

SYNOPSIS :

ACCEPTANCE

Photo story from **Elisabeth SCHNEIDER**

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Multiple sclerosis is a neurological degenerative disease. It causes troubles with the conduction of nerve impulse.

The nerve tissue consists of cells, known under the name of neurons. They vehicle information under the form of electric impulses through the brain, the spinal cord and the nerves, that are called *nerve impulse*.

« I do exist! »

Brigitte, a victim of multiple sclerosis, has been fighting against handicap and indifferent people. Picturing her life through photographs has helped her on her way to acceptance.

«To stay alone means you don't bore people with your handicap»

I have gotten to know Brigitte by listening to her story. I spent some time in a department hospital at Berck-sur-Mer in Pas-de-Calais. Brigitte introduced me there. She spends some time overthere each year to undergo physiotherapy. She used to love sailing and appreciates this place. She is attracted there by the view. The sea and horizon are appealing to her.

I still remember the first time we met. It was during the summer of 2006. We were alone, sitting at a terrace of a café in Paris. I was sitting under a plane tree, reading a magazine. It was a warm day. She was sitting on my left. I had the feeling that someone was observing me. The left part of my body was swarming. I suddenly turned towards her. We looked at each other for a long time. Everything could have stopped right there, but I asked her if she wanted to share a cup of coffee with me. Starting from there, we got to discover each other.

Violent Transfers

I discovered the life she lead before getting sick. I witnessed her day-to-day fight. We regularly met during three months. I showed her my work as a photographer. Brigitte often cried during our conversations. Because of her acute hypersensitivity, I decided to wait before talking to her about my project.

She wanted me to make a portrait of her. I accepted under the condition that I would do it my one way. That day, I never realized what would come out of our encounter. This experience became so life altering, so intense. From the beginning, I was so receptive to her. I could transfer onto her. I was really affected by the violence of the outside world and by her illness' constraints. I didn't show it. It only happened when I was alone. Sometimes I denied what was happening. The reciprocity of our sometimes very straightforward contact, helped with the development of our dialogue. My fears dissipated. A real link took form between the two of us. We simply understood each other.

Why this rejection ?

Brigitte's life was turned upside down seventeen years ago. «*There is no pride...Pride doesn't mean anything anymore, she now abruptly concludes. I feel rejected by everybody out there. People hesitate to talk to me. After a while... they show sympathy, especially old people. Younger ones are frightened to see someone who can't move. I find it difficult to understand their rejection. Why would they reject me ? Because I can't walk or because they don't know what I am suffering from? Is this because I am different ? I get the impression that multiple sclerosis isn't a well known disease. »*

Shedding a new light

The photographs presented here aren't there to illustrate handicap, but to denounce a woman's hardships. In the first picture, Brigitte's silhouette stands out in half light, like in a shadow show. The human being and the armchair melt into each other to become one single object. This image illustrates the way handicap is perceived by ignorant people, who don't know the reality of it.

Time and trust reveal and shed a new light on disabled people and their uniqueness. It shows what distinguishes them, what makes them more than handicapped persons. We discover who they previously met, their passions, their emotions, their desire to tell, to testify, to scream that they too exist.

When I submitted my work to her judgment, I wanted to know what she thought about it. «*At last, I exist*», she answered me. This project only took form because she was determined to testify. It has become a political gesture for her. The more the work progressed, the more Brigitte realised the impact it would have on others, including her family. It has become her life's purpose rather than a simple objective. I think Brigitte was able to achieve this goal because she has decided to accept herself as she is. She isn't ashamed of being disabled anymore. I built my project with this in mind.

A vision from elsewhere

As a matter of interest, I have been surprised to discover an add for the airport of Edimburg, in Scotland. Five people figured in it. Among them was a disabled woman. She was smiling. How come we don't see this type of pictures in French airports? Isn't it important to heighten public awareness of this problem? Handicap is still largely seen as a taboo at this time in France.

Coming to awareness

In France, associations work tirelessly in order to alert public opinion. We are barely starting to catch glimpses of traffic signs and a few advertisements on the television against this type of discrimination that remains firmly anchored in most people's minds. As well as the elderly, handicap should be a concern to all of us. Am I to much of an utopian ? Is acceptance only a long process that needs time and patience? Probably both.

Two years after I met with Brigitte, at the end of may 2008, this work was rewarded with a prize: the Mark-Grosset prize, in the REPORT category. ■