

Bruno Serralongue

Pour la vie

27.01–24.04.2022

Tuesday 25 January - Press preview at 5pm

Wednesday 26 January - Opening from 6 to 9 pm

Curator: Xavier Franceschi



Franck during a reconnaissance at a Bayou Bridge Pipeline construction site, Rayne, Louisiana, July 2018 © Bruno Serralongue / Air de Paris, Romainville

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Presse release

From 27th January to 24th April 2022, the Frac Île-de-France is presenting a solo exhibition at Le Plateau by Bruno Serralongue entitled *Pour la vie (For Life)*, which takes visitors on a journey through portraits of struggling individuals or groups, bearing witness to photographic series initiated several years ago, to which new productions have been added.

Since the early 1990s, Bruno Serralongue has been questioning the uses and status of the photographic image, going out to meet the communities that are formed around a social and political event and the people who are fighting a battle on which their living conditions depend.

Although his subjects often cross paths with those of photojournalists, his working methods differ radically. The use of the camera, which requires time and, consequently, the consent of those he photographs, generates a distanced retranscription of the information, in contrast to the temptation of «creating a buzz» which is constantly sent by the media. The artist focuses on the backstage and periphery of the event and the traces left by it and thus offers a «displaced» point of view that questions the notion of objectivity of the photographic medium and the informative power of the image.

Whether it is a series on the migrant camps in Calais, begun in 2006, or more recently the struggle of North American First Nations against oil pipelines threatening their environment, the site of Notre-Dame-des-Landes and its residents, or the defenders of the Jardins Ouvriers des Vertus in Aubervilliers threatened with destruction and the evicted occupants of a workers' hostel in Saint-Ouen - in the run-up to the 2024 Olympics - or even an earlier series on the demonstrators against the pension reform in 1995, the exhibition interweaves the trajectories of individuals and the energy of the collective.

By inviting us to take the time to decipher what we see as well as what we do not see in the image and by leaving us free to interpret it, Bruno Serralongue's photographs encourage us to question the notion of reality regarding what the media transmit to us. His artistic approach to the documentary image thus provides us with a testimony on the state of the world and allows us to take another look at current events and their tensions.

Bruno Serralongue was born in 1968 in Châtelleraut, France. He lives and works in Pantin.

Retrospective exhibitions of his work have taken place in major institutions: at the MNAM Centre Pompidou, Paris (2019); at the Frac PACA, Marseille (2018); at the MAMCO, Geneva (2015); at the Wiels, Brussels and the Jeu de Paume, Paris, as well as at La Virreina, Centre de la Imatge, Barcelona (2010).

The galleries Air de Paris in Romainville, Baronian-Xippas in Brussels and Francesca Pia in Zurich represent him.





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Interview between Bruno Serralongue and Xavier Franceschi

Xavier Franceschi: There is more than one way of interpreting the title you chose for the exhibition - *Pour la vie/For Life* - and I am inclined to retain above all the positive aspect... Can you tell us what led you to this choice?

Bruno Serralongue: Yes, you are right to emphasise the positive aspect. I don't know if it's a happy exhibition, but it's full of life. The title also makes a mockery of somehow seeing photography as an embalming, a killing of the photographed subject. On the contrary, I emphasise the fullness of life of the people photographed who are proud of themselves and of the struggle they are waging. And they are fighting for life, for an improvement, a transformation, a change or even a recognition of their individual but above all collective life. Life in the title *Pour la vie* is in the singular, yet it is rather a question of showing the diversity of lives and struggles, today as in the past (the slide show of the series *Les Manifestations* (Demonstrations) dated 1995).



XF: It's true that we are far from giving the kiss of death to the subject... In this case, *Pour la vie* is also the title you gave to the first photograph that opens the exhibition and which takes up the title of a project that is active and alive, to say the least...

BS: Yes, *Pour la vie* borrows directly from the «Journey for Life» organised by the Zapatista Indians throughout Europe. Publicly announced for January 1st, 2021, the Journey was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and administrative hassles in Mexico, but it is finally taking place and is underway as I write this. Concretely, a delegation of 170 Zapatista Indians is travelling through different European countries to meet collectives that are struggling «below and to the left» against capitalism and the oppression it inflicts on bodies and minds. As stated in the first press release, the aim is «to hold meetings, dialogues, exchanges of ideas, experiences, analyses and evaluations between people who are committed, based on different perceptions and in different fields, to the struggle for life. Afterwards, each person will go his or her own way, or not. Looking at and listening to the other may or may not help us. But knowing what is different is also part of our struggle and our effort, of our humanity». This is also the exhibition programme. That is why this photograph should open it. At the time it was taken (29th May 2021), it announced the Journey, but now, at the time of the exhibition, it is a living reflection of it and wishes in its own way to prolong the Journey.

