This is the final text for the exhibition catalogue "Intersections (after Lautréamont)", section: "Alice Miceli in conversation with Donald Johnson-Montenegro", published in December 2015 by the Cisneros-Fontanals Art Foundation, in Miami. Donald Johnson-Montenegro is the artistic director of Luhring Augustine Gallery, in New York.

Alice Miceli and Donald Johnson Montenegro in Conversation

DJM: I'm interested in your notion of a "politics of vision," which you have expressed as a central concern of your practice. Your haunting piece, *88 from 14.000*, with the archive of portraits of Cambodian war crime victims, brought up a number of complex ethical questions. For example, how do you as an artist and we as viewers address such an archive: a chilling, systematic documentation of prison camp detainees, taken before their merciless execution by their very executioners? Can you tell me a little bit about your exploration of a politics of vision and how you see your work intervening in, highlighting, or complicating these politics?

AM: When "politics" is referring to the origin of the word in Greek terms — as the agency of a citizen in a city, in the world — I think that our vision, how we see, and the things that we see, are embodied, or embedded in politics, yes. It seems to me that this is true even for the first level of vision, say, the optical, physical phenomenon of human vision (reflected light comes into our eyes and forms an image in our brain). Even that "unmediated" physical phenomenon is, in fact, mediated — by a context, by a culture, by built, learned cognition, by language, by how it is that we learn to see and decode the things that we do see, and thus attribute meaning to them (spatial meaning for instance, what is far, what is close). If that is the case, I think it is even more dramatic when that "vision" is mediated by a human-made tool (from a simple pinhole camera to a full fledged SLR, or any kind image-recorder, really). That human-made tool, which sees already, comes embedded with someone else's intention, attention, and assumption of how that instrument is supposed to be used, and it will be already pre-disposed to create a certain kind of image. There are layers and layers of history in it.

In the case of my work with the S 21 prison mug-shots, given that I overtly chose to deal with already existing images that belong now to an archive, my agency – or the poetic operation of the work – needed to be dislocated. This operation could no longer be placed in the image-making, since the images existed already; they were produced with the vilest, most horrific, deranged of intents, which was to organize mass-murder — an intent with which I believe no one can sanely align oneself. Because of all of this, I knew my action needed to be, then, in the re-mediation of the images. The question was in how to show them. I first saw the S21 prison images in a documentary class at university in Rio, many years ago, as a MA student. I was very impressed by the people in the images, who were facing death and knew it. And by the images themselves, too. I remember thinking, at the time, no matter what horrific intent these images were produced with, these were the last, *really the last*, images of each one of these people in life. They touched me very much. I felt addressed, and it was an unbearable address. To this day, it still is. Years later, I had in mind that I wanted to do work about "death". Death with a capital D, as in the John Donne poem (the "Holy Sonnet 10"). Death as the "ultimate" limit. The only thing we are certain of, but for which we are not present, because when it finally is here, we no longer are. And I remembered the S21 images. I think the reason I felt so personally

addressed by them – and the reason it is so unbearable – is that, by definition, upon being photographed, to be then mercilessly executed at Tuol Sleng, the people in those images were, precisely, not addressed. Their humanity was denied. It seems to be the case with perpetrators of genocide that they strip their victims of any humanity even before they kill them. So that responsibility lay now with us, the people who look at the images at present. And it lay with me, too, as an artist who chose to look at the images and to display them, in the choices involved in how to address, restore and remediate them. My work with the S21 images is an attempt at that.

An extract from "88 from 14,000" can viewed at https://vimeo.com/51092609

DJM: In your Chernobyl project, and in your new project with the minefields, you focus on spaces that have been rendered impenetrable or inaccessible as a result of a human-induced trauma to the landscape. What interests you about such spaces? Is it primarily the conceptual challenge of using your chosen medium of photography to capture what cannot be seen? Are you interested in the limitations of photography as a formal concern as much as a stand in for political, social, cultural, or other limitations?

