

09

Antoine D'Agata's existential realities

WORDS & PORTRAIT
BY MICHAEL GRIEVE

Emerging from the darkness, the distinct figure of Antoine D'Agata moves into the spotlight, centre stage at the open-air Théâtre antique d'Arles, to accept the prize for *Anticorps*, awarded best book at this year's Rencontres d'Arles. He clutches the obligatory bouquet of flowers awkwardly as kisses are exchanged. A few French words into the microphone and the brief ceremony is over. As the audience show their appreciation, D'Agata hastily returns to the relative safety of dark obscurity.

Austrian psychoanalyst Theodor Reik once observed that the "... darkest place, according to a Chinese proverb, is always underneath the lamp", and this quote is surely apt in regard to D'Agata. The contradiction betrayed is that although coy when it comes to the superficial limelight, D'Agata is often the illuminated subject in his photography, as it is in this place that he exposes his confrontation with fear.

During the summer, Marseille is stinking hot. It is an exotic port city on the right side of dirty. Despite the nocturnal silhouettes of long-tailed rats scurrying from bin to bin, and the ripe plume of human urine and canine faeces humming through the narrow streets, it is a city very much alive with a creative force. France's second-largest city, it is currently boasting its status as the European City of Culture 2013. For D'Agata, Marseille is his hometown and a city that as a streetwise punk youth toughened his resolve in preparation for the harshness of the outside world.

D'Agata has just returned from Arles after having taught a five-day workshop. The week before he conducted another workshop, with renowned curator, writer, editor and founder of Agence Vu, Christian Caujolle, about a project on migration called *The Other European Travellers*, at the Atelier de visu. Soon to close due to a lack of funding, the Atelier is both a gallery and residency programme situated in the heart of the city, and as he has no real home to speak of it acts as a sometimes refuge for D'Agata. His ability to conduct workshops is legendary, as his commitment to each individual is total and sincere. Five days with D'Agata is always an intense experience, and participant photographers are pushed to take full responsibility for their own work and dig deep into their creative and personal selves. Always exhausted, bedraggled and stunned, photographers have been known to come out of the other side of an Antoine D'Agata workshop and declare it a life-changing experience.

In the calm of his bedroom, and with the sunlight leaching out one side of his face, D'Agata smokes a cigarette quietly and then reveals he is suffering from fatigue – not from these workshops, but from three hardcore years of intensive work and the drug abuse that has pushed him physically, emotionally and intellectually beyond normal and acceptable limits. His demeanour is generally pained and decidedly withdrawn, but always considerate, and he

apologises for his slowness in cranking his brain into gear for the purposes of our conversation. Though once cranked, he is refreshingly generous with his honesty and eloquent in his articulation of his life and work. In his verbal and written discourse he denies sentimentality and pursues his thinking with a precise deliberation towards the answer in question.

D'Agata could never be accused of not clearly processing his intellectual position and creative drive, as to do so would be to deny the entire relevance of his life. Though risky, the decisions he makes are carefully instigated and lived-through. For most, D'Agata is an intriguing and mysterious individual – everyone wants to understand what makes him tick, as exemplified one evening in a smoky Marseille bar when questioned by his English intern, Molly, about what takes precedence, "experience or photography". D'Agata does not hesitate in responding "experience, always". It is apparent that photography is simply a device to derive meaning from the excesses that he wilfully throws himself into. Despite the manifest insanity of D'Agata's life, a Lacanian psychoanalyst once told him that his creative output serves as constant self-analysis, and therefore, through transference of his desires and feelings, any latent traumas and anxieties are brought to the surface, in full public view. His compulsive drive towards excess and damage is through engagement, resolved through his photography.

It is here, at the Atelier de visu, that D'Agata is rebooting himself, recovering before hitting the road again, this time for Mexico, where some years ago he produced the photographs that became the book *Mala Noche*. I am surprised when he tells me: "I am exhausted – my age makes me tired and so life is a bit more serious now than before. It was fun for many years, but the sex and drugs is really no fun anymore." He pauses and then adds: "Though I am still intrigued."

I ask him what winning the prize for *Anticorps* means and he retorts: "Nothing." Realising his blunt reply, he then begins to laugh. "I'm just being honest," he adds. Behind him, strewn on a table, is a heap of his only possessions and an empty bag, in anticipation of his next journey. Acknowledging his Zen-like existence, he says, "I cannot allow myself to be comfortable – to be comfortable is to become blank, and you renounce questioning and stop taking risks. There are many reasons for serenity and harmony, but as long as you stay alive and keep open, this is all I need."