XF: You were quick to come up with the idea that the exhibition should be organised around a series of portraits - portraits of men and women you have photographed over the course of your career - which would allow you to revisit your entire production and the projects you have undertaken since the 1990s. Does this mean that, perhaps more than usual, you wanted to pay tribute to the various protagonists of these struggles that you like to describe?



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BS: In 2010, at the time of my exhibition at the Jeu de Paume, I had already attempted a cross-section of my series to identify and highlight elements common to all of them. It was a new classification that depended little on the events photographed but which made it possible to show that the development of a repertoire of collective action was (is) at work in my work. In this repertoire, there was already a wall dedicated to portraits, but it was not very developed. I have since expanded it. But I don't know if the term portrait is appropriate. It's about people I asked to pose where I met them, and the environment they are in is also an important piece of information in the photograph. It's not about showing the psychology of a person but about affirming their presence.

XF: What do the different struggles of these men and women have in common?

BS: They all feel crushed by something we can call neo-liberalism, which puts their lives at risk. This takes different forms in India, the USA, Africa and Europe, but the malaise that drives them to act stems from this, a feeling of being crushed, of being expelled from one's own life, against which one must fight by putting one's body into play. That's the common point: you must take the street, public space and take hold it with your body in resistance.

XF: We may not talk about each of the characters in question, their individual commitment - that would be extremely instructive - but I just wanted you to say a few words about Pastor Harry Joseph, who is in one of the photographs, and the struggle that he is waging...

BS: Pastor Harry Joseph officiates and lives in a small community, Saint James, located along the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. This geographical area between the two cities is called «Cancer Alley» because it has the largest concentration of petrochemical plants in the US. The environment is extremely polluted; the Mississippi River serves as a shipping lane for supertankers loading and unloading gas and oil from extraction sites to marine terminals via pipelines. It has the highest rate of leukaemia among the population, often African American, who have no choice but to live near the petrochemical plants because of low rents. Pastor Harry Joseph is fighting against the latest pipeline to be built, the Bayou Bridge Pipeline, whose terminal comes to Saint James. For him, as for the members of his community, it is a new source of unhappiness, an additional risk of seeing cancers develop but also a major environmental risk. But above all, through his struggle, Pastor Harry Joseph denounces the environmental racism of which he and racial minorities are victims in the USA (this is also true in France. This is shown in the *Toxic Tours* made in 2014-15 ahead of Cop 21 in Paris and visible in the Le Plateau showcase). The «I can't breathe», the last words breathed by George Floyd crushed under the knee of the white policeman Derek Chauvin who killed him, is a cry that the inhabitants of Saint James also utter through the figure of the pastor .

XF: We can link this photograph to another one in the exhibition, where the function of objects can oscillate between gardening tools and defensive weapons: this strange piece of metal forming a right angle...

BS: Yes, absolutely. This photo of a U-Tube is part of the same series on *Water Protectors* as the one of Pastor Harry Joseph. It's a welded metal bar that an activist can slide their hands into so that they can't take them out (there are handcuffs inside). These U-Tubes are used in direct action against Bayou Bridge Pipeline construction sites, including by Mak K. Tilsen, a Lakota poet and activist who chained himself to an excavator, stopping the work





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of workers for a day.

Most of the activists leading the fight against oil pipelines in the USA are First Nations. For them, the Black Snake (the pipeline) is not only an ecological danger, but also a symbol of the federal state interfering with their territories. The pipelines run near or under Indian reserves. Leaks, and there are many of them, pose a major pollution risk to waterways and to the agricultural land used by the indigenous peoples. But above all, their struggle is anti-colonial. Numerous treaties have been signed between the federal government and the various Indian nations over the past three centuries, guaranteeing First Nations territories over which they exercise their sovereignty. Running a pipeline through these territories without their consent is an assault on their right to live in their territories under their own laws. A slogan painted on a small house on the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota reminds us of this: «They've been trying to get rid of us since 1492». Fighting against pipelines is fighting for life, against erasure.

XF: To get back to the order - if I may say so - and the thread of the exhibition, can you tell us about this projection in the first room, *Les Manifestations*, and its form of presentation?

