

LUC DELAHAYE
THE ECHO OF THE WORLD
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1. INTRODUCTION

“My way of taking photographs is very simple, minimal: being there and doing only what is strictly necessary – holding the camera. I believe in the power of recording and I work only on that – on what is the singularity of photography, what belongs only to it.”

This exhibition retraces twenty-five years of Luc Delahaye’s work, as of the early 2000s. Built on global current events, that work strives to adopt a rigorous stance of observation and to fully exploit the potential of photographic recording. In this manner of being present, the experience of the event is as important as the image.

While his work does not aim at attributing meaning to the events he photographs, as a whole it traces a kind of state of the world in this first quarter of the 21st-century. A tormented world dominated by the tumult of painful events, from ongoing wars to the memory of past conflicts – Luc Delahaye recognizes that his conception of history is tragic. It is the representation of a world in chaos and haunted by death which international organizations somehow try to regulate.

Initially made according to a traditional approach and in just one take, his photographs, generally large in format, have evolved over time. As of 2004, he began to compose some of them by computer, assembling multiple shots of the same situation, taken for that purpose. In 2013 he then started to explore staging, working with participants who, for the image, take part in a situation that is familiar to them; the two modes of composition may also be combined. In both cases, and despite the use of digital tools, it is always a question of restoring the trace of a presence, of rigorously recording the real as it is experienced.

This exhibition brings together over half the works produced by Luc Delahaye over the past twenty-five years, including ones that are recent or have not yet been shown. The texts on the walls are taken from the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition.

The titles of the works are in either French or English, Luc Delahaye having chosen one or the other at various times and in different situations.

2. LUC DELAHAYE'S BIOGRAPHY

Luc Delahaye was born in Tours in 1962. In 1984, after several years of wandering and doing odd jobs, he moved to Paris, where he got his first reporting assignments, then went to Britain to photograph the miners' strike and joined the small Moba Presse agency. There he covered daily political and social events, show business, and other news stories. In 1985, following a series of paparazzi pictures, he was hired by Sipa Press and sent to Beirut, where he had his first experience of war. There followed many war assignments and coverage of international news in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Rwanda, Chechnya, Iraq, the West Bank and Gaza, Haiti, the Congo, Sudan, Somalia, etc. He joined Magnum Photos in 1994, that same year signing a contract with *Newsweek*. He was elected a member of Magnum in 1998 and remained with the agency until 2004.

His reporting earned him the Robert Capa medal (1993, 2002), World Press Photo first prizes (1992, 1993, 2002), the Paris Match prize (1992, 1994), the Visa d'or (1993), and the Bayeux award for war correspondents (2002). During these years, alongside his work as a photojournalist, he also produced several documentary projects, some of them published as books, receiving the Oskar-Barnack prize (2000), the ICP Infinity Award (2001), and the Niépce prize (2002).

In 2001, he stopped working as a photojournalist and began making photographic tableaux. The earliest of these were presented at the Ricco / Maresca Gallery in New York in 2003, the same year he published *History* (Chris Boot), then at La Maison Rouge in Paris in 2005, and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles in 2007. He won the Deutsche Börse prize in 2005 and the Pictet prize in 2012.

3. EXHIBITION TEXTS

ROOM 1

In 2001, after fifteen years as a photojournalist and having achieved prominence in his profession, Luc Delahaye chose to abandon the traditional formats of photojournalism and magazine pages in order to explore that of the photographic tableau. That decision resulted in a new way of making images and the adoption of a camera with a panoramic format. This conferred a new identity on the group of twenty or so images he made over a four-year period – an identity radically different from that of his photojournalistic work. The large format of the prints turned them into images to be looked at on a wall – a mode of viewing that remains that of these images today.

