**Photographic Museum of Humanity**

**Transcript from interview with Alejandro Chaskielberg**

**PMH - How did you first become interested in the idea of capturing the aftermath of the tsunami that hit Japan in 2011?**

AC - In 2012, I went to Japan for an exhibition of my previous work, *The High Tide*. I was interested in the fishing culture of Japan – having previously lived on an island to realize *The High Tide* – and so I wanted to find a fishing town in which I could produce a new series. After conducting some research, I discovered this small fishing town named Otsuchi. Coincidentally, one of the curators of my show in Tokyo had relatives there, so with these local connections, I decided that this would be an ideal starting place.

Otsuchi is just a small fishing town, yet it is also a place that has suffered terribly due to the tsunami in 2011. It was very shocking to work in the aftermath of a tragedy like this, and it was something that I had never experienced before – it was certainly a challenge for me to work in that environment.

**PMH - What is the current state of Otsuchi – how has the town and its people responded to the catastrophe?**

AC – I made three separate trips to Otsuchi to realize this project. The first trip was one year after the tsunami. The people were still in shock, the city was destroyed, and the remains of the houses were still visible. It was all very recent and many people were still living in temporary housing. Their first reaction to me was fantastic. I was travelling with my four-month old baby and for the residents of Otsuchi – where nobody had babies at that time – it was very moving and affecting for them: this helped me a great deal.

During my research, I found that many of the survivors had taken pictures in the empty spaces where their houses once stood during the day. So, on that first trip, I began my project by taking portraits of the Otsuchi residents in the footprints of their old homes, workplaces etc. – a practice that was very common for them. The second trip was better because by then, everybody knew who I was and what I was doing. Over the course of the three trips, I didn’t see a single person of Western origin – all the people there are Japanese, so I was recognized very easily.

**PMH - How did you find subjects for your photographs?**

AC - I started making connections through the family of the Japanese curator I worked with in Tokyo, and they began introducing me to their friends. They had lived in Otsuchi all their lives, and so they were well-known within their community. On my first trip, I made 12 images with people and I also photographed the structures that had survived the tsunami. When I went back for a second time, I made connections through different channels – I ran a workshop for the locals who were interested in photography. After the tsunami, the people of Otsuchi have used photography as a way to record their lives again, having lost all their belongings and family albums. This opened more doors for me as students would introduce me to their family and friends, and I would often receive calls from people who had heard about the project, asking if they could participate.

**PMH - On which trip did you find the destroyed family album that became so important in this series?**

AC - I found the family album on the first trip. There are many objects like that just lying in the street – albums, passports, etc. – everything can be found there. Looking at this album was shocking for me and it marked a turning point in my project. Such photographs are part of our memories and identity, and it was from that moment that I decided to search for additional destroyed images. Now I was not only working with survivors, but I was also creating a dialogue between my own images and those that I could find throughout the city.

On my second trip, I made contact with the both the local Government, and NGO’s in Otsuchi. I encountered an organization that was in the process of restoring found images – cleaning them up and then returning them to the families. After a number of meetings, they granted me access to their archive which contained thousands of photographs – I selected around 200 that I could work with. The project shifted significantly on that second trip – it had become a dialogue between the past and the present.

**PMH - Why did you select this technique of shooting long exposures in the dead of the night to portray these families?**

AC - I used this technique in my project *The High Tide*. For the people I shot in that series it was a very introspective experience. My subjects would sit or stand with their family in complete silence for several minutes – it was reminiscent of a small ritual and it was incredibly moving for the people involved.

It was with this in mind that I decided to work in the same style for this project. For the residents of Otsuchi to stay motionless for several minutes, in a place where they once lived that was destroyed so recently, was an extremely emotional journey for them. I wanted to set up this situation and see how the camera could capture that poignant, impassioned moment.

**PMH - From start to finish, including the time it takes to arrange and construct the image, how long does it take to produce a single photograph?**

AC – I always research the places I photograph in detail and it takes on average two hours to produce each image. The exposures take between five to ten minutes, depending on the situation, and they are originally made in black and white. At the beginning, I was unsure which technique to use. It was only when I was back in Buenos Aires looking at the black and white images and the family album together, that I realized that I wanted to build a bridge between the past and the present utilizing the colors of the images.

**PMH - Is there an image in the series that is particularly meaningful to you?**

AC - Yes – the one that depicts four people sat in an empty space. This was taken one year after the tsunami and there are many reasons why this is a personal favorite. Firstly, I like the composition very much – I see two different worlds. The ruined house in the foreground is a completely different image than that in the background. One of the structures visible in the background was the house that had a large ship hovering over it after the disaster – the image was well circulated in the media.

Secondly, I began testing what I would do, with this image – I originally tried to imitate the real colors that I saw when I was there but then I started to experiment with the color palette and I made the decision instead, to pick up the colors from the historic photographs I found. It is a key image for me.

**PMH - What equipment do you use to make these striking photographs?**

AC - I use a Sinar Norma 4x5” large format camera with black and white film. There are also some color images made with positive film. Occasionally I will use a digital camera to research and test the light when conditions are poor. To test the moonlight for example, I push the ISO very high in order to see in 15 seconds what the camera will see in 8 minutes. It is a very important tool and it enables me to realize what the moonlight will illuminate. I use digital technology regularly, but just as a rehearsal instrument – much like a Polaroid camera.

**PMH - What other projects are you currently working on?**

AC - I will publish a book about this project in the middle of the year and it will be presented at Paris Photo in October. I don’t know which project will be the next one. I am currently working on a very autobiographical project that is about me and my daughter - it is comparable to a family album with pictures and texts. This is an ongoing project and I also have other ideas that I am working on.