**Interview for GQ Portugal, by Diego Armés**

**Where were you born? Where did you grow up (I know you've spent a lot of time in Argentina)? Give me a brief personal presentation, please, would you?**

I was born in Paris in 1960 but the family left for Argentina when i was 4. My father worked for a big French car maker and the family moved between Latin America and Europe until i was 17. That's when i came back to Europe to do my university studies. At the time my Spanish was better than my French! It's changed since then of course.

I studied tropical agronomy. I don't think i was really interested in agronomy, the bit that i liked was "tropical"! (Laughs) I always wanted to travel and felt that i wanted to live in the tropics. Already when i was a kid i dreamed of exploring the Amazon and the Australian outback.

**So, what came first? The passion for photography or the calling from the tropics and exotic environments and landscapes?**

The calling for the tropics, the exotic lands, the remote tribes... Right from the age of 20 I was very interested in ethnography and anthropology. I started travelling to Asia, where i would study maps for days on end. When it said "prohibited area" on a map i would immediately try to reach that area and explore it. In this way i entered the Golden Triangle when it was still completely off limits. I spent some time in Kun Sah's stronghold. He was this famous drug lord who controlled the opium and heroin trade (the CIA finally got him, 25 years later). I went to Waziristan, which later became the home of Bin Laden. I managed to enter the Chittagong Hill Tracks in Bangladesh, which were completely off limits to outsider, and stayed with the Mru. That was a defining experience for me, because they were so remote.

Photography only came later, simply because i would attempt to photograph these people. I had had an interest in photography for a long time, so it seemed fitting to take photographs of the things and people that fascinated me.

**I read you learned about photography from your brother and some elder photographer in Argentina. How did it happen? Obviously, it became of much use years later for you. But what did you learn with him or them that allowed you taking so many beautiful, powerful, I would say landmarking photos - and I don't even know if I can say that? Were they essential in the raising of Gilles Nicolet as photographer or was it only the beginning?**

When my younger brother was 14 he struck up a friendship with an Argentinian who was quite older than him and ran a small photo studio in Buenos Aires. In those days photographers knew how to shoot, how to develop their own films and prints etc. This guy taught my brother everything he needed to know, and of course i would often hang around them and watch them do. One day my brother came home with a copy of the 1976 World Press Photo Awards that his friend had given him, and I vividly remember the shock that i received while flipping through the pages. The pictures showed a world that was unknown to me at the time, a dark and violent place but also one full of promises. On that day something opened in me, I'm certain of that. It was about the hidden power of photographs to convey emotions and evoke interest. Back then i was far more interested in the content of photographs than in the technicalities of photography. That only came later, and very slowly i must say. To this day i consider myself a little weak on the technical side...

**Tell me about the first day things changed: the day you realised your life had to be something else, something like living in an adventurous, creative, artistic way. If I'm not mistaken, the enlightening, if I might call it, came with your first-born, was it?**

That's right. I was living in Ghana at the time and had a "good" job with a private company. I had a big house, a big car and i was making decent money, but i was bored out of my mind… I wasn't being myself and felt that something fundamental was missing from my life. Then my first child Gaël was born and this made me realise that if i didn't do something about this dissatisfaction, my kid would never grow up to know his real father - the real me - but only a man who was wearing a mask

and playing a role. That was a pretty scary thought i must say! So it is at that point that i decided to take up photography professionally, because deep down i had been feeling for a while that that was what i had to do. I wrote to my boss and told him i would quit. Interestingly, he was perhaps the only one at the time who supported my decision. All my other colleagues simply thought i was nuts.

**I suppose you don't regret a bit your decision, nowadays. But, at the time, wasn't it difficult for you? I mean, how did you get money? You were used to a certain standard of life and then you dropped everything you had and chose your passion. Wasn't it hard for you family? Tell me about that time, right after leaving a well paid job and before you became a well paid photographer.**

Yes, it was very difficult. First because i suddenly had to re-invent myself at the age of 32 and pretend that i was now a photographer, when in truth i still hadn't sold a single picture! (Laughs) Sadly, i felt this social pressure to succeed - because i wanted to be able to look after my family of course - but also because i wanted to be acknowledged as a photographer... It was also a time of blunders and doubts. I was still learning the trade and so of course i made some mistakes in the beginning. For example I would chose the wrong stories, or target the wrong markets. I had to learn slowly, through trial and error, all the more so because i was all by myself in the middle of Africa. Don't forget that in those days the internet was not available the way it is today, so exchanging ideas or researching technical topics was impossible to me. I was lucky that my wife was very supportive. She had taken up a job and was now looking after the family while i struggled to understand how my cameras worked (Laughs).