AM: All of the above. In Chernobyl, due to the fact that, for me, regular photographic cameras failed in really seeing anything in that particular environment, precisely because it is one that is so pervasively filled with "nothing" (invisible contamination caused by gamma radiation), I wondered whether it was going to be possible to touch it otherwise – to touch that which is everywhere but is never really perceived in any way, except for the traces of destruction it left behind. I felt that, in that case, I had to create my own tools to see it, and it needed to be from scratch. After years of working on this project, I decided to look back to the start, to the thing that had fascinated me the most — that ungraspable nothing: the negative space. I asked myself, what other kinds of impenetrability remain out there? For Chernobyl remains in the present tense – that land is, and will be, contaminated long after we all die. Looking at minefields is for me, subsequently, the next step. In their case, the impenetrability has moved from vision to space, and that brings with it a whole set of different questions, as to how this spatial problem translates into image. Unlike remote but untarnished landscapes, these are urgent, negatively occupied spaces, claiming pieces of the world as we speak.

DJM: The first chapter of your current project *In Depth (landmines)* focuses on a landmine contaminated site in Cambodia. The specific landscape that you chose to capture in your series of eleven photographs is an open field, accentuated by a single tree in the center of each composition. While these photographs at first appear to be taken from the same vantage point, we learn that in fact you moved closer to that lone tree with each successive shot, navigating your way through the landmines and adapting your equipment and its settings to keep the general composition as consistent as possible. For every movement of your body further into this impenetrable space, there was a mechanical counter adjustment – a balance or negotiation between the landscape and the camera – in order to create this effect. So as your body progressed towards the tree, the field of vision nevertheless remained virtually static, making it seem as though the space was, in fact, impenetrable to you.

AM: I think that is an impression that might be given off at first glance, nevertheless not necessarily when one looks again, with attention. There is a differentiation: the proportions of the image do remain static, yes, and for a reason; the field of vision, however, is altered with each step, and so, too, the connection between the elements *in the image*, as they relate to one another and especially to the lone tree in the middle, towards which I walked across the minefield. In the foreground, as my body moves deeper into the space, the front trees gradually disappear, while in the background, the mountains, on their turn, progressively recede.

The first image in the series, shot with my longest telephoto lens, was taken as I stood at the entrance of the mined area. I could have chosen, as a safety measure, to stop there, to produce only one sole image capturing a horizon, a depth, that I could gaze over, but perhaps never attain. I wanted, however, to reach it. That is the performative side of the work, where my body, as the photographer in the out-of-frame, is not just gazing *over* an impenetrable depth, but is actually moving trough it, producing images from within, and asking, at the same time, how this penetration translates into image.

What I am exploring is, through the photographic medium's intrinsic physical and optical constituents, issues of vantage point and perspective – the relationship between where you stand, the focal length of the tool that you hold, and how far, or how close, you are to your subject. I think it was Robert Capa who famously said that if your pictures were not good enough, it was because you were not close enough. An-My Lê, nowadays, states the contrary. I think it's interesting that, even if from opposite ends, they are both stressing questions of vantage point. And so am I. Given that all images are a relationship between depth and flatness, I am concerned by how the parameters that shape an image's perspective and *depth-of-field* inform the physical position of the photographer in the out-of-frame, at the time and place of the exposure, in a situation (the mine-fields) where position, i.e. where one steps, is most critical.

Technically, the focal length of a lens determines its angle of view, and thus how much the subject will be magnified for a given position. Wide-angle lenses have short focal lengths; telephoto lenses have longer ones. Wide-angle can indicate close proximity to subject, while telephoto can be done from a distance. For that site in Cambodia, I calculated all focal lengths needed to keep constant magnification size in the image for one central element (the lone tree), for every inch on the ground, aligned on a same axis. Intertwining this pool of hypothetical vantage points with the actual mine-contamination map for that specific area, there were eleven positions in which to step, as I walked across, towards the tree in the distance. For the tree to remain the same size while I changed focal length, I was obliged to walk towards it, and, in this way, to gradually advance into the minefield.

I also think that the issue of Robert Capa's death should not go unnoted. It goes without saying that he is considered one of the greatest war photographers of all time, a guy that pretty much set the standard for many others that came after him in the genre of war photojournalism. While on assignment for *Life* magazine in Indochina in 1954, he stepped on a landmine and was

killed, still holding his camera. The last image in his film roll has long fascinated me: it captured an open field extending towards a horizon that he, himself, never reached. As a photographer taking on the task to look at these kinds of spaces, his death and the problem of his last image were an important entry point for me when I first started thinking about minefields. There is an interesting spatialization of time, or temporization of space, that occurs when considering mine-contaminated land: in every inch of that ground, there might be someone's last instant, last instants spread in space, as far as the eye can see. If you die, you cease to exist temporally, but in the situation of a minefield it means that spatially you don't get to go any further. I wanted to take the problem and carry it on from where he left off.

