François Méchain

« L'exercice des choses »

« The exercise of things »

Interview with François Méchain

By Laurence Chesneau-Dupin, curator
Catherine Duffault, curator
Jean-Yves Hugoniot and Jean-Pierre Mélot, curators

The Exercise of Things is the subtitle you have chosen for this retrospective view of your work over the past fifteen years. It is a poetic but rather cryptic expression. What do you mean by it?

I could have just as readily called it The Exercise of the World. In both cases, I was thinking of Albert Renger-Patzsch, a German photographer of the New Objectivity movement whose famous book Die Welt ist Schön (The World is Beautiful) was originally supposed to be called Die Dinge (The Things). The publisher refused the title for commercial reasons. Die Dinge sounds quite nice, doesn't it? And it's so open.

In The Exercise of Things there is also the idea of experimentation and hence of humility, two notions which I hold dear. From all the traveling I have done over the past thirty or forty years, I have learnt the relative value of things. Two anecdotes spring to mind in this respect. They concern our relationship to time. Once in the Ouvea atoll in the Pacific, I was speaking to a priest and he told me about a recent trip he had made to France. He and some friends found themselves one day in the Paris metro right in the middle of rush hour. Amazed by all the hast and vain agitation, all they could do was sit down on a bench and roar with laughter for a half an hour.

On another occasion, in Malaysia, I was waiting with some friends for a train. We had been waiting for hours. Since nothing was happening, I decided in typical European fashion to go to the ticket counter and ask when the train was expected. Taken aback, the officer looked me straight in the face and nonchalantly replied: "Today, sir." It was, after all, a reasonable answer considering the circumstances and the cultural context. The lesson has been a helpful one. I now know that the value of things requires the prior definition of a number of elements. "Truth on this side of the Pyrenees, error on the other," wrote Blaise Pascal. 2

And for you? Is there a near and a far side to your work?

Traveling has helped me understand what makes me European. Today I can tell you very precisely what is involved. In America, it did not take me long to realize that my relationship to space and history was different. To my mind, living in Europe presupposes the

ideas of sedimentation and stratification. You can have the same attitude in an old country like China. Today, in order to progress, I think it's important to understand what "makes" us in the history of the world, in public and in private terms. And what do we make of it all? The question is a complex one. I do not deny it. The historian Marc Bloch used to say that if you treat your own history with disdain, you risk making the same mistakes again and again. I know that current events show the opposite every day but I still think it's an important idea. This explains my interest in what precedes us, in strata. My work is coring the depths of the world. I often see myself as something of a journalist, historian, geographer, sociologist, and a whole list of other professions that I practice as an amateur. And then, spending time with archaeologists has taught me that you have to destroy the first stratum to get to the next. Obviously, if you were mistaken with your initial analysis, there's no turning back. To arrive at an overall comprehension, you must have the ability and knowledge to produce the right semantic connections at every step in very complex processes. Our relationship to the world works in the same vein.

Do you then consider that the role of the artist is to reveal this complexity?

In a way, yes. My work may be regarded as an attempt to "make sense."

But you seem to be more involved in questioning than in looking for answers.

Only politicians have answers. If I had absolute certitudes I wouldn't be continually trying to reach an horizon that is constantly receding before me. I posit this state of uncertainty as the basis of my work. My approach is embedded in experimentation, and even beyond, since I am also greatly interested in the multitude of ways of formulating questions. I need to be on the knife's edge and to put myself in jeopardy. Many times I have come to places I didn't know, and without any prior information. The exhibition dates were already set, and the challenge for me was to make in a day or two something resembling a scenario from which I could draw the true substance of this new territory of thought. This sense of jeopardy is something I often have on my mind. I recall a picture of Matisse when he was getting old – I don't remember whether it was in a film or in photos; he was painting the ceiling of the Chapelle de Vence with his brush attached to the end of a stick. The stick was the extension of his gesture and, paradoxically, from this uncertainty arose the proper distance.

Are you then seeking your own limits?

More like the limits of things, things that elude me, the in-between. I love pentimenti, for instance. There is something very raw and powerful in them that comes from their depths, something that imposed itself but that subsequent reasoning refuted.

I like this idea of a borderline where things slip toward something else. I don't believe that we can ever really say once and for all that this is this or that. It's like some of Escher's pictures or Mandelbrot's fractals that suddenly open onto something else in an endless renewal. I don't mean to say that one can never decide, sometimes we are even obliged to do so. But personally even as I am formulating my response I know that it can only be relative because everything moves, the viewer and the viewed. There is always a dimension of uncertainty.

Working on the same principle and with the same fear of error, I do my utmost to relate scattered elements which seem, a priori, to have no intrinsic relationship. I am perfectly aware that this can only be regarded as one possible proposal, yet I try nevertheless, to renew

– for the people who are there – connections which they seldom if ever pay any attention to. I am trying, to borrow Paul Klee's terms, "to make the invisible visible," or to put it in other words, to renew the visible and give the invisible meaning.