BS: *Les Manifestations* comprises photographs taken in December 1995 and January 1996 in Paris during major strikes and demonstrations against the pension reform led by the Juppé government. The series consists of 679 slides. For several years, I didn't know what to do with such many images. Should I sort, choose and keep just the best ones? But what does that mean, the best ones? I never knew! So, for this series like for all the others, I don't have any preferences after taking them. I consider all the photographs good. So, then there was the problem of the quantity. These are slides, so projection was an obvious choice, but between taking the photos and the first time I was asked to exhibit this set of shots (2000), I realised that it was no longer so much the triggering event that was important (Pension Reforms) but demonstrations as a form of collective social struggle. Alain Badiou in *Le Siècle* (2005) writes it very well. He states that demonstration has been one of the «dominant forms of collective materiality» in the 20th century. He continues, «What is a 'demonstration'? It is the name of a collective body that uses public space (street, square) to make a show of its own power. For Badiou, demonstrations are «the ultimate collective celebration of the body, the quintessential display of fraternity.» It is right and just.

So not to draw special attention to the initial event, I slowed down the slide show considerably so that, in the total duration of the exhibition, each slide could only be seen once. Once this protocol is established, each time the work is shown, I think of a particular device. For Le Plateau, the idea came to mind that the slides should be projected in the space and not on a wall, and that the images should enter a relationship with the exhibition audience. In a way, I wanted to transfer the images to the viewer, so that he or she could metaphorically bring the slides to life through the body, which must literally go out to meet the images and pass through them. The spectator sets out with the demonstrators, becomes a demonstrator.

XF: You wanted to integrate a sound device into the exhibition that interacts with the photographic pieces. Why did you do this? Is this the first time you have done this?

BS: This is the second time, but the first time, that the sound device is deployed in the entire space, without being linked to a particular photograph. This is a recording made with my smartphone just before the start of the 150th





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anniversary of the Paris Commune. It is a choir singing a song written in 1880 by Eugène Pottier. I kept the last lines of the refrain: «It will never end; it will never end» and you can also hear the applause. The diffusion in the exhibition space is random, you don't hear it all the time and never in the same place, it remains discreet. As a spectator I think you can't help but formulate a question when you hear these words: what will never end? Struggle or repression? But I like to think that it is the people photographed who address these words to the viewers of the exhibition. And there is the applause, which is very important. These few discreet words followed by the applause allow the images to be put together and to open an additional narrative.

XF: What is your reaction to being called a committed artist?

BS: Today I would say that I am above all a committed citizen. And where I am committed, I take my camera with me. But it started more as the reverse. It was through the practice of photography that I joined political and social struggles, in France and abroad. In 1996 I went to Chiapas, in the south-east of Mexico, to take photographs during an international meeting organised by the Zapatista Indians, who were revolting against the Mexican federal government. I remember very well that the trigger for leaving was not the background of the Zapatista movement but the incarnation of it in the French and international media, namely the figure of Subcomandante Marcos. I had, like so many others, been seduced by the media's construction of him and I went to this meeting with the hope of photographing him. There was nothing very political about it, on the contrary, I was showing real alienation towards the media system. But when I got there, I discovered a reality, a political struggle, which has had a lasting effect on my political commitment and my commitment to documentary photography. Since then, the task I have given myself is to take part in the construction of the image of struggling communities which I join. A twofold commitment, then.



XF: I think it is also essential to emphasise the artistic dimension of your work. You are not a reporter; you don't do strictly documentary work. And this dimension undoubtedly lies precisely in this difference. Not to mention the technical and formal choices: camera shots, large format photographs, etc. Can you tell us what led you to these choices?

BS: Perhaps to answer this question properly, we need to go back to the origins of my work. I studied art history at university, then photography at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure de la Photographie in Arles and finally at the Villa Arson in Nice, where I took a 5th year diploma in art. Throughout my school career, photography, its theory, history and practice have been at the heart of my concerns. The two sets of photographs I took during my two years at the Villa Arson are the starting point of my artistic work. One of them is entitled *Faits Divers* (1993 - 1995). In short, it was a matter of reading every morning the (very extensive) news section published in Nice-Matin and going to take photographs on the same day as the news was published, using the information published in the newspaper as my only guide. Obviously, nothing remained of the dramatic or comic event, I was not trying to reconstruct it, I was making a photographic record; in a second stage, the text of the newspaper was silk-screened under the image. For me, it was a question of establishing a protocol upstream of the shooting. I had always been interested in the conceptual practice of photography and this allowed me to try something in that direction, to put the subjectivity of the photographer (which I had certainly been force-fed in Arles) at a distance. But the interest



