

**Bruno Serralongue: For Life**

Frac Île-de-France, Le Plateau, Paris, 27. 1. – 24. 4. 2022

by Estelle Nabeyrat

*Pour la vie* (For Life) is a personal exhibition by the French photographer Bruno Serralongue (b. 1968 in Châtellerauld) that proposes a journey through portraits of struggling people. Its title is borrowed from a photograph with which the exhibition begins: a group of demonstrators holds up a banner of the Mexican Zapatista Movement on the occasion of their trip to Paris in 2021. In reference to their “Journey for Life,” which invites peoples of the world to fight against capitalism, the repetition of this dedication *For Life* proceeds from a subtle *mise en abyme*. The exhibition indeed operates as a flashback on the

genesis of social, environmental, and societal struggles at the same time as on the artistic career of Serralongue himself, who was interested in the latter.

In 1996, during the period when the peasants of Chiapas rose up against the neoliberal policies imposed by their state, Serralongue, intrigued by the media coverage of the Zapatistas and their leader, flew to Mexico. Still freshly graduated, he began a self-critical exploration of his alienation from the image and decided to spend long weeks at the heart of the event and to keep only fifteen shots. Already, he was laying the foundations for a work that would remain on the margins of photojournalistic sensationalism: without the advantage of a press card, Serralongue—like Allan Sekula or Marc Pataut—prefers to invest himself over time and alongside those who lead these fights. This trip would leave a lasting mark on his photographic work, combining a conceptual and documentary approach. His work never ceases to question the concrete conditions of production and dissemination of the media image, as well as its uses and status.

“The time of my involvement is equivalent to that of the fight”.<sup>1</sup> Serralongue is a fan of long shots. His images reflect his personal investment as much as a certain relationship with the subjects; they intend to extend the different causes’ visibility beyond the medium’s instantaneity whose objectivity it questions. The exhibition goes beyond the working format of series or photographic reports by browsing thirty years of photographs: from the North American First Nations’ struggles against oil pipelines threatening their environment, to the village of Notre-Dames-Landes in France and its residents, to the defenders of the Jardins Ouvriers des Vertus in Aubervilliers confronted with their destruction and the evicted occupants of a workers’ hostel in Saint-Ouen—in the run-up to the 2024 Olympics in Paris—or even an earlier series on the demonstrators against the pension reform in 1995. It shows the trajectories of individuals and the power of the collective from which the portraits are taken. As Serralongue tells the curator Xavier Franceschi in an interview in the accompanying press material: “I am above all a committed citizen . . . [I] take part in the construction of the image of struggling communities which I join.”

And there, perhaps, lies the pitfall of this exhibition, which, through the prism of the portrait, tends to horizontalize the fights. Although the titles accompanying the images are detailed, they might not be sufficient for their contextualization. Moreover, if the exhibition deploys a variety of formats and supports (slides, digital projection, small and large formats, etc.), then its



Bruno Serralongue, *Pour la vie* (For Life), 2021. Inkjet print on aluminum, Plexiglas, 51 × 63 cm. Production Frac Île-de-France, Paris. Courtesy: the artist and Air de Paris, Romainville. Copy-right: the artist.

guiding thread through the “bodies in struggle” provokes a general impression of a more formal reception. In fact, Serralongue adopts this approach and nevertheless succeeds in proposing a counterpoint of the media by highlighting personification: “I emphasize the fullness of life of the people photographed who are proud of themselves and of the struggle” (press material). For him, only the media image maintains the illusion of reality. Here, we must approach *For Life* by taking into account its introspective look. It is moreover in resonance with Serralongue’s exhibition *Getting to England*, shown at the same time at Frac Nord-Pas de Calais, Dunkerque, that we must consider *For Life*. The presentation in Dunkerque, conversely, chooses to show the complete series of images taken at the refugee camp of Calais.

By making room for absence and the interpretation it generates, Serralongue’s images engage the viewer in a utopian space. So, the outcome of these fights with their protagonists takes us into “a potential future, a ‘that-could-also-be-different.’”<sup>2</sup>

1 “Bruno Serralongue: Political Struggle in Images,” interview with Étienne Hatt, *Art Press* 497 (March 2022), pp. 32–37.

2 Florian Ebner, “Awaiting the Utopian Moment,” in Bruno Serralongue, *Calais. Testimonies from the “Jungle” 2006–2020* (London: Heni Publishing, 2022), p. 31.

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Bruno Serralongue: Calais. Testimonies from the “Jungle” 2006–2020.

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