Is this revealing dimension in some way related to your own background?

I've always been deeply interested in cartography and more especially in toponymy. At one time, I even thought of working in the field. I love the way certain names can be so telling, the way they reveal something about the place. We always draw on our childhood for inspiration, and my interest in place-names goes back to the time when I first read my father's land register which contained some extraordinary names like "Moonfly," "Scarcely he lies," "Listen if it rains," or yet again "Wolf-dines." My great grandmother told me, when she was nearly a hundred, that she herself had been told in her childhood that a wolf had eaten a sheep on that piece of land.

Did nature impose itself "naturally" as a theme in your work?

Yes, without any difficulty. In fact, I think it never really came up as a question. But if it is true that I work in and on nature, it is actually just a pretext: what really interests me is the relationship to man. Michel Guérin speaks of the tree as a human metaphor in my work. Perhaps it was my difficulty in taking pictures of people that led me to take this roundabout path through nature.

I was born on a farm. My father was an agronomist and my mother knew as much about plants as he did; I want to speak of their names and their uses. I was brought up "knee-deep" in dictionaries. It was only natural for me to draw inspiration from all this. When I grew up, I studied art and then instead of taking over the very prosperous company to which I was the only heir, I threw myself into a world which I knew absolutely nothing about. But wasn't I doing the same thing? Transgression, transmission: you can't get away from your own history.

What is your relationship today to nature and to the environment? In his recent book L'Homme dans le paysage, Alain Corbin writes that our "appreciation of space is totally dependant on how we move through it. Our sensorial grasp of space hinges on the speed of travel […] We don't see the same landscape when we walk, drive or fly."

I agree wholeheartedly. As a history of photography professor, I have always been impressed when studying early American photography to see the photographs taken during the construction of the railway. Timothy O'Sullivan, Carleton Watkins, William Henry Jackson and others represented these virgin lands in the West as they were discovering them on foot, in carts or perched on one of the cars of the railroad under construction. Our approach today is so different. We drive through them or fly over them. The physical relationship to these places is gone. In his 1930s novel "Gold", Blaise Cendrars recounts the story of John Sutter – who owned nearly all of California! He writes about how white citizens who passed the "square hours" test could become landowners: they had to cover, by foot, the square of land they wanted to own in a given time; a few minutes late and they could never own land again. To succeed, the person had to have a perfect knowledge of his own physical and mental capacities and be able to adjust his ambitions to the scope of his abilities.

This story left a strong impression on me. In all of the works I made in Canada, I deliberately pushed myself to the limits of my physical strength. I then related this experience

in the form of a bar codes of sorts: an anonymous, formatted signature. For instance LA RIVIÈRE NOIRE 170BO10035EP1350108H1990, specifies the size and species of the wood, the maximum length of the pieces used, the maximum weight carried, the date. Everything is there, including the reference to eight hours of work, or the typical work shift.

La Rivière noire is a work on a human scale but also on the subject of the human scale, isn't it?

Indeed. It is also about the confrontation between man and his scale, about man's value scale, about the vanity of some of man's "civilizing" acts, 3 and the poetry of place. The poetic act involves displacement. I have often said that poetry is the same thing, differently.

Insofar as we are always moving from one place to another and shifting perspectives, could you tell us something about your difficulty in finding the right point of view?

Yes, the difficulty in my work consists in formulating the proper distance. Photography is a medium that involves making choices all the time: inside or outside the frame, the right amount of light (But what does that mean? Hiroshi Sugimoto wouldn't contradict me in this respect), shot speed, depth of field… All these choices determine whether or not the photographed subject is recognizable. Don't forget that my sculptures are made for the eye of my camera and what it perceives. In addition to the above-mentioned elements, there is also the discrepancy produced by the optical perspective. 4 Consequently, one would have to speak of complexity, a valued ingredient these days. When you are used to moving from place to place, and being with people from different cultures and different languages, you can gauge the relativity of things. Even in the exact sciences, no one would dare talk of absolute values anymore. Einstein said that scientific truths last only twenty years. Before asserting that something is true, you have to define that famous modus operandi. And in this respect, how could we not acknowledge our debt to Pierre Bourdieu, who has left us too soon. Singlehandedly, he opened up broad avenues to us.

How did this project on the banks of the Charente come into being? We asked you to think about a work related to this river that connects our three cities – Cognac, Saintes and Rochefort. We wanted to know how a contemporary artist would see and take hold of these landscapes that have been depicted so often since the nineteenth century. Right away, you led us toward Courbet. Why?

