

MICHAEL von GRAFFENRIED: AN EYE CONSTANTLY ON THE ALERT

by ALBERTINE BOURGET

A rat hunter triumphantly exhibiting his prey from a Berne sewer. A little boy in trance during an islamist demonstration in Algiers. Veiled Sudanese women ready for battle. A woman injecting heroin on the street, for all passers-by to see. Such images are emblematic of Michael von Graffenried's work.

Born in 1957, established for the last fifteen years in Paris, France, where he has recently been decorated as a Chevalier of the National Order of the Legion of Honor, Michael von Graffenried is first and foremost a reporter, with an eye constantly on the alert. But he is not a photojournalist in the classical sense: fiercely independent from his beginnings, he has always refused to belong to an editorial staff or to an agency and always chooses himself the subjects and destinations he covers. Some might see it as an obsession with control ; he claims a search for coherence.

He wants to be where no one goes, so as to, he says, "make visible what we do not see". Because the situation is difficult to access, because we refuse to see it, or because we simply forget to look at it. He opens up "closed societies"¹. For instance, he was accepted in a very discreet naturist camp on the shores of Lake Neuchâtel, which he visited regularly for a ten-year period. He does not balk at the trivia of everyday life: last year, he travelled on several occasions to a small town in the State of North Carolina. He claims that photographic topics can be found anywhere, and that the most banal locations are full of exoticism. Yet while anything may be a photographic subject, he shuns mediatic territory.

His worst nightmare: places where press photographers flock to, fighting to get the best picture. Which does not mean that he shies away from danger. Fascinated by the repercussions of Islamist fundamentalism on societies, he travelled to the North of Sudan when all eyes were on the south of the country, or in Algeria at a time when the press was extremely controlled. There, in order to do his job, he took pictures unbeknown to people, triggering a camera hidden on his abdomen.

¹ International Herald Tribune, « Opening up Closed Societies », August 5, 1995, Laura Colby

This raw material, Michael von Graffenried refuses to let aside once it has been published. While it might mean annoying the editorial staffs and the photography editors, he controls the context in which his images are used. From shooting to publication, he wishes to take the responsibility. And, like a growing number of his peers, he blurs the line between reportage and Art, multiplying the supports and interactions. Once they have been published, his images live on in exhibitions and books, such as *Sudan, a forgotten war* (1995), the fruit of two weeks of travel, *Naked in Paradise* (1997) about the nudists' camp, or *Inside Algeria* (1998). In the documentary *War without images – Algeria, I know that I know* by Mohammed Soudani, which was presented at the International Film Festival of Locarno in 2002, we see him going back to look for the people he photographed ten years before. Because Michael von Graffenried wishes not only to show, but also to lend a mirror to those who are looking.

Since 1998, part of his photographs are printed in size 114 x 47 inches (288 x 120 cm). “These big formats present themselves to the exhibition’s visitor at eye level thus becoming images that objectify the world, without any attempt at dramatizing through catchy details. They try to make the (Art) viewer delve directly into the heart of the event pictured”², wrote Harald Szeemann.

His latest finished work – even though, he says, no work is ever finished – is about everyday life, between prison, drug withdrawal and prostitution, of the couple formed by Astrid and Peter, drug addicts he followed during several months. A lengthy reportage, which produced the book “CocaineLove” (2005) and a public installation, in which the images were shown on advertising pannels in the main cities of Switzerland. They were seen by Robert Fleck as “a manifest for the renewing of reportage photography through ways that are closer to film (Cinemascope format), ethnology and a relation of trust with the photographed subject inherent to classical reportage and nowadays almost completely forgotten, than most current photography”³.

² Independent art curator (1933-2005), in « Entre deux mondes », catalogue of the Museum of Fine Arts Bern, March 2003.

³ Director of the Hamburg Deichtorhallen and former director of the Fine Art School, Nantes (France).