ROOM 2 – TEXT 1

“I later realized the usefulness of that panoramic period – the format encourages a distancing that allowed me to ‘calibrate’ my own distances. There’s the minimum distance, that of the reporter, which I knew well, and the maximum distance beyond which the figures disappear, and that establishes the measurable space of the distances common to everyone. And then there’s the photographer’s mental distance, his point of real presence. The panoramic format helped me clarify this question. But I must say that this word, ‘panoramic,’ that was attached to my pictures irritated me for a long time, as if the format were the key to the work. I was trying to make tableaux, which is quite another matter.”

The panoramic format allows a widening of the field of vision and favors a distancing from the real that is inherent in the panorama. The right distance is no longer that of traditional photojournalism, in which, generally, the closer the photographer is to his subject, the better the photograph. It is that of a retreat, sometimes coupled with a slight elevation. The images are marked by a desire for withdrawal, for neutrality, for an expressive retreat that is a constant in Luc Delahaye’s work. The photographer seems to have gone away. The individuals, though present and facing us, ignore us – too absorbed in their own lives, or too far away to notice the photographer.

ROOM 2 – TEXT 2

Luc Delahaye has always rejected the idea of “having a subject”: for him, covering current events was the best way to elude the question. The triggering factor was often a mental image formed when reading newspaper articles, which encouraged him to go to the place in question – a process that was intentionally not too thought-out, documented, or rational, but remained intuitive, leaving room for the imagination. During those years, his attention was engaged as much by the chaos of war situations as by the pomp of commemorations and the meetings of international bodies, the violence of the former seeming to be a response to the formal organization of the latter. If the events that guide him are most often linked to extreme

situations, that is because those situations, as dramatic disturbances of the real, engender states of disorder that for him are conducive to photographic recording. Reality presents itself differently, in a brutal and unexpected manner; it can be grasped. While it is sometimes difficult to watch, one must nevertheless try to reconstitute it, without pathos and with a form of absence, which for him is the best guarantee of documentary exactness.

ROOM 3

As of 2004-2005, Luc Delahaye sought to give a greater physical presence to the individuals represented – to their body language, gestures, and expressions, in a relationship that was almost one of equality with the spectator, making the human figure the essential component of his work. These new requirements gradually led him to modify his work methods. With the *132nd Ordinary Meeting of the Conference*, shown here, he adopted the technique of computer composition, using several shots taken for that purpose. At the same time, he enlarged the format.

His earlier images had embodied a conception of photography that was widely shared by 20th-century photojournalists: that of the centrality of the shot, which was seen – in its direct relation to the instant – as the essential moment in the production of an image. Composite images transgress that rule. Delahaye, however, insists on the elements of continuity: “My ‘constructed’ photos are always based on reporting. They are made up of fragments of the real, of experienced moments, which for me count as photographic documents.” In both cases, it is a question of trying to render the truth of the moment, though that may sometimes differ from the exactitude transmitted by a single take.

ROOM 4

For several years, Luc Delahaye cut out and saved newspaper photographs that drew his attention, considering them to be work documents meant to feed his reflection and, eventually, to prompt a departure. After 2006, this practice gradually deviated from its initial purpose to take on a life of its own. The endless accumulation and proliferation of images contained the form of a particular vision of the world – quite dark – based as much on the experience of the spectator of current events as on that of the photographer. It was not until 2020 that this material was given its current form: black-and-white reproductions of enlarged details, in a single format and without written informations. A new approach, since the original material was comprised of images made by others, thus evading the questions of presence and the experience of the real that lie at the heart of his practice.

ROOM 5 – TEXT 1

The bodies of work presented in this room and the next, one made in Haiti and the other in the West Bank, testify to the diverse approaches Luc Delahaye has adopted over the past fifteen years. The images taken in Haiti in 2010 relate, in spite of their format, to the traditional and instantaneous

approach of photojournalism: scenes of chaos captured over a short period, as he wandered through the streets of Port-au-Prince in the days after the earthquake, and all conceived independently. Those made in the West Bank from 2015 to 2017, over the course of six visits, were conceived as an ensemble and brought together under the title *Sumud* – “firmness,” “determination,” or “perseverance” in Arabic – designating a strategy of resistance to the occupation. Most are stagings, reconstitutions of observed situations, or inventions, whose participants are people the photographer met on site. In photographs such as *Taxi*, *Récolte*, and *Sumud*, bearing witness to his attachment to Palestine, Luc Delahaye almost allegorically shifts the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict toward a territory that is both poetic and concrete, anchored in daily life of the most ordinary kind, and far removed from the usual representations.

