

Interview On the Road with Nikos Economopoulos

*An interview to Marco Cortesi (LuganoPhotoDays)
driving from Constanza to Bucharest, during an expedition
around the Black Sea, recorded on August 23rd 2012.*

How did you first approach the world of photography? When did you become a professional photographer?

I was never interested in taking photos, never thought I would become a professional photographer. I started developing an interest in it in the late seventies. Looking at photography books gave me great pleasure, in the same way that I enjoyed reading literature or listening to music. I started shooting in the early eighties, and then got more serious about it circa 1985. In 1988, I eventually decided to quit my job as a journalist and to become a photographer, because I felt the need to dedicate more time to photography than anything else. Up until then, I had only been shooting in my spare time, in weekends or during the holidays, and the time just never seemed enough. But even now I still feel the same, time is never enough.

Who are the photographers that influenced you the most?

I like many photographers, but the one who has truly affected me the most, is certainly Henri Cartier-Bresson, especially with his first photographs which were taken during the thirties.

What is your relation to Magnum?

Magnum was an exceptionally positive experience for me from the very beginning. It is a context within which there are many people that I value in photographic as well as personal terms, because I share with them not just professional ethics but human ethics in general. I come from a peripheral country, so being part of Magnum allowed me to get close to the centre of the world of photography, to have more of a global vision and to learn a lot.

What projects do you plan for the future?

I enjoy being on the road, traveling without a predetermined purpose, looking around me with visual curiosity and being surprised by what I encounter. Whatever project I pursue, I try to accommodate it within this context.

I find that strictly following a very specific project somehow limits my visual experience. What interests me the most is to be startled by the things around me, to be positively surprised by the things I decide to shoot. The aim is to have visual experiences and to be in a position to sometimes transform those experiences into images. It is like playing a game with reality, with the world around me.

Maybe this is more of an artistic attitude, but I am not so interested in how one would characterize me, an artist or a photojournalist. What interests me is to dive into those everyday visual events as often as possible, because it gives me great pleasure.

You mentioned being "on the road" - this is also the name of your website and the workshops series you hold around the world. How did this come up?

I have been doing workshops for over 10-15 years now, but it is only during the last five years that I do it in a systematic way. This was the idea of a friend, who once asked how come I do not combine the workshops with doing the things I enjoy, which is to photograph and to travel, while at the same time transferring to others, amateurs or professionals, my own passion for photography.

I was not sure whether I would like it very much, but then I realized that I truly enjoyed the whole thing. Every year I add new destinations and also keep the most interesting ones from the previous years. For example in 2013, I will be going to Burma and Iran, but will certainly return to Ethiopia and India. I organize almost one workshop per month, not just because this way I can travel to the places I want - this would not be a sufficient reason, nor would it last long - but also because it is a great satisfaction to share my experience with others, and to

observe closely the progress that some of the participants make over the different workshops that they attend.

What would be your advice to young photographers?

In photography, as in many other things in life, in order to have good results, one must have a passionate relationship to them. Passion and dedication. It is not enough to just do it in weekends, one needs to dedicate time. I do not mean that one should be shooting all day and all night - but it is important to engage in a continuous dialogue and a constant thinking process about photography and at the same time, to pose visual questions. Photography for me is a kind of visual meditation. You try to pose the questions, and then you try to find some answers. The answers are the photographs you make. Those questions are part of a process which begins before the shot, carries over during shooting and continues afterwards.

Before photographing somewhere, you somehow prepare for it. Not necessarily by looking for practical information regarding the place, but perhaps by trying to imagine how you would like to "see" this place. While shooting, one does not think much. Somehow thinking is suspended. But immediately after, you begin again. During that process, one must not stop at the shot itself, but must continue during the editing process.

When one tries to put the various shots within a visual universe of one's own, his or her unique visual universe. This universe that you create within your mind as well as your heart, is an idealized universe that you would like to shoot. What you do is to look for it in fragments of the reality around you. Perhaps this concept is the closer I can get to describing the essence of personal style. You take elements from the surrounding reality which correspond to your imagined reality. Maybe this is a subconscious process, but inside us, we all have a world within which we feel well. Photographs are a way to appropriate somehow those ideal mental spaces.

Those are the things that are important for me in photography, and not technique or equipment. And also the ability to let reality subvert your expectations and take you by surprise.