

PORTOBELLO™

David-Alexandre Guéniot

« Already thinking of a travel article, I noted the features of this silent world: the memory-erasing white architecture; the enforced leisure that fossilized the nervous system; the almost Africanized aspect, but a North Africa invented by someone who had never visited the Maghreb, the apparent absence of any social structure; the timelessness of a world beyond boredom, with no past, no future and a diminishing present. Perhaps this was what a leisure-dominated future would resemble? Nothing could ever happen in this affectless realm, where entropic drift calmed the surfaces of a thousand swimming pools ». Cocaine Nights, J.G. Ballard, Flamingo, 1996.

Photography arrests time but can as well capture the action of an already arrested time, i.e. a vacancy, a time immobilized even before it is captured, a dead time. The pictures of *Portobello* show us bodies in expected and satisfied poses, representations of a low cost popular culture, self-fictions of proletarian glamour. Naked torsos, tattooed arms, complicity smiles face the camera lens that will record the image – smiling and relaxed – of a holiday-like let-go / let-it-be mood. But they also show us places immobilized within town-planning and architectural projects whose expression refers more to the kind of organization and arrangement of a Luna park than to the construction of places to inhabit. Places to enjoy rather than places to live in.

Such a time vacancy let us catch a glimpse of a lapse of time, a temporal gap, i.e. the sideslip of one time towards another. This gap exists, for instance, at the moment a group picture is about to be taken, when the persons who have (finally) found their poses are waiting for the click of the shutter to (finally) get rid of them. It is in that bracketing of the image – immobilized before being captured – that such a time slip would situate. A moment of suspended existence. A moment of experienced inexistence. Like a force of inertia, all engines off, that would trouble the implacable chronology of time by letting the flow of things slip off for some seconds. It is in that interval (between the arresting of the action and its restarting, between the fabrication of the pose and its falling apart) that the photographed persons reveal themselves, as subjects and objects, as if displaced onto the side of time. As if they were both inside and outside themselves, in- and out-side their bodies, i.e. already on the picture. As if at that very moment they had ceased to exist in reality and were about to realize virtually within the image: the magic of iconographic transmutations. As if, absorbed in a sort of apnea (waiting for the click), they would allow us to watch the staging of a *déjà vu*.

The pictures of *Portobello* thus show us how a reality presents to itself in the way it wishes to exist, i.e. such as it represents and demonstrates itself to others. The persons, the photographed landscapes take part, as subjects and objects, in a pre-existent iconography. What we see in the pictures are persons that are at once actors and spectators (of themselves) but also persons and characters, just like the landscapes are at once landscapes and settings, just like reality is at once real and staged, i.e. built on the basis of fictions (political, economic, social, town-planning, gardening, aesthetic). *Portobello* would be, in this sense, a fictionalized real world. Like a frozen second nature in a glamorous summer iconography, in a fiction devoid of history, in a pre-narrative time (as we would refer to a pre-historic time), i.e. a time from before narration, from before remembering – future, told – those experiences; a second nature then – a sort of Eden transformed in thematic park without a theme (apart from the one of realizing a diffuse fantasy of holiday(s)) – where it would be possible to live in the hollow of a dead time, on the side of time, one that, with no past or future, would have reduced the present to the entropic movement of a light breeze sweeping the surface of thousands of swimming pools (so Ballard), a present with an effect of pyrolysis, like those self-cleaning ovens at very high temperatures, that burn away any trace of cooking.

*Portobello* is a world whose characters (the figurants) would have been placed before painted canvas that fall apart just behind them. A world of interchangeable settings (it happens here but it could as well take place somewhere else) where the depth of field is nothing more than a space inviting the appearance of mirages. *Portobello*, generic name evoking a vague Latin exoticism, a city or a region (Italian? Spanish? Corsican? Portuguese? Brazilian? Mexican?), or a hotel or a night club whose old-fashioned interior and neon sign on the façade we can easily imagine, or a colorful cocktail (illustrated by a picture) on a list of drinks: Portobello (yellow), Eden (blue), Flamingo (rose, of course), Acapulco (green), Florida (red). *Portobello*, a place of seasonal intensification like a trademark (Portobello™) synonymous of Eternal Summer where what counts is to live the experience of that exoticism. The sun: to live from sunrise to sunset in t-shirt and light sandals; the beach (or the swimming pool): to sunbathe, drag, laze around, exercise one's body (an animator on a podium, Madonna-mike on the corner of the mouth, reverberates an aerobic choreography across a surface of 20 meters, to holidaymakers that trample on the sand); the sea: to contemplate the horizon, practice pseudo-aquatic sports (people pulled up 10 meters higher than the sea level laugh at the vision of themselves suspended from a parachute pulled by an outboard); and then all sorts of entertainment: like those of the afternoons (to find oneself around a beer, in front of a plasma screen broadcasting a football match, or in family, watching the show of a Michael Jackson's double or a transsexual version of Snow White performed by two drag queens), or else, later in the evening (to go out for a drink and run across a bunch of Irish young girls, whistles in the mouth and dressed in police uniforms, burying the life of single woman of one of them (the one who instead of a police cap wears a cap with a penis hanging in the middle of her forehead)). It would be about living these experiences in order to authenticate them (validating, on the same occasion, the clichés they bear), so as to inscribe them (as if those clichés worked as visual landmarks) in a fictionalized reality, in an individual experience of fiction. What the "clichés" of *Portobello* reveal us then, are not only the stereotypes upon which that fiction is built, but most of all what those photographic moments have of specifically non decisive, i.e. the duration of that time slip, the depth of that dead time which invades and crosses the clichés, a duration where, like in a plastic film, fiction seems to be able to detach (itself) from reality.