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was not where I thought it was, because at a certain point I started to read the texts and then something else was revealed. Ordinary racism that exudes from the texts became apparent where the alleged culprits are «very Mediterranean types», or «bearded»; all expressions that one does not pay attention to when reading these news items casually (especially when one is not a racialised person), but when you read regularly and carefully it stands out. That's when I realised that it's not only the information that counts, what is transmitted, but also the way it is told, I could say the way it is staged. That's where it all plays out: is it an alienating or liberating staging? It was at this point that I decided to focus on events for which I would provide a narrative, through photography, that would follow another imperative than that of informing. To do this, I had to consider what I saw in the press, because today it is the mass media that gives the official version of the event, but photography (the image in general and of course the text as well) is not content to represent an event; it reiterates it, prolongs it, elaborates it, since it survives it. The photograph will therefore define the framework within which the event will acquire its meaning, a posteriori. It will make an event legible or illegible. The camera, large format, museums, galleries and art centres provide a forum to diffuse my photos making it possible to develop a legibility of the event as a counterpoint of the media.

XF: You mention conceptual photography as a starting point. On the other hand, there is this «fine art» photography, as it has been called in France - so present in the 90s when you started working -, which seems heavily present... As if you were somewhere between these two poles...

BS: For me, when I started, it was obvious that photography had to be in colour and in large format, hung on the wall and not printed in a book. This is certainly a debt I owe to the works and debates on photography in France in the 90s! (It's true that Jean-Luc Moulène's photographs seemed to me more attractive, more modern, than Robert Frank's.) But it didn't have to be a painting. This is where conceptual photography - that of Douglas Huebler, that of Ed Rusha - has been an important model: these are not exclusively photographic works, the text plays an important role, and their mode of operation is the series and not the single image. So yes, my work clearly borrows from both these ways of thinking and photographing. In contrast to conceptual photography, which is generally in black and white and small format, I am aware that my colour photographs, which are quite large format, taken with a large format camera and positive film, framed in Plexiglas (since 2007) can be appealing, or at least have a recognisable style. The style is recognising a gap between what is seen (has been seen) and its rendition. This is essential. All photography rewrites reality. Only press photography can live in the illusion of an absolute continuity between the image and reality. But rewriting does not mean creating fiction. It is rather to affirm the creation of new relations with reality to think it differently. This is what I try to do.

XF: You adopt a position that in the end may seem rather singular: we feel that the subjects you tackle are dear to you - you choose them for what they express of a world that you feel you must fight -, you «cover» the events in question by attending them over a long period of time - which can be very long (a far cry from a reporter acting in the moment), as is the case with the series on undocumented migrants -, and at the same time, your works translate a form of distance, not to mention a quasi-impossible form... How do you go about explaining this paradox?





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BS: To a journalist who questioned him during the Visa pour l'Image festival in Perpignan about the supposed awareness that a press image can generate in the viewer, Jean Baudrillard replied: «we said it regarding the Vietnam War, and we have come back to it a lot. People act according to what they are, not according to the images they see. The image is a bonus. It is more indifference that dominates in the face of news photos. They have become too familiar to move us. We are used to it. We need more and more. The proliferation of images is such that we have crossed a critical threshold that forbids any real decoding. Perpignan reproduces this profusion. The public sees thousands of photos as if on a television screen. They are not given any reference points. It sees them pass by, cannot judge them, make a difference, exclude them. The distance, the judgement, the pleasure of the image is a dramaturgy in which few participate». The distance that can be seen in my images allows another dramaturgy to exist. For this, it is perhaps paradoxical, but the image must be hollowed out a little. The emptiness allows the viewer to make their way into the image, it allows them to imagine, to judge, to participate.