ROOM 5 – TEXT 2

“The staged photographs [...] result either from an encounter or from something seen, and that experience always provides the base, although necessarily in a deferred way. They have a history, formed by the movement of human relations and running parallel to the ‘official’ history of the image, and that will inscribe itself on the image’s reverse. In these stagings the moment of shooting is one of inner tension that, for me, is exactly equivalent to shooting in the conditions of reportage. I am not photographing a fictional character, but the external reality of a person, in fragments, methodically, patiently, and ardently. I am documenting. My staged pictures are really very simple, made with modest means, but they need that base in order to have a legitimate existence in my eyes.”

ROOM 6

“The town was deserted, the government forces had fled. In small groups, to secure the area, the rebels spread through the quiet streets, entered each house. I made the photograph in those circumstances. With the computer, I changed the color of the tee shirt. It was faded orange, like the walls of the house, and it became that deep purple. I removed one element, a kind of shelf on the wall. And I corrected the optical distortions that appear when you photograph architecture. It is necessary to rid the image of these flaws that mark it as a photograph in a thankless way by giving free rein to the shortcomings of the technique. And to that end, one can rely on a geometrical convention of representation, which of course doesn’t correspond to our vision either but has the advantage, as a convention, of being tacitly accepted. Photographic distortion is a visual obstacle, it seemed impossible to me that the militiaman could cross the doorstep of such a house.

So he enters, and in a second, we won’t see him anymore. *House to House* is closely related to the photograph I made a few minutes later, in the courtyard of another house: *Death of a Mercenary* is its reverse. Outside, inside. While the first is a metaphor of disappearance or absence – and perhaps, but on a

personal level, a metaphor of my position as photographer and my calculated absences – the second is an image of appearance. The militiaman's effacement is opposed to the mercenary's frontal and painful presence, the evidence, the concrete reality of a face at the moment of death.”

ROOM 7

Conceived during the same period, with very different subjects (the trading floor of the London Metal Exchange, the Syrian army in the streets of Aleppo), the two large compositions *Trading Floor* and *Soldats de l'Armée syrienne, Alep, novembre 2012* belong to the same allegorical genre or register. The stylized gestures, the choreography of postures, and the sometimes caricatural exaggeration of expressions, make them the least realistic of the images in his repertoire, into which they introduce a new tone, grotesque or surreal. Allowing himself a step away from documentary grounding, Luc Delahaye used portraits of traders photographed in London – which he employed as well in another specific work, *Trading Floor (Études)* – to compose the faces of some of the Syrian soldiers, drawing an indirect parallel between these two contemporary “battle” scenes.

ROOM 8

Over the past ten years, black and white have reappeared in the work of Luc Delahaye: unretouched, small in format, most often displayed on the wall as an organized group, his black-and-white images evoke a serial or typological photographic language close to the documentary aesthetic. Nevertheless, the computer remains the veritable laboratory where the images are developed: most of Delahaye's work is now done in front of a screen. His practice is closer to that of writing – writing with images, to produce an image that “thinks.” An image that is neither bound to its author's initial intention, nor too narrowly dependent on the real. Delahaye now seems far removed from the heroic imagery of the war photographer, even though war remains a crucial subject for him, as is confirmed by his presence in Ukraine in 2022, during the early months of the conflict. There, amid exactions and summary executions, he produced some of his most disturbing images, questioning the gaze cast on violence: that of the perpetrators, that of the photographer, and our own.

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