I'm not sure who led whom. I listened, as I always do in my projects, to what people had to say first. Gustave Courbet is a painter who I respect a lot, and whose work is nearly photographic at times. He caused a fracture in art history. He broke with the traditions of war painting, historical painting or mythological painting to depict ordinary daily life. Manet was to paint a bunch of asparagus; by 1849, Courbet had already painted a burial in the country. What a scandal it caused! It's this relationship to what's vulgar, in the Latin sense of the common people, that I love. No more famous people, nymphs or devils, simply gens de peu, or "people with little" as Pierre Sansot put it so well. By having the people of Ornans pose for him, Courbet expressed our condition. Each person can recognize his or her neighbor. And, whether we like it or not, the great majority of the population comes from there. Certain people tend to forget this.You seem to like the way in which Courbet's work "smells of sweat," so to speak, yet this is not the case for your work.

It is and it isn't. If the use of the photographic tool inevitably creates distance, I have nearly always worked on places without importance, never named because they are perhaps unnameable, "places with little" that nobody pays any attention to. And, believe me, these places are anything but sanitized.

What I also like about Courbet is the provocative, scandalous side of his personality. I've always tried to avoid being pigeonholed. People have always had difficulty classifying me: photographer, sculptor, sculptor for photography, photographer using his lab to fashion light as he would fashion earth… I like this uncertain space. I have refused established rules and orthodoxy. But I also know the price.

What's more, Courbet had a very strong relationship with the material of painting; the same as he had with nature, with all things, in fact, with life itself. He was a great hunter, which involves knowing a great deal about animals. This is probably my only point of contention with him, but I don't hold it against him because the cultural context was so different then. Anyway, it is this confrontation with the material – be it pictorial or vegetal – in the forest, which I feel very close to. If the photographic act could be described as conceptual – since you always have to imagine what happens without being able to check it during the picture taking (the photographer sees the result of his multiple choices afterwards) – sculpture gives me this intense relationship with material that can be checked as it's happening. I sometimes speak of a combat because the materials I use rarely go in the sense I have imagined. There are always things that resist and that take the artist somewhere else, creating the "in-between" dimension that I love.

And then there are Courbet's framings – some are sumptuous. My fascination with this certainly comes from my long practice of drawing. In La Grande Porte project, not far from Port-Berteau where Courbet worked with Corot and Auguin, I'll be installing a series of car doors in two rows, one behind another in either direction, and at different heights. They will evoke the kind of traveling that we practice today, and which is very different from the way Courbet got around. 5 Since these doors are frames in themselves, some elements of the landscape will be inside them, others will be outside. The windows rolled down or up to different heights will all coincide perfectly with the bank on the other side of the river. I'll be applying very thin layers of transparent color onto the glass, that will pick up the color of the water at a certain time of the day.

A color photographic panorama in several pictures edge to edge will recreate this stained-glass composition (framings within framings) – my cherished hope being that these screens of color will forget the dividing line and merge into the real colors of the river itself. I know that the viewer will have to wait, perhaps for a long time, attentive to the slowly changing light.

So you are returning to the use of color?

Yes. I dropped color and have been working in black and white for a good fifteen years. I felt frustrated at seeing my pictures as they were processed by Paris' industrial labs and not being able to do anything about them. So I decided in 1987 to work in black and white. To be able to sculpt in light the promises of my negatives seemed absolutely fundamental to me. Now I've decided to adapt my response to the content of the project, and to use black and white or color accordingly.

In the case of La Grande Porte, color imposed itself. All these painters came here and celebrated the marvellous quality of light. Why shouldn't I? We are accustomed to hearing people speak about the skies of Ile de Ré or on the coast; that's because Saintonge is a country of neither shadow nor stark light like in the South. Everything here is in nuances. And the people who live here are the same. You have to slow down and take your time to get to know

them, but it's worth it. I'd very much like this new sculpture to speak of this, of this time of waiting for the time when the right light comes. The Charente river is like that. It winds and hugs the meadows with its curves. Its level descends no more than five meters from Saintes to its mouth forty kilometers downriver. That's what makes it magnificent. Why then would you have me speak of something else?

You make a lot of preliminary sketches. What is the role of drawing in your work?

It's something I talk about too seldom, and yet it's surely what I like the most. The drawing and design stage is when everything is possible, everything's conceivable. It's a time of great joy. A few years ago, I exhibited a preliminary drawing alongside my black-and-white photos of sculptures; the drawing was on the same scale as the photos. It harked back to the space of the imaginary before the actual confrontation with the materials of the sculpture, with the site, with the weather (by definition unmanageable), and with the project itself that escapes your control as the days go by. The main aim of this "design" was to permit the in-between. I think that with certitudes no longer acceptable on any level, the figure of the hyphen may very well become the most significant sign of our relationship to the world.

As in Kaissariani on the back cover of the book?

For example.

Translated by Gila Walker, New-York