“An Aesthetics of Displacement”

Landscapes

François Méchain’s Arcadia conforms to the realistic image that the Ancient Greeks had of it as “a poor, bare, rocky, chilly country, devoid of all the amenities of life,” to borrow Panofsky’s terms.1 That was before Virgil recast it as an idyllic setting, with the success that we know in subsequent elegiac literature and in painting.

In 1991, the artist installed his ephemeral sculpture Arkadia in the Oros mountains in the center of Peloponnesus. The panoramic view of the site shows a vast hilly expanse with small round clusters of vegetation as the only plant-life covering the remains of former terraces. The sculpture, which picks up and echoes these shapes through magnification, consists of an almond tree, a holm oak and limestones taken from the broken terraces – elements that the artist considers emblematic of Greece. As is often the case in François Méchain’s work, the genius loci manifests itself in the form of a metonymic condensation of sorts, wherein ordinarily dispersed materials are compressed into a compact arrangement. Their choice here was dictated by a desire to place areas of strongly contrasting tones in contiguity – contrasts heightened in the printing, and which accentuate the abstract geometric quality of the picture.

An anamorphic device makes the very elongated oval shape (708 x 275 x 255 inches) look like an almost perfect circle : a fictive projection on the ground of the holm oak sphere adjoining it. The sculpture was organized as a function of a single point of view and the work’s existence wholly hinges upon photography. The picture was taken in the morning light on a clear day so that, in a reversal of tones, the scattering of clouds in the sky echoes the dark scrubs interspersed here and there over the white rock. The focal length pushes back the tight, dense holm oak sphere with its sharp outline to make it appear closer to the light and the frothy-looking almond tree sphere.

After the conception of the sculpture in view of the photograph comes the work on the negative which accentuates the sculptural dimension. The bond between photography and sculpture in contemporary art has been underscored many times, and François Soulages notes that “present-day photography confronts all the modalities of sculpture.” 2 As for François Méchain, in his notes for Arkadia, he describes the treatment of the negative as the “sculpture’s second act (in the lab).”

The memory of landscape painting, which is never far from the artist’s mind, is subjacent (no doubt unbeknown to the beholder) in the search for a balance between areas. The visual analogy between the sky in the upper part of the picture and the bare ground at the bottom, reminded him of a painting by Lorrain, Eliezer and Rebecca (in the Doria-Pamphili Gallery) in which the empty sky cuts across an area equivalent to that of the mass of vegetation.

In accompaniment to the work, François Méchain composed a sort of poem, 3 strictly ostensive and utterly absorbed in recording the moment, but which he endows – by the style of the characters and the block presentation of the text in a vertical rectangle – with the durable aspect of ancient epigraphs, perhaps in a distance echo to the inscriptions found on certain Arcadian tombstones.

Out of all François Méchain’s photographs, Kaissariani (1993) is the one that most spontaneously conjures up the word “landscape.” To be sure, many other works by the artist

show "a stretch of land that the eye can comprehend in a single view," which is how landscape is defined in most dictionaries, but either the sculpture totally dominates its natural surroundings or else the photographic composition converges toward the sculpture. In Kaissariani, even though the sculpture is strongly present, it leads the eye past the hills into the distance. In sum, we have here a "landscape with sculpture," to use the accepted term for this type of figure. And it is clearly no accident that this work, more than any other, points in the direction of painting.

Historians may not all agree on exactly when landscape made its appearance in Western civilization, but no one challenges what Anne Cauquelin has termed its "invention." 4 There is no such thing as a "natural" landscape – that is to say, landscape is not a substance. To turn a land into a landscape requires a number of conditions (by which you can recognize a landscape culture according to Augustin Berque) or at least a cultural process (that Alain Roger dubs "artialization"). 5 What is true of history is also true in our experience as individuals. A landscape is a "mental thing." "The landscape thinks about itself through me," Cézanne proclaimed "and I am its consciousness." 6

In his eighteenth-century course on painting, Roger de Piles gives the following instructions: "The sites must be well connected and their shapes clearly disengaged so that viewers can readily judge that there is nothing to hinder movement from one ground to another, even though they can only see a part thereof." 7 The art of smoothly connecting successive planes was held in high esteem (at least until Cézanne) in painting as in landscaping, for which, according to René-Louis de Girardin, "the principle is that everything be together and that everything be smoothly connected." 8 The Kaissariani photograph possesses this legato quality to the highest pitch. And it plays brilliantly on the atmospheric perspective, even if its Lorrain-style hazy background is mainly the result of pollution around Athens.

