

Don't we all want to be Alice?

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I was invited by Recyclart – an art centre based in Brussels - to write about one of their community projects and, surprised about the nature of the project in question, accepted. Vincen Beekman made a brief explanation of context and methodology, making sure that my perspective would mostly be nurtured by the images shared with me.

For little more than 4 years, Recyclart has been working with a community that gathers around Brussel's central train station, giving them disposable cameras, processing the film, handing them back the photographs and so on and so forth. It sounded like an organic process, in search of some sociological truth. As I was told about the circumstances that made these images possible, I started imagining how the photographs would be like and who were the people taking them. It seemed uncanny that I would be allowed access to this family album and, more so, that I'd be writing about it without any previous knowledge of the individuals portrayed and their life stories.

When I finally saw the sketchbooks with the standard minilab copies of the photographs taken by the community, I dove into a complex journey. As I was going through more than 500 photographs, I kept thinking *Why am I looking at this? Why were all these photographs taken in the first place?* Finding an answer sounded like the right premise for this text. There's a punctum in these photographs that is hard to explain. Although the overall feeling of joy of the people portrayed in these photographs is undeniable, I was left struggling with a feeling of pity towards them and that became even harder to work through (I'll get there). I wondered why this group of people chose to take place in this adventure: as subjects and objects, lookers and looked at, why would they want to share their experiences through photography with the rest of the world?

What place do I occupy in this constellation of gifts? Is this series of photographs more authentic because of its amateur footprint? In what ways does this project differ from one created by a so-called "professional photographer"? If done by community members, does that legitimate my place as a voyeur? As I go through the photographs, I'm left with the conclusion that although the question of belonging makes a huge ethical difference (the point of view is that of an insider, not an outsider), some aspects resemble works usually done by photojournalists. For instances, whoever he/she might be, the one holding the camera is frequently seduced by a position of authority towards the world around him/her. When holding a camera, we turn into *homo erectus* and our shots often accentuate the differences between the *I* and the *Other*. That clash is often disheartening, but hardly avoidable. From the top of our eyeballs, we dramatize what's happening at a distance: skies look higher, floors lower, faces wider, eyes bigger and arms longer. An optical distortion - one could argue -, but what's photography's role in the making of this altered perspective? Is the camera a mechanism that, while transforming one's notion of time and space, inherently dislocates de *I* from the *Other*?

Whatever considerations existed when this project was first started, I suspect its promoters weren't anticipating such an emotional journey. Although the methodology isn't new (soldiers documenting their experience while at war, migrants photographing their journeys across borders, mail carriers photographing the country with disposable cameras, etc.), the continuity and persistence of this project make it stand out. It's hard to ignore its references to several sub-categories of the documentary genre, with emphasis on the archive, the family album and the snapshot. Thinking about the history of the photographic

medium and its intrinsic flirt with social realism, it seems only natural to suggest that the usual constraints of professional documentary work - technical, historical, physical or emotional - scarcely allow for an ethical storytelling. When dealing with shared space and social realities, photographic representation makes it particularly challenging to deconstruct human relationships. Perhaps that's why choosing to spring such a project from the inside managed to pave the road for authenticity, putting the ethics of being and aesthetics in sync.

But life is a fucking mess and looking at these photographs left me restless, drifting in a sea of contrasting feelings. Skippy, Julien, Chris, Patterson, Carlito and the gang photograph out of joy, of wanting to share their existence with everyone else: their faces, their scared bodies, their families, their love for each other, their partnership, their generous hugs, their love for alcohol and drugs, their clothes, their dogs, their belongings, their beds, their playgrounds, etc. They photograph out of joy, even when showing traces of the dark holes that surround them; even when displaying traces of violence. They are alive, they live in the present tense and they want to celebrate exactly that: living in the moment. Some of them are homeless, some of them just like to hang out and share that common space. A community is formed out of a routine and necessities and no doubt an essential tie between this group is formed out of its relationship to drugs.

These photographs translate the special feeling that arises from thinking about oneself as an a-historical being and whatever moral considerations might emerge from looking at this body of work is for each one to attend to. Is there something romantic about being homeless? Is there something romantic about being addicted to drugs? Yes and yes and I feel this project manages to address exactly that. Modern societies have a very hypocritical approach to drug consumption and while prevention campaigns often address the dangers of abusing recreational drugs, they often ignore the circumstances that turn them into soul crutches.

My stating about the romantic aspect of being an outsider does not mean I think these photographs are seductive, sexy or cool. I don't think they are, nor do I think they glamorise the marginal lifestyle. What is it about it then? My guess is that the romantic aesthetics of this project spring from its intrinsic relationship to the idea of freedom. Though life in the streets is harsh and often undignifying, now and then a feeling of total liberty takes over. That feeling is difficult to put in words. It might have to do with the subversive nature of the act itself and the display of the refusal of everything our capitalist societies stand for; it might have to do with the high that comes from living in the moment and keeping a playful spirit alive; it might result from a metaphorical conquest of the art of outdoor living, which in turn is an intrinsic denial of the scaffolding of modern civilization so dependent on the idea of property. Whatever the source, that feeling is difficult to replicate. On its own, drugs are an expression of escapism and, in that sense, a rebel statement against the normative patterns that define social contracts and, thus, societal living. What most people find out, one way or another, is that living a balanced life is hard as shit. In some lives, a schism becomes too evident to ignore and escapism and addictive behaviours take over. For a second or more, don't we all want to be Alice?

If I project an existential nature onto this project, it is because I'm reminded of Camus' understanding of existence. When he questioned the Cartesian statement *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), his proposed alternative was *Je me révolte donc nous sommes* (I rebel, therefore we exist). Camus' understanding of human nature made him suggest that rebellion was a value on its own, given that it proved our consciousness as beings searching for signs of humanity. So, when I mentioned I was left struggling with a feeling of pity towards the people at the core of this project, what I meant was that I pity their lack of successful rebellion towards the habit of addiction.

The repetitive nature of addiction clashes with a conscientious fight for freedom. We all know this, but often choose to ignore it. In this project, that repetition acquires visual expression. The subjects, willing to document their living experiences, invite us into a world

that grows dimmer as we start to recognize patterns that tell us *death is all and everywhere*. Together, we choose to celebrate that which brings us closer – our human condition – instead of choosing to highlight the things that societal living, and often photography, point out as reasons to keep us apart.