Furthermore, when land is taken over by mine contamination, it has been shut off and appropriated in the function of territorial acquisition, at the detriment of all other values. That's an occupation that is indifferent to the lived experience of a place, and to the people that might have once inhabited it. I think that in carrying out their job, the de-miners then become the first ones to be able to truly inhabit such spaces again, because theirs is an experience that is incorporated and walked through. With their guidance, my experience is likewise of a walked through, embodied engagement with the land. The attempt is to create a view that counter-aligns occupation, and that, even if only symbolically, claims the land back, given that a point of view from within has now been offered.

DJM: The genre of landscape photography (and its predecessor in painting) is associated with notions from the tranquil and bucolic, to the grand and awe-inspiring, and the sublime. Read outside of its context, your landscape photographs from Cambodia might at first read as peaceful and straightforward. Your use of this genre, paired with the technical possibilities of photography that you employed, seem further to obscure or muffle the threat that lurks beneath the ground and the potential harm to which you subjected yourself by entering the area. In this way, your strategy here creates a parallel with the hidden nature of the landmines. Can you speak more about this – perhaps in contrast to how you resolved the problem of capturing the unseeable in your Chernobyl project?

AM: The title *In Depth (landmines)* is an active part of the work's formulation in the sense that it places the images in that context. In the series itself, what is being addressed is the spatial consequences caused by mine contamination. As I mentioned above, that is also why the work exists as a series, as opposed to one sole picture, given that the gap between each image is of equal importance to what has been captured in them. I think that what the viewer does with these elements in relationship to how they see the images is for them to discover.

There is a risk, as in radical sports, but this was a calculated one. Something could always go wrong, but I've done my best to go prepared. I went across the mined areas accompanied by the de-miners who carry out the extremely dangerous task of identifying and later disarming the mines, and who therefore know the land best. *Risk* here is a given of the limit situation I chose to look at, and implicate myself in. It is what ties the series together, as the latent *stimmung* of that landscape.

In the *Chernobyl Project*, the operation was a problem of the unseeable. That is where the impenetrability was. Therefore, that required an action from me in the image making, the attempt to capture marks of that unseeable, *on film.* In the minefields, the question is no longer in how to create an image of that which cannot be seen, because we can see the land even if the mines are hidden. One can gaze over and even capture that space in an image, like Capa did instants before his death. That *space* is now the problem. The question then lies in the mined depth to be walked trough, represented *in the image*.

DJM: In the second chapter from this body of work, you investigate a site in Colombia. How did the more rugged topography affect the conceptual or logistical parameters of the work you produced there?

AM: Yes, in Cambodia the contaminated site in Battambang was an open field, already mapped, and therefore much "easier" to navigate. In Colombia, where contamination by anti-personnel mines remains a huge problem, the demining campaign has just started, and there is still a lot of mapping to be done. It is also the case that mined areas around Medellin, where I traveled to, are located uphill in the jungle, in regions once dominated by the FARC, who would mine sites as a defense mechanism against the army, which was following them. Taking this into account, and because the systematic identification and mapping of explosives has yet to be finished, the marking that has been so far applied is not in maps, but literally *in* the land: that is what the red sticks we see in the images stand for. The central one was my guide as I gradually advanced into the mined area.

I like also to think in musical terms, given that the work is dealing with problems of interval. At first, there is an equal, regular division of space (like time in a musical score) in the relationship between vantage points, focal lengths and constant subject magnification in the image. In the Colombian series, the constant is the central red stick. All of this is then made actual and experienced trough the uneven mine contamination in the site. In theory, I could produce endless images from A to B, but in reality, the mine contamination only allowed for seven vantage points in the ground. This created a tension between the equal division of space and the way that irregular "beat" of the contamination forced me to cross. I also see each landscape as having its own timbre (rugged and dense, as in Colombia, or clear and open, as in Cambodia). These are the particularities of each place. And the specific contamination they have been subjected to has its own sequence of intervals, telling me how to move.

Additional documentation in the form of an illustrated conversation between Alice Miceli and architectural designer Karen Kubey (Pratt Institute, New York) can be viewed at http://workuntitled.com/micelikubey.html