Kaissariani is located on the slopes of Mount Hymettus. Among the natural elements found on the schistose rock are the countless cypresses ("living columns" in the artist's words) that punctuate space all the way to the distant Parthenon, visible on the horizon or masked by smoke. The pines are rarer. The presence of wild aromatic plants inspired the artist to conceive of a "sculpture of odors." With the scrubland plants and a wire fencing support (whose structural analogies he noted in passing), François Méchain built a huge powerful column, nearly ten meters (390 inches) long, which he laid at an oblique angle among the candle-like cypress trees.

Taking the photograph involved certain difficulties since the great depth of field that the photographer sought could only be produced by a lengthy exposure with no foliage movement; while the visibility he wanted could only be obtained in a clear, "washed" atmosphere, and hence on a windy day. In no way concerned with a rigorously faithful rendering of the "real world," which he knows only too well is construed in the photographer's mind, he finally opted to retouch the Parthenon to bring out its shape in the distance.

Whereas with Arkadia, François Méchain seems to want to counter myths and pictorial traditions; with Kaissariani he appears, on the contrary, to subscribe, as in a game, to the rules of "picturesque beauty" which require the presence of "rustic ruins" in the landscape.9 Doubly "rustic," the ephemeral column in Kaissariani seems to render a final ambiguous homage to this picturesque tradition of landscapes with ruins – which had become a commonplace in art.

From Nancy Holt's tondo, shot through the opening of a pipe set in a sand dune; or the homage to Turner in Barbara and Michael Leisgen's photographic pan of the setting sun; or yet again the series of landscapes that Ian Hamilton Finlay had Corot, Gaspard Dughet, Salvatore Rosa or Le Guerchin "sign," many photographic works have celebrated an absent

painting, while at the same time, sealing its disappearance without an iota of nostalgic pictorialism. The Unpainted Landscape was the telling title of an exhibition in the eighties.10

La Rivière noire, made two years later (1991), stands in opposition to Kaissariani by the way in which the smooth connection between successive planes has been brutally dropped in favor of an abrupt relationship between foreground and background alone. The sculpture consists of wood gathered in the solitude of the Laurentides forest and heaped into a pile in such a way that when seen from a specific viewpoint, its contour follows the crestline of the mountain behind it. La Rivière noire is thence a masked landscape.

Yet what is left of the landscape, namely the horizon (and "real" horizons seldom coincide with the abstract horizons of linear perspective), is underlined by the sculpture and remains the essential constituent element of the picture. "The landscape is where the sky and the earth meet," declares Michel Corajoud 11 – a claim that Hamish Fulton's series of skylines seems to substantiate. La Rivière noire calls to mind Montagne Sainte-Victoire and the way in which Cézanne makes the pine branches – which reenter the frame of the painting from the sides – rhyme with the profile of the mountain on the horizon, while he establishes a pictorial coalescence between near and far by bringing the distant planes to the surface.

Only one specific framing of the scene could yield the homothetic view of the two outlines in La Rivière noire, and this framing cuts off the sides of the sculpture. In this veritable meditation on photography's power of illusion, Méchain pursues a much earlier line of experimentation: in one of his Equivalences sequences (dated 1982), the viewer gradually discovers that a snow-covered mountain is in fact a crumpled piece of paper on a table mimicking the shape of a distant mountain.

Figuring on the photographic diptych of La Rivière noire is the name of the place that gives the work its title. To François Méchain, the place-name is the concentrated memory of the place, and his work involves bringing to light the invisible past that it harbors. Many names in Quebec's French typonomy have even darker connotations than La Rivière noire (The Dark River): Misfortune Lake, Poverty River, Lake of Nastiness or Carnage Lake, 12 among others, bear witness to the sense of terror that this wild and unpredictable nature inspired for many years. The story of how these "awful lands" were turned into landscapes has been told often enough by others. And if the category of the picturesque was evoked in speaking about Kaissariani, the La Rivière noire diptych – with its association of mountain and forest themes – pertains rather to the category of the sublime to which its two topoi are ordinarily related.

