



Otsuchi Future Memories Dislocated Colours Travelling Between Times

By Erik Vroons

Despite that fact that photographic coverage of natural disasters often has a strong, immediate impact on the viewer, those same images ultimately seem to lack the strength to arrive at a genuine engagement with the subject at stake. Current affairs related to cataclysmic events can evoke immediate and genuine empathy from onlookers but that same interest also has the tendency to fade away fairly easily. What aesthetic means are at hand then, for a photographer, to arrive at a more enduring kind of compassion for a people directly affected by deluge, mourning their loss?

That is the question investigated by **Alejandro Chaskielberg** (1977, Argentina) when he visited the Japanese town of Ōtsuchi, or what remained of it, about 18 months after the area was hit by the incredible earthquake of March 11, 2011, which was followed, consequently, by a tsunami and fatal flood. The end result of his inquiry, *Otsuchi Future Memories*, can be considered a 'crossover documentary photography' project, not in the sense of how the term 'crossover' is normally understood in music (as the dilution of distinctive qualities to appeal to mass tastes) but more in the literal sense of the word, which is to say:
a blending of genre conventions.





Chaskielberg came up with the luminous idea to portray the village locals at the exact spot where their houses had been, before disaster struck. Moreover, besides the magical and vibrant colours arriving from long exposure shots of the people and their former homes, made at night with the support of a handheld torch, he also retrieved family pictures from the debris caused by the tsunami. At a later stage of the project, he managed to work together with a local organization that had already archived thousands of those recovered private photographs, originally owned by the inhabitants of the village.

He went back to Ōtsuchi several times over the years, and at some point in the process Chaskielberg must have had a eureka moment, related to the 'crossover' aspects of this work: to take the colours found in the water-damaged vernacular images and implement those into some of his own post-apocalyptic registrations of the area, eventually showcasing the two side-by-side as diptychs. With the support of image processing software (i.e. Photoshop) some of the found material thus interrelates with staged (group) portraits that Chaskielberg himself established in and around Ōtsuchi, a connection between found and documentary elements impossible to establish in a more ordinary juxtaposition.

The creative process of adding a sacramental value to an already artistic testimony of that area, of its past and its people, relates something that in ancient Greek rhetoric was understood as *kairos*, or "a passing instant when an opening appears which must be driven through with force if success is to be achieved." In other words: a window of opportunity through which an argument can be delivered, here specifically manifested in the transfer of time through colour.

Through this window, Chaskielberg moves from a visual artefact, a picture that was once in a private album, to his own registration of the region where that object was recovered from, a district now so tragically suspended from its former existence. This is the creative moment seized by Chaskielberg, making a subjective intrusion that forces the viewer to bridge the 'that-has-been' (the famous notion of indexicality made by Roland Barthes) with an aesthetic registration, the 'that-has-been-seen'.

We are still far removed from general consensus on the range and breadth of acceptable crossover concepts

The wrath of nature, with all its accompanying suffering, is something not unfamiliar to our eyes, for we have seen a perpetual cycle of images that deal with its consequences. Typhoons, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and what they do to the people that are struck by them – there are entire folders of those catastrophic events in our collective image bank. Portfolios so powerfully stamped into our cortex that any other picture arriving from sorrow or despair caused by an 'act of God' will have a hard job finding a spot there still unbranded. It is at least uncertain whether or not our visual language still has the same impact as it once had, and the question of whether what we are saying with photography hasn't become too generic altogether is also up for debate.



The photographic documentations of the immediate effects of mishap inflicted by nature will continue to be produced and also remain valuable in their own right. The problem addressed here is how to stimulate an audience response towards events that once easily received our close attention, but then were slowly washed away by other breaking waves in our perpetual news feed. Strategies to further broaden the range of possibilities in the long-standing repertoire of photojournalism are worth the investigation, but it has to be said that, at this point, we are still far removed from general consensus on the range and breadth of acceptable crossover concepts.

Leading all the way back to the end of the nineteenth century, there is a ro-sham-bo between those who want to limit photography as a means to document a technically accurate record of the subject and others who are of the opinion that it should also be possible to exercise an aesthetic interpretation. More recently, post-production tools like Photoshop have been giving new fuel to the fundamental issue of seeing photography as a means of artistic expression, an argument that has been forcefully counteracted on by many defenders of the so-called 'straight' – or strict – vision of the medium.

For one, Alejandro Chaskielberg cannot enter the World Press Photo contest with his enhanced images (assuming he would be interested) because, although staging is allowed when it concerns portraits, according to the third rule of their ethical code, "it is not accepted to make any material changes to the content". Taking a moral position with regards to post-production in visual reportage is indisputably valuable, considering all the technical enhancements made possible in the digital era, as we do not want to be fooled or misguided, but the colour-inversions as presented here by Chaskielberg are best judged using other criteria.

The relation between the moment of capturing and the photographic end result has been kept intact

In the field of documentary, which can be understood in such broad terms that it stretches from 'pure reportage' to 'almost art', photographers often feel the urge to stimulate the narrative in a conceptual way and that in itself seems to be accepted by an expanding audience. Chaskielberg also investigates new ways to spark the interest of our eyes, with his long exposures and innovative use of a torch in the dark, but what to make of those colour transmutations, pulled from one image to the other in his diptychs? Are they merely a clever way to cross-link between the past and the present, or do they, simultaneously, have a purging effect, at least for those who were directly affected by the tsunami?

