

ALEX ROTAS**GROWING OLD COMPETITIVELY:
PHOTOGRAPHS OF MASTERS ATHLETES***Bristol: Alex Rotas Publishing, 2014, 69 p.*

If someone told you that they were a sports photographer, wrinkled faces would probably not be the first thing you would imagine. Wrinkled faces will not be what catch your eye when you look at the pictures of athletes over sixty, taken by British photographer Alex Rotas. The first that you would probably notice in her pictures is the huge commitment to their performance and perhaps immense certitude and the related coolness of aged athletes.

Through fascinating pictures of older athletes, Alex Rotas decided to challenge ageism in our society, by which she means “any expectation that I or anyone at a certain age is going to behave any particular way... according to their age. So you can also talk about ‘reckless young people’, or young people who are always on social media...” (interview)¹; hence, she does not limit photographing the oldest generation, even though this is her particular focus. What she seeks to capture in her pictures is the fact that “masters athletes don’t necessarily look younger than they are. ... What they all look is very alive: empowered, focused, determined and joyful. What I have learned from them is that it is possible to look your age, to look ‘old’ even, and wonderful.” (Rotas, 2014: 8)

In her own words, her own mission is as

follows: “Fighting ageism means we need to fight the idea you’ve got to really be youthful or young. And that it’s actually fine to have the wrinkles, to look old, and that you can look wonderful with wrinkles. You can look wonderful whatever your age is if you look full of life. And that’s, I think, one of my messages. One of the things I enjoy with photographing these athletes is that they usually have lots of wrinkles. Because they are outside all the time. But they still look wonderful!” (interview)

Alex herself has always been a passionate sportswoman; she still plays tennis and thinks that her time as an athlete may still be to come. Photographing athletes close to or even in their 90s has helped her think this way.

“I think that’s the thing I’m enjoying most – feeling, through meeting and photographing all these amazing people, that my life is getting bigger when actually I’m at an age when it could be narrowing down.” (interview)

She herself has had multiple new experiences with multiple new beginnings, both in her private and professional life. She took up photography after she retired, as a second-career woman (Feglová, 2004) and, according to her own words, she feels more freedom in this “profession” than in her previous jobs or other activities:

1 This book essay may have a bit of an unconventional format, as in addition to her book we also deal with Alex Rotas as an author on the basis of an interview that we conducted in January 2018.

“My whole life has been very much trying to control life, having plans and goals and maybe reaching some, maybe not. Now I am kind of doing the opposite to what I did in my other lives. Which is I am just letting go, letting things flow. I haven’t got any plan at all, I have got no master plan, I have got no goals, I’m just letting this project take me where it will.” (interview)

In this part of the interview, Alex Rotas refers to the perception of retirement filled with leisure or pastime without a specific goal, which fully corresponds to the widespread discourse in the countries of the global North about a deserved reward for a well-done job (pensioners being “released” from work), which distinguishes it from the state of unemployment (all unemployed being excluded from work) and loafing. It is therefore not necessary to fill the retirement period with new work or activities which are economically beneficial for society. Spare time dedicated to hobbies or even loafing is becoming something that is justified. British sociologist Andrew Blaikie noted twenty years ago that changes can be observed mainly in the field of leisure activities, travelling and holidays. We can thus observe how “inactivity” is becoming common, adopted and fixed through means of mass suggestion of the public discourse (1999). Special forms of how to spend the time in retirement can develop once the institutional and financial prerequisites are ready and available on one hand, and when a different perception or recognition of the difference between retirement and unemployment, i.e. leisure spent by “doing nothing”, can be promoted in society on the other hand.

However, the decision of Alex Rotas made corresponds rather more to the choice of “starting to do something completely new”.

“I didn’t know anything about photography. I didn’t even have a camera. But I like



being a beginner, so I just thought it would be fun to learn how to take photographs. I’ve never been an expert at anything, I keep finding myself down at the bottom of the big learning curve, and I like that. I am on the bottom of the curve and I can see all the stuff I am going to learn, which implies an active future, and I am really excited about that.