The measure of man

The enigmatic line of numbers and letters on the lower right of La Rivière noire can be deciphered as follows: the artist's height (and stature), the length and maximum diameter of the birch trunks, the length and maximum diameter of the spruce trunks, the time it took to make the work, and the date. La Rivière noire, another Canadian work, presents a similar line indicating the artist's height (170 cm); BO for birch wood: its maximum length (100 cm) and its maximum diameter (35 cm); EPI for spruce wood: its maximum length (350 cm) and its maximum diameter (10 cm); the time it took to make the work (8H); and the date (1990). The inscription on Chemin au Porc-épic can be read in the same way. In the latter work, the artist replanted fifty partially bare dead trees in a formation whose density verges on the absurd: one last symbolic square of the "standing dead."

There is a photograph by Brancusi in which, by the agency of superimposition, a portrait of the artist sitting in his studio is embedded in the ghostly figure of a seemingly dead tree stump that began to bud just as the artist was recovering from an illness. "Here the photo

is a visual metaphor," observes Friedrich Teja Bach, "a parable of the kinship between man and nature, and of their shared vitality." 13 The connection between sculpture and photography meets up here with the relationship that links the image of the body and the image of nature, in a way that is significant when we consider that Brancusi is a tutelary figure for François Méchain.

In François Méchain's output, the relationship to his body, and hence to his identity, is a recurrent albeit discreet theme insofar as it is treated without pathos, and in a paradoxically disembodied way. "The imaginary horizon that informs any photographic undertaking is the desire to produce a picture of the world in which one's own presence is visible," states Serge Tisseron, 14 who goes on to explain that whereas this presence may take the form of a reflection or a cast shadow, it is usually evinced by a "style" which is actually nothing other than the manifestation by the photographer of his/her active participation in the very thing he/she is photographing. For Penone (Ma hauteur, la longueur de mes bras, mon épaisseur dans un ruisseau), for Charles Simonds (Birth), for Ana Mendieta (the Silueta series), and for many others, it is the imprint of the body that seals the bond with nature. Even for the artist walkers who banished nearly all human figures from their pictures, the body was still the instrument of measure of the earth (and Richard Long's sleeping marks bore witness to his recent passage).

It is mainly in François Méchain's in situ works in the great expanses of Canada that he introduces the coded notation recording the measures of his body along with quantitative data about the effort accomplished, its duration and date. There, confronted by the immensity of the forest, he seems to have felt the need to situate himself, get his bearings and test the bounds of his physical possibilities. This code may not have the ironic or violent thrust of, say, Jean-Paul Albinet or Enrique L. Cabro's superimposition of bar codes on nature, but it nonetheless borrows the aspect of callous itemization that characterizes commodity society. Like the bar code, it is comprehensible only if you have the key, but you can do without deciphering it. In the data that is provided the body is basically perceived as a tool and these notations bring something quite new to the artistic context discussed above – namely, the idea of work. Instead of a fusional relationship with nature or the romantic dereliction that is often its counterpart, we have here just the opposite: man, in his proper place and on his own scale, obstinately transports, piles and builds. Patient and thrifty, he counts and records every effort he makes. At the heart of the artistic gesture, perhaps he remembers ancient gestures, acts that were once useful, even necessary, for survival.

At a recent exhibition, François Méchain displayed two altogether unusual pieces in his body of work. They were set on the floor and inclined against the wall in a way that underscored the materiality of their rigid backing. What was depicted in these photographic objects was (sculpture within sculpture) the oversized image of a woodchopper's wedge looking like an upside-down megalith, standing out, without any context whatsoever, against the white ground. Such tools used to be handed on from generation to generation, and those that the artist uses as models come from his family. Blown-up as they are, they extol an essentially physical relationship to nature, and more particularly to the tree – a nearly constant presence in his work. This age-old relationship is distanced, contemplated and theorized by the displacement from the rural world to the field of art, and the concomitant shift from the brutal use of a functional object (of which it bears the profound marks) to the wholly intellective gratuitousness of the photographic act.