**And when did it begin to pay-off? I mean, not only financially, but also in terms of personal satisfaction. Which (and why...) were the first journeys that you felt like "this is it, I'm happy, I'm doing the right thing”?**

At one point i found this incredible story which i started to cover. It was the story of the Gbaya python hunters, people who have mastered the art of catching live pythons hiding in aardvark burrows. The aardvark is a kind of giant African ant eater that digs extensive underground burrows, where pythons also like to hide. Gbaya hunters can slither down these

burrows in the dark, all the way to the pythons, where they grab them by the neck while covering their eyes - and then slowly pull them out. Over 2 years i spent a lot of time with them in the bush, and was fascinated by their knowledge. It constantly reminded me of how little i knew about the bush, and I felt privileged to be able to witness all this. We were often surrounded by dangerous wildlife - lions, elephants - and this was incredibly exciting of course.

Also i could sense that the story had amazing potential. I felt that it could be my "big break" and that gave me extra energy. It took me two full years of work before i could bag the story, but it eventually ran in the US edition of National Geographic Magazine, before being widely published around the world. That really launched my career.

**What does it take to be photographer out in the wild, in the bush, with native people, surrounded by dangerous animals? How do you prepare for that? I mean, physically, psychologically, the whole combo.**

It takes time, dedication, knowledge and curiosity. Time, because nothing comes easy in this kind of environment. For example you come at the wrong time of year and nothing will be happening… You'll have travelled this far but you'll see nothing, absolutely nothing! So you have to come back and back again, and be prepared for the long haul if you want to succeed. The dedication is also essential, because when you chase such difficult stories in such harsh environments it is very easy to get discouraged… You just can't allow yourself that, so you just have to keep going and eventually something wonderful will happen. I used to say that the most important thing in this kind of work was that "once you have bitten into it, don't ever let go".

Knowledge of the people is also very important of course. You have to be able to gain their trust, so that they will show you something that they may never have shown to a foreigner before. You need to gain their respect, too. And curiosity is what will make you discover new facets to a story. You may have started shooting the story with a particular idea in mind, but if you are capable of showing curiosity, of constantly enquiring with these people, it is very likely that you will discover a lot more and that your story will just keep gaining in strength and importance.

**For how long did you work with NG magazine? I know how and why it all ended, but I'd like you to remember the good (or not so good) times between you and NG. Would you consider working for/with NG magazine the peak of your career as photo-journalist?**

We worked on two stories together, and I was working on the third when i got into trouble and decided to abandon photography. That may not seem like a lot, but when you consider that it's almost impossible to get un-commissioned work published in that magazine, it was quite a bit…

Back in the 90's and early 2000s Nat Geo was this incredibly good magazine (unfortunately i find today that it has somewhat changed, and for the worse). They had the best lay out, the printing was outstanding, and the quality of the stories and the photography were generally very good. What struck me also, is the profound respect that they showed for photographers. This was not always the case in Europe, where photographers could sometimes be treated rather dismissively. I think that at NGM they understood that photographers were the ones who contributed the most important element to the magazine's success. The magazine was also staffed with great professionals, editors like Tom Kennedy and John Echave, who were not just incredibly good at what they did but who were beautiful human beings, on a deeper level. Working for them and with them was definitely a peak in my career as a documentary photographer. The fact that it all ended is 100% my fault. At NGM they were professional through and through, and the only mistake they did was to take my word on some aspects of this story, when they shouldn't have (Laughs).

**Not that we're here going around in circles, pretending there's no elephant in the room, but now I think it's time to get to the point: your long work with the Barabaig hunters turned out to be a disaster for your career. But, at the same time, I believe you can be proud about it, except for your decision to "resort to a little trick" (sic). How do you feel about that specific story? Not the consequences - we can talk about it later. Now I only want to know about the work.**

Honestly, and at the risk of sounding pretentious, i think very few photographers would have gone to the length that i went to try to bag that story… It was truly beyond difficult, and it demanded a lifetime of African experience to even consider shooting it.

Even though i ended up staging a shot, the story was VERY real… I mean, these guys hunted elephants whenever they could ! It's just that on the 5 hunts that i attended they didn't get lucky - by that i mean that they didn't manage to bring one down. And so of course this put me in a very delicate position, and also made me "unlucky" if you want. That's when -and only when- i decided to resort to a little trick: don't forget that before this i had been trying for nearly two years to get the real shots. So perhaps I will not say that i feel proud of the work i did, but i will definitely say that i am convinced i did my best, and that the only way i was able to do that was because i already had 20 years of experience of the African bush. In a story like this, your human qualities and your experience of the field become more important than your technical or even creative ability as a photographer.

