The document tends towards the imaginary, fiction tends towards the real. You could say that if you aim at a form of truth through fiction, then the reality will become enigmatic precisely because it is obvious. Documentary photography offers an interesting possibility of achieving a poetic form. For me that is more than just an interesting possibility. It’s what I’m aiming at. If an image is powerful enough, if it resists us, if, by its obscure coherence, part of it escapes our understanding, then it means that something has been won from reality.

— Luc Delahaye, Snap Decision, Art Press, 2005

For more than two decades, Luc Delahaye has photographed world events. As a photojournalist working for magazines such as Newsweek, he specialized in war photography, and he has received numerous awards. Concurrently, Delahaye explored several more personal projects, applying documentary-style photography, both black-and-white and color, to social issues such as homelessness in Paris or the economic struggles of life in Russia. Those experiences led to his current work. Initiated in 2001 with the war in Afghanistan, this series of large-scale photographs features significant recent events ranging from natural disasters to genocides. While the subjects are familiar to us through the extensive media coverage, Delahaye’s camera records each scene with detail and accuracy and includes an uncommon peripheral vision that reveals the extended context of the events he renders. Inspired by the “reticent, understated, and impersonal” aesthetic of the photographer Walker Evans (American, 1903–1975), Delahaye applies the same qualities—documentary photography and a serial approach—to his work.

His choice of subjects also reveals a similar interest in the “ordinary.” By photographing seemingly mundane meetings, he provides unusual access to influential international institutions such as the United Nations and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). His photographs focus on the long-term effect of current events and reveal their impact well beyond their initial moments in the headlines.

A Mass Grave near Snagovo, Bosnia relates to the research into and identification of victims of Serbian war crimes. The photograph focuses on a working group of four individuals isolated in a vast, overwhelming landscape. Delahaye sometimes combines different shots taken at the same event to create a more powerful rendering of the scene, a common artistic practice. The workers are arranged in a balanced composition based on their body positions: the figures in the center are seated in profile, while those on either side stand, turning their heads from the camera. Their gestures and actions—of digging and collecting, enhanced by the tools in their hands or spread out on the ground—seem to refer to the harvest and farming, evoking the rural scenes painted by Jean-François Millet (French, 1814–1875). None of those elements, including the surprising white, blue, and pink colors that punctuate the brown soil, evoke the tragedy until closer attention reveals human remains.

Enlarged to near-life-size, such quiet and subtle scenes become spectacular. By choosing a higher vantage point, Delahaye engages viewers as direct observers while making us question our ability to comprehend the image as presented—as well as images in general.

The detailed representation and clear successive spatial structure (in which the fore-, middle, and backgrounds are distinct) of Delahaye’s photographs lend a surprisingly painterly aesthetic and a cool lyricism to his subjects. This ambivalent combination of documentary photography and dramatic scale suspends the images between fiction and reality, emphasizing what he calls their “obscure coherence” and challenging the viewer’s experience and interpretation.

— Anne Lacoste
Department of Photographs

Delahaye continues to travel around the world recording global events. He uses a medium-format, handheld camera with a wide-angle lens and works with film that limits him to a few exposures. Although his approach is direct, like a reporter’s, he aims for “perfect action, pure in its efficiency.” His goal is to create an image “that is subservient to neither the real nor to [his own] intention.”

From a distant and head-on point of view, Delahaye’s camera records each scene with detail and accuracy and includes an uncommon peripheral vision that reveals the extended context of the events he renders. Inspired by the “reticent, understated, and impersonal” aesthetic of the photographer Walker Evans (American, 1903–1975), Delahaye applies the same qualities—documentary photography and a serial approach—to his work.

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In the Shomali Valley, a Taliban soldier killed during an offensive of the Northern Alliance on Kabul, the Afghanistan capital.

After the September 11 attacks, the United States and members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) decided to provide support to the Northern Alliance, that is, the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan. Their goal was to wrest control of the country from the Taliban, an extremist religious/military group that ruled most of the territory after winning the civil war in 1992-96.

In the village of Musenyi, Rwanda, a burial ceremony for eighty anonymous victims on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the genocide.

During the 1994 civil war in Rwanda, a mass extermination was supervised by the Hutu-dominated government and carried out by two extremist Hutu militia groups against the ethnic Tutsis and their Hutu sympathizers. Between April and July 1994, an estimated 800,000 to 1,000,000 people were killed.

The J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center
July 31–November 25, 2007

The Palestine Hotel
April 15, 2003. The Palestine Hotel, home of the international media in Baghdad.

In the 2003 Iraq war, the Palestine Hotel was the headquarters for the international media covering the conflict. On April 8, 2003, during the U.S. invasion of Baghdad, an American tank fired a shell at the hotel, killing two journalists and wounding three.

The ICMP has been working on locating, recovering, and identifying the genocide’s hardest hit by the Indian Ocean tsunami. The city lost one-third of its population, an estimated death toll of 40,000.

Digital chromogenic print, 2004; 122.5 x 241 cm
Promised gift of Michael and Jane Wilson

Courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007.15