Sometimes, however, the confrontation between the human body and the great expanse takes a more dramatic turn. This was the case for Rocky Mountains, an installation conceived in 1991, when he was resident artist at the Banff Art Centre, but which was never completed. The first element of the work was a huge photograph of the Canadian forest, framed so as to hide the skyline and to create a continuous dark pattern covering three panels,

curved in such a way as to remotely suggest the curve of the earth. Four meters below this arc, a photograph was to be set on the ground showing three constructions with the appearance of compact logs, but actually made out of thousands of tiny twigs in the form of three human figures the size of the human body: one lying with arms parallel to the body, another lying with arms outstretched, and the third sitting. The sculptures roughly matched the shape of the silhouettes in the manner of a stereometric diagram. François Méchain, who recounts his distress in face of the gigantic, unmovable trunks covering the ground as far as the eye could see, decided to work with the smallest unit of wood available on the site and thence come back down to the scale of his own body. The inextricable network of twigs were suggested to him by his chance discovery of a picture of Raimondo de Sangro's anatomical mommies (now on view in the Sanseverro chapel in Naples): real human corpses treated and dried out in such a way that the entire network of veins could be seen. Whether this strongly organic yet distanced allusion is perceptible to the viewer or not, the telling opposition between the fragile, transparent and discreetly anthropomorphic figures and the overwhelming dome of tight foliage that dominates them remains eloquent. Here the code accompanying the image provided all of the artist's personal characteristics, as if, far again from any fusional aspirations, he had felt the urgent need in face of nature's violent lack of measure to ensure his own identity in clear-cut figures. As to the ineluctable slippage that leads from the living, active body standing in the landscape, to the dead body returning to this same nature from which it will soon be indistinguishable, this will be one of the themes of L'Arbre de Cantobre, in which the body comes back in an ultimate unrecognizable form: not figures or images, but material.

Here and there: the Viking connection

Ever since artists left their studios some thirty years ago (and not only those who were interested in "nature") displacement has been one of the main characteristics of a whole stratum of art. Walks, hikes, road-movies, travel in all forms – real or imaginary – have become the matrices of artworks. From Smithson's physical and mental back-and-forth movement between "site" and "nonsite," and the sometimes odd imbrication of "nonsites," which opened new horizons: to Paul Armand Gette's Études de lieux restreints, without forgetting Oppenheim's work on space and time, Fulton's step counts, and Long's wind lines, there has been an endless variety of combinations of photographs, texts, samples, material, aerial views, traces and diverse documents brought back into the art scene and established as works of art. Maps as instruments of knowledge, supports for the imagination and plastic objects have assumed ever growing importance (and like Long and Smithson, Méchain is a great map enthusiast). Artists have become nomads in their search for places to install their works, but also, in a strange twist of events, by the game of commissions. To all this, hastily sketched here, François Méchain is a lucid heir. He has brought to this legacy his own reading of movement and migration, of passing borders and bracketing together distant sites; and in his reading, history is as important as geography, geology or botany. Every territory is seen as the cradle of a human adventure, culture as indissociable from nature, and thoughts on traveling and traveling in thoughts answer each other (Méchain likes quoting Fernando Pessoa's remark: "travel doesn't exist, only the traveler").

The simple coincidence of two commissions, one from Odense's photography museum, the other from Bailleul in Normandy, quickly turned out to be an hasard objectif (objective chance). Odense, the chief city on Fyn Island in the Danish archipelago, is not far from the Hindsholm peninsula that the artist explored in 1994 when he observed the omnipresence of the sea and the great number of vestiges of the Viking civilization. Bailleul,

a Renaissance château set in a park of very tall trees, is the property of a family linked by its origins to the history of Norman migrations. Invited to intervene in the park, François Méchain conceived of a work that remained on view throughout the summer season and was followed by a photographic triptych exhibited in a gallery. As for the Danish project, the artist finally chose the site of Mølleskov, on the Hindsholm peninsula, to install a sculpture of branches that could be reached only by a footpath leading to the shore and thus remained confidential; the ephemeral sculpture being made in view of the photograph alone.

The transient character of the two works is thus embedded in different modes of reception. Furthermore, the “Viking connection,” an imaginary thread drawn by the artist between the two sites, and hence between the two works, is basically a working concept. Fundamental to understanding the genesis of the works, it is not visible in their finalized form: each of the photographic triptychs can be viewed in an autonomous manner. The twelve-foot-long Mølleskov sculpture was installed near the shore in a natural depression that reminded the artist of the shape of a Viking vessel whose vestiges could be seen nearby. Using, as usual, the materials offered by the site, he planted branches in the ground to suggest the general shape of a beached hull, seemingly stranded in the sand, askew, very much open to the sky, a barcaccia with earth seeping in from all sides, its bottom covered in beech leaves.