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Images available



Pour la vie (For Life), 2021
Production Frac Île-de-France, Paris
© Bruno Serralongue



Condemn World Bank, WSF Mumbai, 2004
World Social Forum series, Mumbai, 2004
Courtesy the artist and galerie Air de Paris, Romainville
© Bruno Serralongue



Sunday Afternoon, 1999
Sunday Afternoon series, 1999-2000
Courtesy the artist and galerie Air de Paris, Romainville
© Bruno Serralongue



Afghan refugees' camp in a wasteland close to the hospital, Calais, 16 July 2020
Calais series, 2006-2020
Production Frac Île-de-France, Paris
© Bruno Serralongue



Cherri Foytlin from Navajo Diné nation, leader of opposition movement to Bayou Bridge Pipeline founder of Water is life Camp. Protecting Mother Earth Conference, Wa He Lut Indian School, Olympia, Washington, 1st July 2018
Water Protectors series, 2017 - ongoing
Courtesy the artist and galerie Air de Paris, Romainville
© Bruno Serralongue



Boubacar Diallo, elected member of the consultation committee of the ADEF hostel in Saint-Ouen, led the fight for a dignified rehousing of the residents following their evacuation to allow the destruction of the hostel which is located within the perimeter of the future Olympic Village, Saint-Ouen, 23rd January 2021
Adef series, Saint-Ouen, 2020 - ongoing
Courtesy the artist and galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich
© Bruno Serralongue



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The climate brass band playing to support the occupancy of the Jardins Ouvriers des Vertus (community gardens) in Aubervilliers threatened with destruction to allow the building of a swimming pool for the Olympic Games in Paris 2024, Aubervilliers, 8 May 2021

Production Frac Île-de-France, Paris
© Bruno Serralongue



*Group (roadmenders and villagers), 12.08.2004
Work group series, 2004
Courtesy the artist and galerie Air de Paris, Romainville*

© Bruno Serralongue



« Our sacred land », the sticks filed next to Bellevue farm, ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes,
Sturday 8 october 2016

Notre-Dame-des-Landes series, 2015 - ongoing
Private collection, Paris
© Bruno Serralongue



Vendredi 28 avril 2006. Delegate Zero's guard. Lienzo Charro Los Reyes FPFUI-UNOPII, Iztapalapa

Courtesy the artist and galerie Baronian Xippas, Paris-Brussels
© Bruno Serralongue



*Judge Not, Support Sexual Preference, World Social Forum, Mumbai, 2004
World Social Forum series, Mumbai, 2004*

Courtesy the artist and galerie Baronian Xippas, Paris-Brussels
© Bruno Serralongue



*Hwang Yi Min, Yu Man Hyeong, Park Jun Kyu (in front of trade unions 's building), Séoul, 2001
Corée series, 2001*

Courtesy the artist and galerie Air de Paris, Romainville
© Bruno Serralongue



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Events*

Offering you reasons to come back to the plateau during the exhibition time.

› Artist /curator tour

With Bruno Serralongue and Xavier Franceschi
Sunday 06.02.22
5 pm

› Late-night opening *Pour la vie*

With a talk led by Jade Lindgaard regarding environmental, social and political issues
Full programme and guests : fraciledefrance.com (from February)
Wednesday 02.03.22 (preceded by a presentation of Noémie Gouda's window display by the artist at 7 pm)
7.30-9 pm

› Film programme

Artists film screening echoing the exhibition
Programme on fraciledefrance.com (from February)
Saturday 19.03.22
2- 7 pm

› *Calais (2006-2020)* / Bruno Serralongue

On the occasion of the release of the book *Calais (2006-2020)* dedicated to the photographic series on migrants in Calais. Texts by Jacques Rancière and Florian Ebner. Bilingual FR, ENG. Publisher Heni Publishing.
Discussion with the authors of the book
Saturday 02.04.22
6 - 8 pm

› Plateau-Apéro

Wednesday 06.04.22
7 - 9 pm

› Late-night openings

Opening until 9 pm, each first Wednesday of the month, with a guided tour of the exhibition at 7.30 pm
(except 02.03.22)

› Guided tours

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*Events free of charge





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La vitrine

Every month, the “Window Display” at l’antenne is home to a new art project linked to le Plateau’s exhibitions, collection and educational outreach ventures.

Anna Holveck

12.01-27.02.22

Opening 2 February, during the late-night opening at Le Plateau

Noémie Goudal

02.03-03.04.22

Opening 2 March, from 7 to 9 pm

Antoine Proux

06.04-29.05.22

Opening 6 April, from 7 to 9 pm during Plateau-Apéro



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La vitrine

L’antenne culturelle
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Free entrance

Tube access : Jourdain or Buttes-Chaumont / Bus : line 26

Exhibition open from Wednesday to Sunday, 2pm - 7pm

Late-opening each 1st Wednesday of the month, Plateau-Apéro

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