

Wilde

PRESS RELEASE

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AYA

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It's a postcard.

In front of a thatched hut at the rough edge of a forest, thirteen humans pose with a large dead crocodile. A taut clothesline in the top third of the photograph cuts across the image. Most of the people seem to be Amerindians: men, women, and children. Their expressions are fixed; some are holding long bows. The youngest child peers down at the animal's hide, the others stare into the lens. There aren't just bows and arrows. There's a rifle.

In the centre, a man in a white hat appears to be the host of this tropical Last Supper. One imagines that he discarded his shirt just before killing the saurian whose mouth is agape. Behind him, the head of another man in a white hat sticks out. Both wear a goatee. This image has been colourised in broad strokes. The pale skin of the white men is enhanced by the overexposed pallor of their shirts. Beneath the caption reads: 'The photographer Kroehle's excursion on the Ucayali River (Indian Territories, Peru)'.

What was Arguiñe Escandón thinking in the summer of 2016, when she sent Yann Gross this postcard with the warning: 'I hope you don't end up like him'? Who was she really talking about? The animal put to death and displayed like a trophy? The humans with black hair and loose tunics, Amazonian peoples, lined up like subjects in an ethnographic plate? Or rather the two Westerners, trapped by their own device, sanctioned by history and who remain, for eternity, captives of their own grotesque staging?

It all begins with a postcard, that is to say a commercial photograph, a sign standardised by mass production. So, it all starts with imagery, rather than an image.

Like Escandón and Gross, Charles Kroehle was a photographer fascinated by Amazonia, which he explored between 1888 and 1891. With German ethnographer and photographer George Hübner, they travelled by foot and by boat through eastern Peru, looking for beings they could place straight before their lens, both to document their existence, as well as to justify their own conquest.

Just like Instagrammers posting pictures of their meals to share proof of their feasts, the photographers-explorers of old printed irrefutable evidence of exploits that they had already accomplished.

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Gross was captured by this postcard and its history. He searched everywhere for biographical material: archives, private collections, auctions... He discovered newspaper articles reporting the possible death of Kroehle, struck by an Indian arrow in the middle of the forest. There was, in this quest for documents, a kind of Oedipal flight in the face of Escandón's omen.

To know Kroehle, was perhaps a way to escape his heritage – his eye.

Kroehle's images constitute a body of work that has helped to establish our representations of indigenous people and our Amazonian imagery. An astonishing spectacle, they present the forgotten kingdoms, the bare skins, the exotic customs. They simultaneously validated the white man in his supremacy and justified his universalist curiosity. They are the fruit of a dual appropriation: by force and by love.

Every representation is a possession. Kroehle's frozen warriors betray their innocence of this encounter by domination, which a 21st-century photographer would no longer dare. When Escandón and Gross arrived in Peru, they were haunted by the ghosts of Kroehle and Hübner, confronting them each time they tried to escape them. Seeking to be rid of the images of Eldorado, conquistadores, and savages – good or bad – they wanted to wipe away the weight of their own identities.

They believed they had succeeded on certain hallucinatory nights when they found themselves bent over a bucket vomiting psychotropic plants. Just before dawn, they came across kids immersed in flowers, leaf-women, inhabited trees and a sorcerer in camouflage. This book is an almost illusory deluge, structured by shamanic experiences and auroral mists, as if this forest so examined, scrutinized, was trying to take its power back.

There would seem to be no iconographies more antagonistic than those of Escandón-Gross and Kroehle-Hübner: where there was certainty and triumph, there is only doubt and melancholy. But the two 21st-century photographers, aware that good intentions produce more mystification than straight theft, went even further: they wanted their images to literally come from the forest.

Armed with plastic ponchos, their skin perforated by insects, they set out to collect plants with photosensitive properties. Carica papaya, whose liquid can irritate the hands. Dracontium lorentense: careful, the emulsion tends to turn yellow. Anthurium sp, Maranta Arundinaceae, Physalis Angulata: they spent hours smearing these emulsions on glass plates, in the heat and humidity that conspired unmercifully to discourage them.

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Through this experimental botany, two young Europeans in their secluded workshop in the midst of Amazonia, rediscovered the genetics of their art. They attempted a deconstruction by revealing Amazonia with the juice of Amazonian plants, just like we vaccinate ourselves with a small dose of a disease. This applied phytography leaves images of a surreal beauty that threaten to disappear at any moment.

Little by little, over the course of the project, Escandón and Gross realized that they were no different from Kroehle and Hübner, that they too had travelled the world in search of an absolute elsewhere that dwelled within them. This book is called 'Aya'. In the Quichua language, the term means: phantom, soul, spirit, death or corpse. It appears for example in the compound word 'ayahuasca', the liana of the spirits, the dead.

Escandón and Gross, by going in search of two 19th-century Western photographers, tracked down the spectres of their own civilisation, as well as that of their discipline; how photography is always, in the words of Roland Barthes, 'the image that produces Death by wanting to preserve life'.

What is striking, in the mirroring of these Amazonian representations produced a century apart, is that today the omnipresence of death has an almost intolerable power. While on the postcard, the subjects posed with the remains of a crocodile without any ulterior motive, now even the most innocuous images (a spider's web, a snake in one's grip, a stretch of forest) are affected by this foretold sense of loss.

Amazonia disappears. And 'Aya' already anticipates its survival through the spirit.

Text by Arnaud Robert