The photograph shows the upper part of the spiky wall along the skyline, in a framing that recalls the one he used a year earlier in Calais for Machine végétale I (1993) – a transparent construction in elder wood whose volutes spiraled out against the sky over the sea. The work on the negative (“the sculpture in the dark room”) brought out the contrast between the distant brightness and the shadowy area where the in situ sculpture seems to barely emerge from the refuse of the past.

In bracketing the two sites together, the artist drew up a list of common features: the soil (clayey), the tree species (oak and beech), the windswept atmosphere, and the traditional architecture (half-timbering and thatched roofs). Recreated Viking houses, like the Fyrkat house in Denmark, are indeed reminiscent of Norman houses. And we know that the roofs of early Nordic churches, particularly in Norway, were built in the form of upside-down hulls.

So if the seascape in Denmark could conjure up the boat theme with its open form – seabound and naturally adventurous – the Bailleul park lawn, on the contrary, evoked the theme of the house in the symbolic schematic shape of three plain cabins. The stocky, earthbound huts are closed in two ways: first they have neither door nor window; and second, the material leaves no empty space inside. Impenetrable and solid as they may be, they nonetheless look light and frail, like toys abandoned beneath the huge trees. This is because of their small size and the fact that two of them are made out of fragile material: dried grass for one, a see-through network of branches for the other. The third hut was initially supposed to be in compost, materializing thereby the total memory of the site, but the idea had to be dropped because it probably would not have withstood a season of frequent storms. The artist finally opted for logs, whose growth rings could fulfill the same memorial function. The cabins were positioned in an oblique line on the path proposed to the visitors, leading around the tree groves to the château and chapel. The line is on a north-east axis in a coded reference to the geographical position of Mølleskov.

In addition to the allusion to childhood, in the small size of the cabins and the concern with working on a human scale that it reflects (and which, as we have seen, is a constant in François Méchain’s œuvre), their size can also be explained by the artist’s conscious desire not to place artifacts in a relationship of rivalry with the site’s natural elements. Observed in different seasons, the site here is
characterized by the tremendous verticality of the trees in winter and the powerful luxuriance of the plantlife in summer. With the great enterprises of American Land Art now apparently a

thing of the past, artists who work in natural settings know how crucial the relationship is between the scale of the surrounding landscape and the work.

The cabin is also the earthbound homologue of the nef 15 in the sense that it is a sort of "temple of nature" offering a privileged mode of access to the latter, as Gilles Tiberghien has remarked. Extending, in his turn, the game of association to which the artist invites us, Tiberghien notes, "an upside-down relationship between the roof and the hull, all the more telling when you consider that cabaner [to cabin] according to the Robert dictionary means both 'to live in a cabin' (1605) and also 'to capsize' (1783), and hence to turn upside down, as in cabaner un navire [to cabin a ship] or to overturn a ship with its keel in the air." 16

For François Méchain, nothing in the making of his works is gratuitous. This does not mean that he is unreceptive to interesting accidents, but nothing is there for purely aesthetic reasons, nothing for sheer effect. All of the components are articulated according to a strict semantic construction, often of great complexity. Yet this discursive rigor is something the artist imposes upon nobody but himself. It serves at once as a guiding thread and a safeguard to him. Thereafter, the plastic object breaks away from it and it need not be integrally understood. The conceptual construction gives way to oblivion and the work gains from this loss.

The two photographic triptychs were made according to the same principle. The sculpture, properly speaking, occupies the central part with either side depicting the immediate environment. This structure plays on contiguity – the views are linked in the manner of a panorama – and on a hierarchization that places the sculpture in the position of the central scene in ancient altarpieces. This hierarchization is more noticeable in the Danish triptych because of the difference in the size of the panels.

The history of photography is always present in François Méchain's mind, and his notes for Bailleul include a view of The Haystack (April 1844) from Henry Fox-Talbot's Pencil of Nature. Remarking on the negative-positive relationship between the hull of the ship and the roof of the house, Hennig Hansen sees in these two triptychs a metaphor for photography itself, and the inception of the work produced a year later in the same place: Double Négatif.