The past two years have been a frenzied hive of activity, with the nitty-gritty realisation of two major books, *Ice* and *Anticorps* respectively, together with the extraordinarily ambitious solo exhibition of *Anticorps* at Le Bal gallery in Paris, which has propelled his work onto an ever-increasing audience. This is a remarkable extension from his first successful exhibition at Galerie Vu, back in 2003. At the beginning of this year, he also exhibited at Galerie Les Filles



du Calvaire in Paris, the gallery that represents his work, with a show called *Noia*; a book of this work with the same title is soon to be published by Morel Books. And despite his extreme life, he has managed to steer a steady course, with an impressive output of books and exhibitions. As he would see it, his job and ultimate responsibility is to be accountable in making his photographs real and seen by an audience.

Ice

The reason why D'Agata is so exhausted and serious about life is because of the experience of living through what he describes as "my madness and that of others" – the manifestation of which was to become the extraordinary book *Ice*, published in 2012. On a deeper understanding, *Ice* is an amoral journey that initially appears to be a dissolute array of profane sexual imagery. It is by far his most extreme photobook, and by his own admission very violent. Page after page of skin-damaged and anorexic women, performing sex while high on drugs, delivers a very strong assault on the senses. In these depictions, D'Agata is a crazed, sexual drug-addicted protagonist, and together with the various emaciated women they are laid bare with a frightening starkness. The strange conflation between the intriguing chiaroscuro beauty of the images and the disorienting depictions of ugliness distorts the viewer's sensibility. The naked mises-en-scène of blurred bodies appear as floating in darkness – intoxicating and vivid reminders of human vulnerability and madness and the need to connect. D'Agata tells me that no one dared to risk publishing the book except the French publisher, Images en Manoeuvres Editions (now reincarnated as André Frère

Editions, based in Marseille), which in the past has published other books of D'Agata, notably *Stigma* and *Insomnia*. No one wanted to exhibit *Ice*, and no magazine wanted to feature the work. To digest this visual corpus of images is to swallow the empty lives and very violent reality of female prostitutes in Cambodia. It propositions a certain truth, raw and brutal, that by normative standards is not sufficiently diluted to be accepted. When the Magnum photojournalist Robert Capa famously declared, "If your photographs aren't good enough, you're not close enough," he probably could never have imagined that a future Magnum member would get this close to the subject by being a major part of the subject himself. Despite a fraught ideological and ethical relationship with the Magnum office that "is close to zero", D'Agata arguably runs in accord with the spirit of the original founders. He fights for his work to be accepted without compromise.

For D'Agata, contemporary documentary photography is a sociological view that can only ever be distant from the subject. The endless debate of bridging the distance between objectivity and subjectivity can never be resolved unless the photographer immerses himself fully into the situation and reveals the subjective construct of photography; otherwise, the work becomes a decoy to reality and inevitably results in a distilled simulacrum. D'Agata once offered that, "The only type of connection I have to the tradition of reportage is coming up with the most efficient ways to deny, denounce or destroy its prejudice. Beyond humanistic pretence, reportage always conveys twisted or insidious values. One has to remember that no photograph can pretend to show the truth. A picture only shows a given situation under a very specific perspective,

From *Anticorps*
All images © Antoine D'Agata



consciously or not, openly or not, relevantly or not.” D’Agata does not offer an answer; there is no judgement cast and no allusion to the sublime. An audience may be drawn or turn away from this work, but no one can really accuse D’Agata of hypocrisy. His theme and actions are honest by virtue of the fact that he feeds his desires and confesses his curiosity and yet simultaneously documents the abject madness of the ‘other’. It is a complicit scenario, a simple transaction.