I like making mistakes. I love that, now. I grew up in a culture, where I wasn’t allowed to make mistakes so it is very liberating for me. My family background is that I had to be an achiever ... making mistake was a big ‘no no’ in my family. And as I get older and I am finding how freeing it is to let go of this need to achieve... I mean that I am taking up running and I am not good at running at all... and it has been incredibly liberating to find that I can do something that I am actually not good at and enjoy it! I don’t run fast and I don’t run that far and actually I can still enjoy it. That’s so new to me as I approach the age of 70. That’s another great thing about getting old.” (interview)

The beginning of her photographing was marked by her interest in sports and gender, related to her academic career: There was a huge difference between how the elite male and female tennis players presented themselves on their own websites, she discovered. Later she wanted to observe how the media depicted older athletes. She was surprised to learn that actually the media

didn't depict them at all. There simply were no visual images to be found:

"I started getting interest in looking at images of sportsmen and women, simply out of personal interest as a sporty person myself and someone who loves tennis. If you looked at the websites of female tennis players some ten years ago, you often would be hard pressed to see a tennis racket. They chose images that sexualized and objectified themselves. They often were not wearing tennis clothes; I mean it was incredible... The men on the other hand, presented themselves as subjects rather than objects. They'd show themselves playing tennis, doing their charity work, living out their lives with non-chalance and authority. This was such a contrast to the ways the women had chosen to objectify themselves. And I was completely blown away and I started writing some papers as an academic on that subject. It was a bit dodgy actually because I felt I was kind of criticizing very high profile tennis players.

Anyway, I did a google search one day, just out of interest, thinking I'm going to have a look at the images that are out there of older athletes cause maybe I could turn my attention to this topic now and write a paper on this subject. I was an older competitive tennis player myself so I knew that people went on doing their sports and competing through the older age groups. So I did a search and that was when I was really shocked to find that there were no images, so there was nothing to critique..." (interview)

She decided to fill the gap in 2011 and set out on a journey which led to the publishing of her book *Growing Old Competitively* (2014). Her aim was to show, among other things, that our best years can come at any age; the people she photographs convinced her "to look at the years ahead with enthusiasm and excitement..." (Rotas, 2014: cover). The perspective of Alex Rotas thus fully corresponds to the concept of four ages by Peter Laslett. British social historian Peter Laslett calls his work *Fresh Map of Life* (1989) or its German version *Das dritte Alter* (1995) the historical sociology of the old-

age. Some parts of his work could rather be called a normative – a kind of a guide on what the third age means and how the author would imagine its form in the UK. The author sees his work as an opportunity for "proposing and taking measures against the chicane of the birth date lottery" (Laslett, 1995: 45). He clearly attempts to conceptualise high age in a more positive manner. According to Laslett, the life of an individual begins with the age of dependence, socialisation, immaturity and upbringing – the first age. This age is relatively without responsibility and of low authority towards others. It is followed by the age of independence, maturity and responsibility, earning activity and saving. According to Laslett, it cannot be the age of fulfilment, as work and the related status are, in spite of everything, determined by other people, the employer. The second age is the age at which the individual is not the master of his time. Our time belongs to the company from the moment we take up a job (Laslett, 1995: 272). The third age is the period of personal fulfilment, and usually relates to the later life stage after retirement. During the third age, the subjective age is more important than ever before in terms of living. It brings certain timelessness to this phase of life. And finally, the fourth age is characterised by irreversible dependence, weakness and death. The time it comes varies; the third age has no fixed upper limit. There are many activities and interests that we can continue performing, even though the body gradually weakens, even to an advanced extent.

Although Laslett's work was published some time ago, even today it differs to the view of the retirement life period in some European countries (including Slovakia), where sometimes the old age is depicted as the period of decline and loss in all aspects of life. Similar negative ideas are the basis of ageism in European society, against which Alex Rotas decided to fight through the images of aged athletes. The way she has chosen primarily to challenge ageism, "is by providing images that show older people doing things that you might not normally

expect them to do. I am putting images in the public domain as much as I can – images of older people who are physically very active and elite – have elite bodies in their 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s, because my primary aim was to show what the ageing body is capable of and challenge the automatic believes that age means inevitable decline and passivity and so on.” (interview)

In her book, she stresses the importance of the body itself in athletic races. Unlike in tennis, which she plays, athletes’ performance would not be helped by a high-tech racket with superb strings or indeed high-level racket skills that might obviate the need to run fast. In most cases, athletes have only their bodies to use. They turn up at the starting line, the gun goes, and they’re off. They’re either fast or they’re not. They have only their bodies to rely on: “I love tennis but as a new observer to track and field events, I find this honesty, this nakedness even, both moving and beautiful” (Rotas, 2014: 6).

Body and embodiment² as the central theme of pictures goes hand in hand with the interest in old age themes mainly in culture sciences. These themes have been long avoided by researchers in connection with old age in social gerontology (unlike cultural gerontology which dealt with and still deals with this topic; see, for example, Turner, 1991; Shilling, 2012). The probable reasons were fears that the focus on the “deteriorating” body would ultimately turn against the ideas they had preferred. They sought to avoid the reduction of the old age to physiological and medical processes that would suppress the importance of its social and cultural construction (Twigg, Martin, 2015: 3). However, several books published recently explore the comprehensive nature of embodiment in old age (Öberg, 1996; Gilleard, Higgs, 2013; Tulle, 2015).