Taking account of photography

Double Négatif: two turfs of grass on wire netting structures above two bare bands on the ground suffice to create the momentary illusion that two strips of lawn have taken off from the ground and wrapped themselves over the branch of a tree. The photographic diptych shows the sculpture from two different profiles, one in positive and one in negative. In the latter, the pared off patches on the ground look like shadows cast by the bright strips overhanging the low branch. The pun in the title is a somewhat ironical reference to one of the key works in American Land Art.

To François Méchain (picking up in his own way Ansel Adams' image of the negative as a score and the print as its execution), "a negative is a promise." This is something that he makes visible twice (the second in L'Arbre de Cantobre, in 1998). Of course, we are no longer actually dealing here with negatives since these are prints on paper and so they too are interpretations; and, if François Méchain is surely not the first artist to display negatives, the monumental proportions that he gives them are not a matter of indifference. What is magnified here is the inmost, secretest part of the photographic operation, and the one most peculiar to it. About the negative, Régis Durand states that "the vision it yields in reversed tones […] works to create a genuinely fantastic photographic realm and an utterly original photographic material." 17 There is, though, something else at work here, beyond the element

of visual fantasy (enchanting in Double Négatif, dark and disquieting in L'Arbre de Cantobre) and that something has to do with reawakening the mystery of the first appearance of an image, admittedly sought by man, but directly produced not by him but by the agency of light and the body intercepting it. "Out of all the profane arts, photography is the one that, by its relationship to light and transfiguration, stands closest to a sacred art," writes Serge Tisseron. 18

It is this dimension that is paradoxically brought to the fore by the most objective approaches which, returning to the very source of the phenomenon of light impression, are founded – in Rosalind Krauss' wake – on the indexical character of photography, on its nature as a "remote imprint." 19 L'Arbre de Cantobre, a complex installation exhibited in "La Vitrine" at the Maison européene de la photographie, bracketed together the photograph, in negative, of the inside of a piece of tree bark developed against a wall, and the primitive wood engraving obtained by rolling ink-covered sections of the trunk over paper. That is to say, a remote print and a direct print. This somewhat unusual "xylography" puts nature to work in the making of its own image, somewhat in the manner of Penone's frottages in his
Il verde del bosco series.

L'Arbre de Cantobre can be regarded as a summa inasmuch as the installation, structured in a quasi-didactic fashion, is consecrated at once to celebrating a natural object and to analyzing the means that the artist has at his disposal to transcribe the experience – François Méchain would no doubt say "exercise" – of this object. In this respect, his stance is similar to Francis Ponge (and Méchain is an avid Ponge reader) when he states, "TAKING SIDES WITH THINGS equals TAKING ACCOUNT OF WORDS." 20

While decomposing the tree (that he will, to the contrary, synthesize later by superimposing tree species in the visual sampling of Archéologie, Forêt de Bastard), he pushes the medium itself to its limits. The "squares of uncertainty" on one of the walls, pick up a process that he had explored in 1996 in the Canadian piece Lassalle River, which mainly played on the confusion between the texture of the mud and that of the bark. These textures were reworked on the photograph with a paradoxically derealizing sense of detail. As Serge Tisseron has commented, "even if the photo cannot render the invisible visible, it compels viewers to see what is ordinarily not seen," in the manner of the spectators to the Lumière brother's movies who were "mesmerized at the sight of the leaves moving on a tree." 21 On the other hand, these same textures, blown up again and again in the "squares of uncertainty," not only lose this precision, they gradually give way to the grain of the photograph, ultimately vanishing in the "blow-up effect" dear to Antonioni. It is vain to pursue the object's image within the photograph.

