming hostesses, latter-day goddesses of war. Welcome to the world of the *powerful*.

This story by Guillaume Herbaut stands in counterpoint to his corpus of work showing human beings in the grim congruence of their distress and desire. The clinical tone of the pictures clearly shows that any human presence has already retreated, leaving nothing more than the unemotional realm of force. The photographs have permanently set the smiles and expert stances of the visitors, thus confronting us with the travesty of weapons turned into toys in the minds of those placing orders to fill their barracks with such gear. Artifice reinforced in visuals becomes a mantra. The images shown to the powerful are distorted, as in a funhouse mirror. The art of war deserves no better than to be relegated from trade fair to fun fair.

UKRAINE, FROM INDEPENDENCE SQUARE TO THE DONBAS – THE FIGHTERS

The history of revolution can never be written in advance. If protracted, time undermines the event as heroes gradually become exhausted and leave other characters to contend with increasingly uncertain fates. For a number of years now, Guillaume Herbaut has been covering Ukraine and the tension between advocates of the country moving closer to the European Union and those who are attached to their Russian links.

The struggle which started with the heroic occupation of a city square in Kiev developed into trench warfare in the east of the country. How can this shift be shown as the people follow the transition into what has generally been recognized as a period of doom? Perhaps by giving each rebel an identity as a *fighter*, bringing each one into the legend of current events.

It is impossible to overlook the past, for it was here in this part of the world in the mid-19th century that photography and war came together for the first time. During the Crimean War (1853-56), Roger Fenton from Britain traveled with six horses drawing his photographic van and was able to develop pictures using the collodion plate process. Pictures “based on photographs” made using the plates became the first press photos in history.

Guillaume Herbaut has found something similarly archaic in his coverage of the war in the Donbas: a person speechless, a landscape devoid of movement, an atmosphere frozen. Herbaut fraternizes with his photographer forbears as the separatists and the Ukrainian Armed Forces play out, once again, scenes from the battle waged since ancient times between Europe and Asia.

7/7 L'OMBRE DES VIVANTS: MEMENTO MORI

7/7 is an agreement that Guillaume Herbaut has concluded with two contracting parties: photography and himself. But can his fear justify a work? It is a matter of venturing out into the field where violence prevails, not to be subjected to it or even witness to it, but to make it his target, i.e. to study the nature of the human race today.

In parallel with the images, pen in hand, taking notes, making sketches, the photographer has moved on, step by step, until the shots are taken. Vendetta in Albania, terror in Mexico, the maimed in Japan, trauma in Poland, and obsession in Ukraine: all form circles or spirals that always bring the photographer back to his own story.

Can fear be averted by putting a face on the source of fear? *Memento mori*. Behind the esthetics of vanities, the images here comprise an art, an art of dying.

Michel Poivert

Photography Historian



Lina Hili. Her husband was an accountant with a small building company in Shkodra, Albania. On October 5, 1999, he had just left the bank after collecting the monthly wages, when he was shot dead in the street by a man who stole his bag containing 130,000 leks (approximately 1000 euros). Lina's brother-in-law avenged the murder. Now she is worried that her son could be the next target.

© Guillaume Herbaut

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Guillaume Herbaut (born in 1970) lives and works in Paris. While doing press assignments, his documentary work takes him to places marked by the past and presenting him with symbols and history to address in a bid to reveal dramas now invisible: Chernobyl, Auschwitz, Nagasaki, and, more recently, the conflict in Ukraine. His photographs have been exhibited in many festivals and venues (e.g. in Paris, at the Jeu de Paume museum and the Maison Rouge). Guillaume Herbaut has received a number of distinctions, including two World Press awards, a Visa d'or, the Niépce Prize (2011) and the Bayeux-Calvados award for war correspondents (2016, in the Web-journalism category, for his logbook on Ukraine produced by Arte Info). He has recently published the book *7/7, l'ombre des vivants* [Editions de la Martinière].

Guillaume Herbaut
POUR MÉMOIRE

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Exhibition
February 13 to May 13, 2018
Open every day, 10am to 7pm

ADMISSIONS

Admission to exhibition: 4 €
+
Admission to Grande Arche Rooftop: 15 €
Students (under 26 with student ID): 10€
Children (6 to 18): 7 €
Unemployed, over 65 & disabled: 12 €
School groups: 7 €
Free for children under 16

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PRESS CONTACTS

TOIT DE LA GRANDE ARCHE

MY RP / BPFConseil

Béatrice Parrinello-Froment & Justine Germond

beatriceparrinello@bpfconseil.com

justine@bpfconseil.com

+33 1 6 63 72 16 06

ARCHE DU PHOTOJOURNALISME

2e BUREAU - Sylvie Grumbach, Martial Hobeniche

archeduphotojournalisme@2e-bureau.com

+33 1 42 33 93 18

www.2e-bureau.com



Ukraine - Savur-Mohyla - October 5, 2014 - 4:55 pm

The memorial in honor of soldiers who died in battle in World War II defending the position on the heights at Savur-Mohyla. After weeks of heavy shelling by both Ukrainian and pro-Russian forces, the obelisk on the memorial collapsed.

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