**And afterwards, you quit photography for ten years. What have you done with your time and with your life during such a long period?**

Yes, after that i quit photography entirely, partly because i did not want to be branded as a "cheat" for the rest of my life, but mostly because i knew i would no longer be able to do what i had loved most, and by that i mean tell beautiful human stories in the middle of nowhere… I was at an age and at a stage in my career when only Nat Geo could have funded the kind of projects that excited me. Now that i had lost their backing it was pointless to continue. Of course I could have become a wedding photographer, or a commercial photographer, but that simply wasn't me. So i just quit.

I immediately tried to rebound and started dealing in, of all things, furniture! (Laughs). I am a survivor, and i was ready to do anything to try to look after my kids. That didn't work though, and so for the next 2 years i immersed myself into philosophy. I read a lot and went deep inside myself. Of course I felt a lot of pain, and I wanted to understand why. I did understand eventually, and i got out of this mess stronger than i had ever been. By then i felt that the time to work again

had come, so i first worked as a literature tutor at an international school, and then started managing lodges in the national parks of Tanzania. I also went through a very creative period, sculpting and making all sorts of objects. Until recently i never thought i would take up photography again.

**Before we go any further, there's something I need to ask you about: the women in your life. You said your (ex?)wife supported you a lot when you decided to become a photojournalist. I also know your recent companion offered you a camera so you could photograph again. However, being a photographer in wild Africa means you'll spend a lot of time apart from them. So, I'd say these must be quite perfect examples of unconditional love or they're constantly trying to get rid of you in subtle ways. What do you think?**

My ex-wife (or rather ex-partner, because we were never married), who is Dutch and also the mother of my kids, really supported me and encouraged me in the beginning, when i decided to become a photojournalist. Until then i had been the one earning the bread, but she said she would work so that i could concentrate on my photography.

Our lives took different paths though, and we slowly grew apart, until one day (just before my troubles with NGM) we decided that once our kids would be through school, we would separate. That eventually happened and so we no longer live together. We are in good very terms though, and see each other often (she also lives in Africa).

After that i met my new companion, who is from India. That was 5 years ago, and she had come to volunteer in one of the national parks where i worked. She is 25 years younger than me. She is also this beautiful, deeply thoughtful human being. In this case our love is definitely unconditional… I mean, i'm this ugly, old, broke fart, while she is young and beautiful, so obviously she's not in it for the money (Laughs). I mean, our love is unusual.

**Ok, back to seriousness. When it all happened, the Barabaig hunters photo scandal, what was the dimension of it all? You had a lot of credit in the business, but how did it affect, not only you, but also NGM and wildlife reporters in general? How did the audience react?**

**I read the editor's note and it's pretty harsh, sounding like "this person tricked us and now we know we never knew him", which must have been pretty rough for you. Do you think about it often? Did it leave a scar or is it still a wound?**

It was not prime time news of course, but it was a small scandal in the world of photojournalism. People spoke about it, particularly in forums (interestingly, the NGM forum on this particular topic was quickly removed from their website…), and articles were written on the subject. At NGM they are extremely sensitive about their reputation, and so obviously they had to react quickly. They immediately posted something on the web, saying that they were enquiring into the whole thing. Three months later (in the Octobre 2004 edition if i'm correct), they printed an apology to their readers. The Editor in Chief (Bill Allen) also resigned a few months after the scandal, and i would not be surprised if his decision to resign was somehow connected to this, although i have no way of knowing for sure.

The audience reacted almost unanimously by dismissing my whole work as bogus. It was almost as if they felt that the entire story -not just a few shots- had been made up. Almost no one, whether in the public or in newsrooms, seemed to want to know *why* i would have done something like this, the reasons behind my decision to cheat. They probably thought i had done it because that was the easy way out, or the lazy thing to do.… A bit like "why bother shooting the real thing if you can just stage a few shots?". But then i guess you can't blame them for that. After all they did not know what i had put in that story in terms of work, energy and time, before i decided to cheat.

Seeing the editor's note printed in the magazine was hurtful of course. I mean in those days NGM ran 13 million copies a month in the US alone, and was read by 50 million people worldwide, so obviously seeing my name reviled in this way was not very pleasant… As far as i know this kind of apology had happened very rarely in the history of NGM - perhaps even never - and there i was branded as a cheat for all to see. Mind you, i really don't blame them for what they did, they were just covering their back and doing what they had to do.