Roland Barthes recalls in La Chambre claire the same frustrating experience with a portrait of his dead mother. The strong connection between photography and death has been emphasized many times. "To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability," Susan Sontag observes, concluding that "all photographs are memento mori." 22 The Arbre de Cantobre installation echoes this by alternating the "squares of uncertainty" with squares of dust taken from an old cemetery, and squares of sawdust (an anthropomorphic view of the tree runs through his entire œuvre).
It has often been mentioned that François Méchain came to in situ sculpture via photography. But before that, he practiced painting. The displacement is at work here from one medium to another. It is also as a painter that he tackles photography, as can be seen in his profound sense of material and his use of large formats. "The material status of photography was often denied it," writes Florence de Mèredieu, "because of its relationship to the immaterial and the spectral." 23 This may explain why it has fiercely asserted its materiality at times, as if to recover the "aura" of which its reproducibility had deprived it right from the start. While some authors, such as Lémagny, have extolled "the conquest of its material by photography,"

others, including Régis Durand, have expressed wariness when it comes to the finely-crafted refinement of beautiful prints. 24 Addressing the topic of photographic material entails then a great many paradoxes. Not the least among them resides in the cleavage historically opposing "pure" photographers and artists who use photography (or in Dominique Baqué's terms, "creative photography" and "plastician photography" 25). A doubtful distinction in its own right, it is made even more problematical by the fact that often the former have been intent on positing the importance of the photographic material, while the latter have been glad to use photography as a simple recording device. More particularly, in the field of in situ interventions in natural settings that interests us here, many artists have opted for a "neutral," that is to say illusionist, photography (no matter how vivid the cibachrome print), in which the picture takes precedence over any medium-specific work and the photographic act remains invisible. In this respect, François Méchain stands apart.

We also know that "plastician photography" tends toward an extension of the print format, in the direction of the "painting-form." 26 In this regard, on the other hand, François Méchain is no exception; indeed, he always scrupulously notes the exact size of the original photographic object in the information accompanying reproductions of his work. But whereas the "painting-form," as Dominique Baqué remarks, usually goes together with the use of color, in Méchain's case the large format has more to do with the bodily practice of studio work: the physical confrontation that he experienced as a painter and that left him with a feeling of nostalgia. One of the reasons why he has been working almost exclusively in black and white since Géographies animales (1985-1986) is his desire to handle even the most manual aspects of the printing phase himself. (The essentially sculptural quality of black and white is, of course, another reason). It is only in his recent works that he has come back to color, or rather that he has left himself the freedom to use color or black and white, depending on the nature of the project.

Seeing through

Pursuing his reflections on the cabin – not only as a shelter and hideout for primitive man as well as for children, but also as a lookout for hunters – the artist built a small house on the Ile du Vert-Galant in Paris in the Fall of 2000. Made in hazel wood, its floor was covered in strong-smelling humus, and it had a single wooden bench for furniture. Its loosely constructed, see-through walls in no way impeded the view of the city from the inside, a view perpetuated by the photograph. A few months later, the latter was displayed at the Maison européene de la photographie in the form of a cut-and-fold, make-it-yourself view. A color photo of the cabin, a frail structure supporting a roof made of leaves, and line diagrams of Parisian monuments completed the installation, which restored the elements of an experience and indicated the lines of its imaginary continuation.

The view through a loose screen recalls an earlier Canadian work, From Toronto to Toronto (1996). Photographing the nearby city from an island nature reserve (where any intervention was prohibited), François Méchain toyed with the focal length to allow a thin screen of twigs to ironically obscure the city's monuments and the symbols of its economic power. Attentive as always to language, he superimposed on the picture two definitions of the word "island." One geographical, the other anatomical, they attest again to the conscious approach to the body that runs through his entire work. "The experience of my flesh as the envelope of my perception," writes Merleau-Ponty, "has taught me that perception is not born just anywhere: it wells up out of the inner recesses of a body." 27

In 1999, in the Gorbitz district of Dresden, François Méchain tackled a city site again but one whose recent destruction had erased any historical stratification in reality as in

memory. The artist used old cobblestones to make a circular border of words – "history," "fragment," "point of view," "identity," "difference," "unknown," and so on – written with no spaces between them. Standing in the middle of the circle, spectators were invited to look through telescopes whose mobility was restricted to a particular view of sections of the circular bed or the surrounding buildings. The different views variously evoked loopholes, peepholes, panoramics and, by the shape of the scene, tondos – in particular a landscape by Freidrich and a veduta by Belloto exhibited at the nearby Gemäldegalerie. They could also call to mind Nancy Holt's locators of Missoula Ranch by the way in which they cut out pieces of landscape and offered selective views in the fabric of reality. (Incidentally, Nancy Holt is the only Land Art figure who came to in situ installations via photography as Méchain did.) But there is a significant difference. In Méchain's work, the "seeing through" functions on several levels, at once physical and symbolic, and proceeds not so much from the contemplative experience as from a fragmentation, already indicated in the text of the circular bed which brutally recalls the brutality of history. This was forcefully brought home by the installation at the French Institute in Dresden where photographs of a splintered reality, broken up by the telescopic views, were scattered among pieces of the Frauenkirche destroyed in the 1945 bombing.