Perhaps it is most apt to understand this artistic interference as an attempt to report on the *couleurs locales*, that French expression defining 'the local colours' in such broad terms that it can also refer to the atmosphere of a specific community. That is to say, Otsuchi Future Memories pinpoints a blend of the once-captured and the currently vanished mnemonic, associative interactions between different photographic objects – retrieved and self-produced – together confirming the rehabilitation of something that we can understand as the location's distinctive atmosphere, its *genius loci*.









But still, how can it be stated so confidently that a transfer of hue from one surface to another delivers greater value to the overall quality of Chaskielberg's artistic exploration? "Is it not crossing a line?" one might ask, perhaps even somewhat disturbed. When such scepticism arises, I would like to claim here, the very act of alteration itself has already triggered the first step towards the activation of an audience: the paddling pixels, moved from found photographs to self-produced footage, leave a gap in our understanding of the dichotomy between straight photography and pictorial embellishment and should thus be appreciated as an artistic strategy in crossover documentary photography that forces a leap of thought. But that is just a mere side-effect of it all.

Traditional reportage aims to cover the news when it is 'hot' and, as a consequence, it leaves our emotions in a fluid, fluctuating state from one event to the next. The tsunami had a huge emotional impact on the viewer in the days or even weeks after the tragedy occurred – if only because there was still the clear and present danger of a fatal meltdown in the nuclear plant of Fukushima – but over time, news coverage faded and with that, public interest. Our emotional engagement with the communities directly involved, those inhabitants instantly redefined as 'survivors', conflicted with the maintenance required in our own daily lives, not to mention the other current affairs vying for our attention.

Considering the transient nature of public involvement with current affairs, the project discussed here might lead to a more solid view on the enduring consequences of tragedy following from a catastrophe. In defence of Chaskielberg's alterations, it needs to be firmly stated that the relation between the moment of capturing and the photographic end result has been kept intact.

Montaged photographs no longer have valid documentary value when the reference to reality has been reduced to zero, but that is not the case here! It cannot be said that the image alterations have been established from various sources in such a way that the ability to trace the pictorial fragments back to their initial materialisation has been frustrated, let alone made impossible.

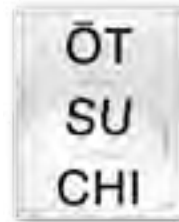
The very act of alteration itself has already triggered the first step toward the activation of an audience

Securing the referential qualities with the insertion of alien colours (exotic to the picture in which they are implemented, that is) does not prevent the final image from still being considered as incongruous by some. As mentioned before, it is an act of meddling that in photojournalism at present day is still judged as a 'falsification' of the objective and, consequently, considered as something of lesser photographic value by those who prefer a more purely mechanical witnessing as performed by the camera. Nevertheless, despite those obvious objections and the ongoing cry for a more austere use of the medium of photography when it comes to the reportage of contemporary issues, such as the tsunami and its aftermath, it could be counter-argued that the creative interventions as addressed here are actually piercing beyond our most primal emotions.

The inversions showcased in Otsuchi Future Memories make room for a cathartic effect, enabling the local community to see themselves with literally colourful memories related to their habitat. While this might actually have been the main motivation of Chaskielberg to initiate the project, it is essentially the brilliant artistic act of bridging documentary photography with a pictorial technique – the ‘that-has-been-seen’ – which is to be appreciated as a photographic articulation of ‘recovery’ in a larger sense, giving way to a fundamental restoration of our solidarity with a place and its people almost gone from our sight. We as an audience are thus given a more unceasing documentation of the Ōtsuchi

community in the process of their reinstatement, leading to a higher and more sustainable sense of empathy. If that is actually so, when the aesthetic enhancements made here indeed serve a certain rehabilitation-effect, this ‘crossover’ project also deserves to be considered as offering a wider perspective on photographic reportage.

chaskielberg.com



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 Alejandro Chaskielberg (photographs),
 Daido Moriyama (text)
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Hand-coloured Photographs From The 19th Century

In reference to Alejandro Chaskielberg’s Otsuchi Future Memories, it is worth bringing back to mind that hand-colouring photographs was a popular activity in Japan in the second half of the 19th century. Notably, it was around 1880 that Yokoyama Matsusabur coined the term shashin abura-e (‘photographic oil-paintings’) but even before, it was **Felice Beato** (English, born Italy, 1832 - 1909) who successfully applied the refined skills of Japanese watercolouring and woodblock printmaking to his knowledge of European photographic techniques.

In fact, the enhancement of black and white photographic images with colour leads all the way back to the Swiss painter (and daguerreotypist) Johann Baptist Isenring who has been credited for giving a painterly appearance to daguerreotypes as early as 1841, using a mixture of acacia gum (also known as ‘gum arabic’) and pigment. It was not long until parallel attempts by others – mainly from England and France – would lead to patented processes of hand-colouring photographs. These experimentations continued until the beginning of the twentieth century, and more or less ended with the introduction of Autochrome (Lumière Brothers), soon followed by Kodachrome (Kodak) and other versions of colour film.



Mode of Shampooing, 1866 - 1867, Hand-colored albumen silver print © Felice Beato and The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



The Toilet, 1866 - 1867, Hand-colored albumen silver print © Felice Beato and The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



Scavenger Coolies, 1866 - 1867, Hand-colored albumen silver print © Felice Beato and The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.