

Bruno Serralongue

Pour la vie

27.01–24.04.2022

Curator: Xavier Franceschi



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

le plateau, paris
22, rue des Alouettes
75 019 Paris, France
T +33 1 76 21 13 20
fraciledefrance.com

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Press release

***Pour la vie (For Life)* 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 Uertus 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...



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

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





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this mean that, perhaps more than usual, you wanted to pay tribute to the various protagonists of these struggles that you like to describe?

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.



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

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.



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



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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 .



Pastor Harry Joseph of Mount Triumph Baptist Church in front of his church, Saint James, Louisiana, 7 August 2017
Water Protectors series, 2017 - ongoing
Courtesy the artist and galerie Air de Paris, Romainville
© Bruno Serralongue

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 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



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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.



U Tube, Water is Life Camp, Rayne, Louisiana, 7 July 2018
Water Protectors series, 2017 - ongoing
Courtesy the artist and galerie Air de Paris, Romainville
© Bruno Serralongue

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.



The Demonstrations, 1995-1996
Production Frac Île-de-France, Paris
© Bruno Serralongue



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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 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.



Indians (Chiapas), 1996
Production Frac Île-de-France, Paris
Courtesy the artist and galerie Air de Paris,
Romainville
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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

Every Sunday at 5 pm
Meeting point at the entrance desk

*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

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frac île-de-france, le plateau, paris

22, rue des Alouettes
75019 Paris
Phone : + 33 1 76 21 13 41
info@fraciledefrance.com
www.fraciledefrance.com
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

L'antenne culturelle

22, cours du 7ème art (50m from the Plateau)
75019 Paris



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frac île-de-france, Administration

33, rue des Alouettes
75019 Paris
Phone : + 33 1 76 21 13 20
info@fraciledefrance.com
www.fraciledefrance.com

President of the Frac Île-de-France : Florence Berthout

Director of the Frac Île-de-France : Xavier Franceschi