Some may be surprised by the fact that the times and other results achieved by senior athletes in top-class races differ little

from the performance of athletes in younger age categories who are at the centre of attention of the sports audience all over the world. Rotas compares in her book, for example, the times of the runners to the times of the multiple world champion and Olympic winner Usain Bolt. His record in 100m run is 9.58 seconds. The times of the fastest 100m runners in the age category of 70–74 years are around 12.77 seconds, which is less by only 3 seconds.

Alex Rotas notes that it is sometimes difficult for her to guess who competes in which age category. People age at different rates and a group of 55 year olds, even 55-year-old elite athletes, can look very different. On the other hand, the championships have a certain order that makes you feel like you’re travelling in time. Masters athletes compete in 5-year age bands, starting from 35–39 years old, then 40–44, 45–49, 50–54 and so on right up to 100+: “The events always start with the oldest age groups and it’s fascinating watching the five-year bands flash by, one after the other, in front of your eyes. It’s almost as though you’re watching a reverse life-cycle (Rotas, 2014: 6).

On the other hand, Alex Rotas is well aware that stressing the activity and achievement of older athletes can “run the risk of presenting an alternative dictate... namely that there is only one way to get old and that’s by being physically active. Of course that’s absolutely not true. I always welcome the opportunity to use words as well as images, I can talk about the fact that I think there are lots of ways of ageing actively. Some may be physical but others may not; for example you can actively engage your mind thinking about difficult and challenging stuff... this obviously requires activity. Also even emotionally engaging with your friends, with your family... a sort of emotional response is also very active, I mean it’s challenging – you know, you are sitting in a chair but you are trying to respond in

2 In ethnology/anthropology, embodiment represents the manner of describing porous, bodily, perceived, revived experience in the social context.

a loving way to your family when you are presented with challenging situations and you have to really examine your own sort of response, and that's not easy. And I think that is also something we should do at every age. For me, this too is a sort of way to describe active aging." (interview)

According to Alex Rotas, sometimes the images need explanations or caveats, especially when they are shown to older people. I would hate them to think: "I should be doing this! And if I am not I am failing at this ageing. My photos just show one way of ageing, not THE way to age." (interview)

The paradigm of active or successful ageing represents a project of the present, based on individualist autonomous personalities able to make choices about themselves, with the possibility of individual control over their own lives, recognising the values of agelessness and avoiding the negative aspects of old age. Successful ageing inspires us and, in its essence, posits the fact that the negative aspects of old age can be shifted to a higher and higher age, until they disappear – all this thanks to a combination of medical interventions and individual efforts. This in fact corresponds to the neoliberal principle of transferring responsibility for one's own life almost exclusively onto the individuals themselves who control their own lives through choices and activities they perform in line with the slogan "Everyone is the architect of his own happiness". Active ageing is usually understood as economically productive ageing (Boudiny, 2013), dedication to a healthy lifestyle and "ageless" appearance (besides medicine, with extensive help of sports, clothing and cosmetic industry), which represent new goals that older people should actively pursue. However, the other nuances of active or successful ageing are not so attractive, though they are harder to recognise: the hyper-positive attitude to ageing is ageist in its essence by suppressing vulnerability, decline and dependence on others which are intrinsically linked to old age and ageing as part of human life. Sara Lamb noted in her book: "What of those of us who

don't make it to ninety or one hundred without pain and suffering? If one develops vulnerabilities in later life, does that mean that one has 'failed' at ageing?" (Lamb, 2017: xi)

Thus Alex Rotas is aware too that images of active or successful ageing "erased the social factors behind: The privilege that allows people to go and do yoga, sports and other things, are far from universal. I am very, very aware of my own privileged position. That am a white woman in my, you know, nearly 70, that I belong to a sports club, I have time and facility to eat well and make choices about how I spend my time." (interview)

During her work, Alex Rotas meets different people from different countries and different social backgrounds. Their stories represent a firm part of her book.