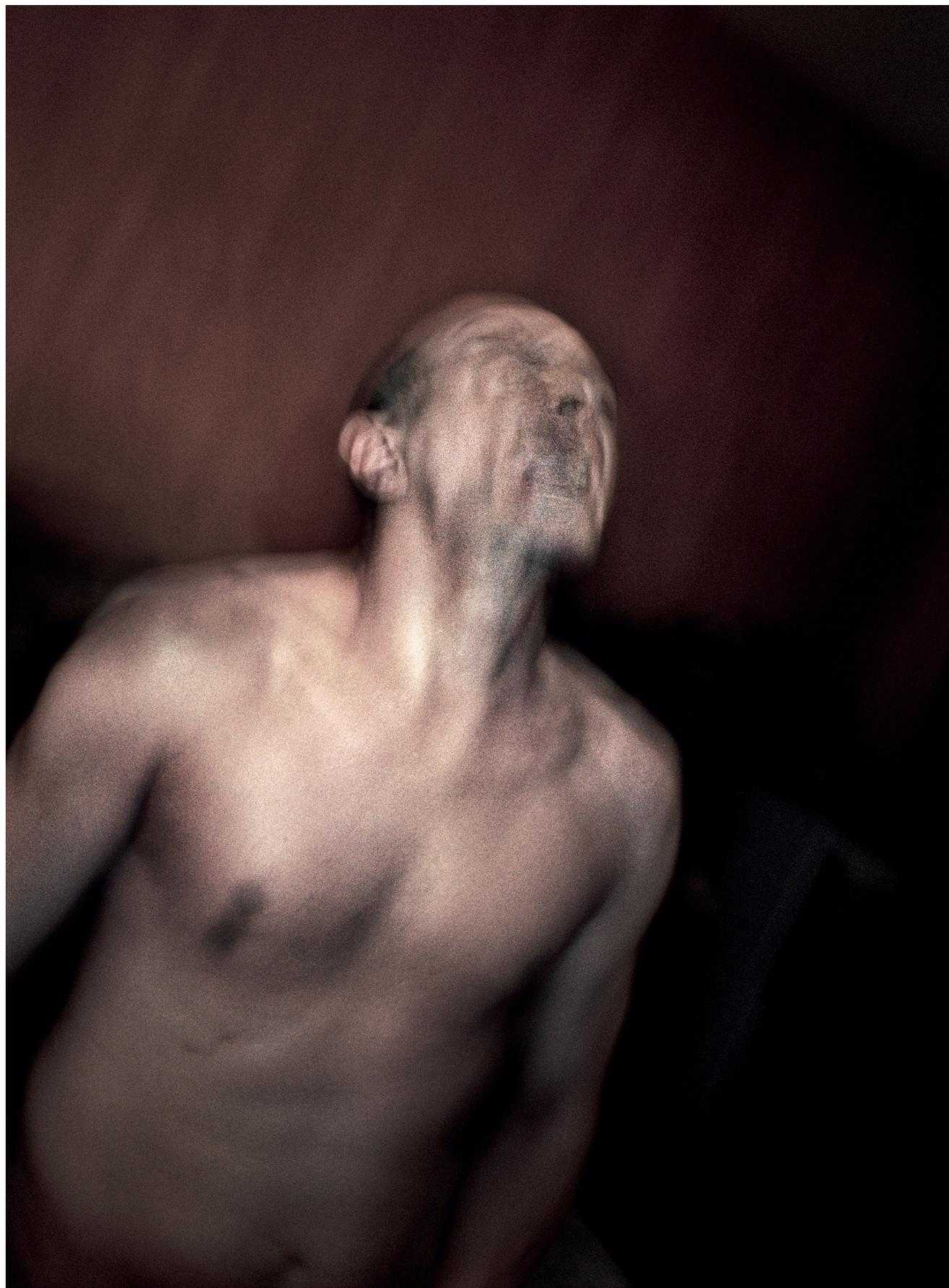
D’Agata explains that most of the women, or “little warriors” as he calls them, photographed in the book have since died, their brief lives fallen victim to poverty, addiction and mortal diseases. They dissipate into and out of *Ice*, which is a street name given to the drug methamphetamine. It is highly addictive and in high doses can induce mania, with accompanying euphoria resulting in feelings of increased self-esteem and libido. The Cambodian prostitutes take the drug to cope with their work – to make an unpleasurable situation bearable. For D’Agata, the drug is about experience – to extend his drug addiction to new levels of pleasure and pain.