There is no doubt that for some years this “scandal” had a very large impact on my life - professionally, psychologically and socially - but in the end probably no more than some other life events i have gone through, like a beautiful love story gone sour, or the birth of a child and all that it implies in terms of commitment, joy, worries, sorrows etc. It definitely forced me to completely re-think myself - my choices, my actions - and to explore the complex web that is our psychological make-up: the nature of ego, the nature of psychological fear etc, or, in other words, the mental traps that push us to make mistakes of this kind. In the end, on a personal level, i think it was a very positive thing that this should have happened, because it made me so much stronger.

I rarely think about it nowadays, or when i do, it’s always with an amused feeling. My girl friend and I sometimes joke about it. There is definitely not a trace of hurt any more, that i can assure you. There is no scar and no wound.

**Now you're coming back from the shadows, and we found you on instagram. Are you making a living from your photography again? What kind of photography do you do?**

It was my new companion who pushed me to take up photography again. She has a very keen eye and we often discuss photography together -we look at other photographers work, we go to exhibitions, we sometimes buy collectors prints - and she must have sensed that the passion was still there. Women are intuitive and very often they understand us way better than we understand ourselves! (Laughs). Anyways, some time back she bought me a little Fuji X100S and said “please, take photographs again”. That’s how it all started again. From the moment i had the camera in hand i was hooked.

Although the response to my new work as been very positive overall, i can’t say i’m yet able to make a living out of it. I’ve quit a paid job though, and i’m devoting myself full time to photography again.

My photography has now gone in a new direction, something quite different from what i was doing before. I no longer work in colour for one -only B&W. My work is also less sensationalist, more ethereal, more contemplative somehow. The sequences of images no longer constitute picture stories, as had been the case in the past, but i try to make images that

suffice to themselves individually, where every image conveys a feeling or a message, or evokes a mystery. It is definitely not journalistic in nature, but more a "*travail d'auteur*", as the French say.

**What are you planning for the near future? I heard you want to make a book. Are you planning something like a Sebastião Salgado's style, compiling photos of various situations and environments? Or you pretend to make a comeback as a photo-reporter?**

I enjoy shooting again tremendously, and I'd like to completely focus on that from now on. At the moment i am working on a book project, looking at the unique environment that is the Swahili Coast, on the western edge of the Indian Ocean. I also hope to exhibit my work in galleries soon.

To answer your question, there is no way i could make a comeback as a photo reporter! After what i did no one would take me seriously (Laughs).

**So, it means your new work has been shown in exhibitions? Where? When? Give me details. Is there one coming? In Europe?**

No, you misunderstood me, i have no exhibition planned at the moment, although i have been approached by a photo festival in Northern Europe for a possible exhibition in 2017. What i mean is that, as much as possible, i would like my new work to be shown in exhibitions and galleries, or in books, more than in magazines. Ultimately my aim is to target the fine art market, and not so much the magazine market anymore, like I used to do in the past. In those days my work was almost exclusively calibrated for the magazine market: a powerful story line, a chronology of events, colour shots etc. You wouldn't really have seen it hanging on people's walls, as fine prints...

Because i like to surprise, I am someone who normally doesn't like to show his work before i consider that it is fully ready, and i feel that my current work on the Swahili Coast is not yet complete. It should be soon, though.

**How would it be if you had never got caught for staging shots? How would you live/have lived with that?**

At the time i got caught my career was going very well. My work was being published in all sorts of major magazines, and I had just gotten my first proper Nat Geo assignment, on a story in India. That, i have no doubt, would have led to more assignments. So I am pretty sure that if i hadn't been caught i would have done well. But then there is no need to try to re-invent the past, it's a waste of time.

To answer your question, if i had not been caught i'm sure that i would have managed pretty well with my conscience. By that I mean that the fact that i had cheated would not have bothered me, or not much, because i was cheating out of a sense of despair. After investing so much time, work and money into that story i felt that i simply could not afford to not have it published - and get paid for that. And you know, a lot of photographers, including some of the best and the most well-known, cheat or have cheated in some way or another... Examples abound. I don't want to dwell into this here, or be specific, but i can tell you that many do re-arrange reality, to say the least, including amongst photojournalists. It's just that most of them are smarter than me and don't get caught! (Laughs).

**Yeah, I figured. From the conversation we're having, I deduce that you did not get stuck in the mistake, which is great because it's good to have you back with your photos.**

Thank you. It was a mistake that cost me a lot, and i paid my dues. Now i simply look forward to doing more photography again, because i'm still in love with beauty. That never changed, you know.