"I think this was what surprised me when I started to take these photos. I didn't expect to get a relationship with the people I was photographing, and yet I have. ... It's very life-enhancing for me to have learned the stories that people have. I didn't expect to have the privilege of people sharing as much about their lives as they have done with me or the new friendships I have made." (interview)

In connection with the stories of living human beings, Alex Rotas reflects on the ethical aspects of her work. It is not suitable to share publicly all the information she gets, however, what surprised her were the illness narratives:

"What I found really moving is that they are usually very happy to share details about their illnesses. So a lot of them have had cancers and strokes and they actually want to talk about them and they like the idea that this may encourage other people. It's not like they are breed of super humans, they are absolutely not, they are the same as everybody else, they get the same strokes, they get the same cancers they have the same heart attacks and issues..." (interview)

Talking about illnesses and focusing on sports as a means or aid to cope with the consequences of health problems have been

part of the illness narratives genre since the end of the 1980s. Through personal life stories, seriously ill patients sought to present to doctors or other medical professionals and to the public the impacts of their illness on their work, family life, identity and the perception of themselves. They attempted to describe the way their illness was becoming part of their life, the changing attitude of society towards them, and their status that they acquired as a result of their illness. Arthur Kleinman calls these stories illness stories or illness narratives (Kleinman, 1988).

People usually do not have a precise idea about how many senior athletes do top-class sports. There are actually thousands of them over the different age groups but over time you discover, says Rotas, that it is the same people who meet at the races, creating what comes to feel like a small community. This is especially true in the higher age groups, where actual numbers of competitors declines. Throughout the year many of these athletes will be saving money not for their holidays, but for visiting at least two events – a summer championship and a winter indoor championship and for competing in the sport they love. Hence, a major factor behind their meetings is not only the contest itself, but friendships:

“I’ve got pictures of people being very active but they have lots of pictures of people who are very joyful and one of the reasons why people carry on doing competitive sport is because of the community. And because of the camaraderie.” (interview)

“People die, that’s another really sad thing. And I have been thinking about how affected I have been when somebody I have photographed and got to know has died. Sometimes this has been because of sudden illness. Sometimes because of ‘old age’” (interview)

The photographer and the athletes she photographs develop a deeper relationship, says Rotas, because sometimes the pictures can feel really intimate. When you are engaged in high-level sport, all your focus is on your body. Athletes of any age are not

paying attention to what they do with their face when they compete. And it is those very intimate moments of facial expression that the photographer captures. It is definitely her skill and experience that enables Alex Rotas to photograph people so that they feel satisfied and they like the pictures. “I would never publish a picture that makes them look bad. You know, there are some tricks I’m learning, for example especially with an older body you try to get them as they are in the air when they are running. If you get them when the leg lands on the ground, all the muscles kind of drop, and you want to show their energy, their ‘bounce’. Little things like that make a difference.” (interview)

In addition to photographing senior athletes, exhibitions and book publishing, Alex Rotas works in a radio, in a sports programme in which she brings up new topics:

“I came on and wanted to talk about gender and they just want to talk about football tactics. And I am talking about gender and stuff like that and representation so you know, I present an alternative voice.” (interview)

She is also invited to speak on sports in higher age at motivational lectures held at various places. She has discovered that people want to hear her own story too as well as the stories of the people represented in her book. When she first realised that interviewers were interested in her too, she was initially perplexed.

“I was in my early sixties and I was thinking I am just a middle-aged woman who takes photographs of old people, what’s interesting about that? And then I had one of those light-bulb moments and I thought oh my God, no – I am an old person who takes photographs of old people and I am a part of the story...” (interview)

Being a part of the story is a strong momentum that entitles her to speak from the insider’s perspective. On the other hand, Alex Rotas enjoys intergenerational communication in her work, as well:

“I need help now in a lot of technical aspects and I also need help with social

media and I mean I'm just trying to make myself use Instagram. So I had to get help from younger people, younger than my children, I mean students who are in their early twenties. And it is fabulous because they're helping me. And I hear about their lives too. This contact has been an unexpected blessing." (interview)

With respect to the many projects to which Alex Rotas dedicates her time, in the future she plans to focus on projects that bring together several generations: "I am increasingly thinking that intergenerational projects are the way to go.

When I first started doing this work I was interested in thinking about different words for different types of older people. I was thinking there should be a word for the younger-old, the older-old and then the old-old, but I've stopped thinking that now. I think we're all in it together and all these potential categories contain and divide people. I just think that any project that is intergenerational is probably the best way forward. I've seen one or two examples of that in sport and it is just very empowering. It somehow feels kind of normal, it's normalizing. Everyone competing is just a person who loves this particular sport. You may need to keep the different age-groups competing together. But they can perhaps compete on the same day, in the same arena, in front of the same crowd. I know it's difficult to stop thinking and assessing whoever you are talking to on the basis of the age. But maybe it's the way we should be going." (interview)

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