At times, and for long periods, he would be immobile, lost in the mist of ice, and the only way to keep him anchored to reality – “to keep sane” – would be to cut his arms and feel the pain to stimulate his consciousness. For weeks he would spiral into an overwhelmingly torpid state, unable to perform the simplest task, sinking deeper into the lowest and darkest of places. During these periods, photography was certainly impossible and irrelevant, and yet in the less dense periods the choice to photograph is his ability to move in and out of the situation, to somehow control it even though he has “never been so close to madness”.

At one point he spent a month in a hotel room in Bangkok, unable to move, and spent two days trying to negotiate a simple journey across the road just outside. The book is punctuated with text from D’Agata’s personal diary, with emails to and from the prostitutes, his editor, and his children in Marseille, which adds a greater dimension to contextualise the photographs into something other than dramatic abstractions of debauched excess. An essential question is to ask if D’Agata is trying to connect with other people? He explains: “It is an interesting question. I have been using photography to mostly invent my own life and to push limits beyond what I thought would be possible – to go inside into different territories. I have always tried to understand and to get close, and part of my job is to be accepted by others, which is not easy. But in a way, I don’t really hope to get close, though I need people, their space and their trust, to lose myself and explore, to invent situations to push their limits and my own limits.

“Sometimes it is a game, but it is also serious work, scary and exciting, and we get lost within. But I realised a long time ago that there is a space that cannot be filled, because the people I get close to are already far away – most of them cannot be reached as they are within their own logic, and lost in their own worlds, with their own obsessions and addictions and bad habits, and I have my lonely quest. It’s a mix of real intimacy, of real magic meetings... people giving me everything, their time, their image, their words, their trust. Trust is a big word, meaning they open up, but we are not looking for anything else. We are sharing moments, but we are not looking for friendship necessarily; of course, we keep in touch via email and telephone. I use the word

From *Ice*





solidarity as they give as much as I give them. But there is no space for developing any kind of relationship.”

D’Agata never thought he would experience other people’s realities as intensely as he does his own. It is a process that develops out of his need to open up to vulnerability, thus allowing a purer form of intimacy, devoid of spirituality. The mental, physical and emotional place he was in was the antithesis of what could be considered a zenith – that imaginary path beyond the top of the head. It was, rather, an inner experience, with no illusions of grandeur, based inside the mind and body, into a dark hole, and “it’s made of bad things – it’s made of pain, stagnation, frustration”. D’Agata says he would become “an empty shell”, yet he regards the experience as “precious” as it takes you to the rawness of reality.

Anticorps

Anticorps is a compendium of D’Agata’s oeuvres from 20 years of photography. It is not a retrospective and he does not regard *Anticorps* as a form of completion; rather, he seized the opportunity to “go through my negatives and begin to make a logic of it”. He has always felt that, despite his fastidious and diligent approach, his work goes in different directions, becoming hybrid, and he fears the lack of control he often has over these different directions. It was therefore a “good time to make some order, though there are still so many holes and missing parts”. His life is so completely absorbed in his experiences that the photography becomes the counterpart, running wild, and *Anticorps* was a chance to harvest some of what he had sown. It was an attempt, on a certain level, at a summation of his achievements from just 20 years of photographing.

The exhibition at Le Bal was curated by Fannie Escoulen and Bernard Marcadé, and ran from January to April in 2013. It was a spectacular installation, a blizzard of juxtaposed images that occupied every wall space in the lower gallery at Le Bal. The intention was to marry all aspects of D’Agata’s archive – from the sexual to the political – and to make the connection that these two types of work are not entirely disparate. No matter what the environment, D’Agata’s work is always the documentation and expression of the human struggle to exist and coexist, and the display of war-torn buildings, empty landscapes, riots in Israel, the displacement of refugees and prostitutes is, for the first time, rendered with cohesive editing and curatorial precision. The accompanying book of the same name is beautifully reproduced and designed, published by Editions Xavier Barral.

Ironically, the photographs from *Ice* that no one dared exhibit blend in the mix of *Anticorps*, and D’Agata, who understands that his work may not be acceptable to the spectator, was interested that people had to see the work – that it was “forced on the audience, though in a different context”. D’Agata wanted to play with the spectator. He worked hard for this exhibition within the limited time he had, and “the main criteria was to stick to the meaning, with nothing too pretty or smart, and I don’t think I could have done better”. He wanted to show two sides of violence – “of people who are subject to violence and the violence that people impose on themselves and how it connects to the world in which we live”. Yet even D’Agata himself sometimes finds his photography to be too violent, and of