It is interesting to note that the Dresden installation reverses, to a certain extent, the relationship between language and sight manifested in the work shown in La Courneuve and Saint-Brieuc. In the latter, the surroundings were seen through an openwork sculpture whose holes reproduced two texts: one by da Vinci celebrating sight which provides access to the beauty of the world, and acclaiming the painter's freedom, and the other by Rousseau evoking the solitude of a secret garden. These texts were, by the way, scarcely legible, but then so are the manifold implicit determinations and diffuse cultural patterns that forge our grasp of the world and which can suddenly become clear if the eye focuses on the plane which is theirs.

In Paris, from the pretend refuge of a see-through cabin, we could play the part of country folk and contemplate the city. In La Grande Porte, we will be invited instead to enact the role of city-dwellers who no longer see nature, save perhaps through the window of a car. A series of doors with translucent blue windows will form a screen between the river and the spectator. The window area is superimposed exactly over the surface of the river, at least from the specific point of view which the photograph will adopt for the second part of the work. That landscapes can only really be seen through the paintings that "invented" them, will be underscored, as we approach, by the broad strokes of the brush used to apply the coating that turns the panes into stained glass.

This paradoxical pictoriality is in fact a Homage to Gustave Courbet, who lived in the area in 1862 and 1863. Courbet was invited by Étienne Baudry (a shrewd collector and a friend of the critic Castagnary, also from Saintes) to stay at the château de Rochemont in Saintonge near Saintes in the summer of 1862. In December, he moved into the ferry house on the right bank of the Charente before moving in with Laure Borreau, the Dame au chapeau noir, whose beauty seems to have kept him in Saintes at least as much as the "milky blue of the sky that indicates the nearness of the Ocean," which enchanted Castagnary so. 28 We know that Courbet worked outside directly from nature, sometimes in the company of Corot, another guest at Rochemont, and of Auguin, and took these paintings sur le motif "to the point of completion." 29 Port-Berteau has, of course, changed considerably since then – and the huge weeping willows leaning over the water have disappeared. But at least one of Courbet's landscapes shows a place that looks very much like the one where François Méchain will put his installation. If we are to believe accounts of the painter's stay in Saintonge, the most common means of locomotion at the time was by donkey. We also know that Courbet was a big walker (the famous Bonjour Monsieur Courbet of Montpellier is evidence thereof). So we can either cultivate a certain nostalgia for the nineteenth-century traveler's absorption in

nature, or recall that “nearly a century ago, Proust discovered (invented) the landscape from an automobile.” 30

Beyond the anecdote, the introduction of an object as deliberately incongruous as these car doors in a natural setting, more generally points to the history of landscape in painting which originates, in part, in the image of a window opening onto the outside. 31 We know the use that has been made of shooting from inside cars by certain photographers, such as Bernard Plossu, not to mention in the movies. In 1982, François Méchain proposed a series of shots in a sequence entitled Relativité: the pasture seen through the windshield dimmed gradually into blurriness as the eye of the camera focused increasingly on the fly sitting on the pane. We have here another illustration of the constancy of an aesthetics based on discrepancy, the in-between and displacement at work in the diversity of François Méchain’s œuvre.

Never has “nature” been discussed so much and so effusively as now that we know it is in danger. This too is something that preoccupies François Méchain. But he is not naive enough to believe that this mythical object can be grasped otherwise than through the agency of a great number of cultural filters. Whereas the making of the sculpture may very well involve an oceanic feeling and a fusional vertigo – born from the physical experience of and surrender to the evocative power of a place – the photography that prolongs this moment reinstates a separation, an exploration of uncertainty and an awareness of relativity. Far from confirming the commonplace notions of sensory experience, the photographic act bears witness to its precariousness, and feeds back into the sculptural act. The latter is conceived then, less as a matter of fashioning a new object in the world, than as a machine to see this same world. And the lyrical dimension that nonetheless persists in the work is sifted through what the artist calls “the exercise of things.”

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