

Disturbing images

There are too many problems. Everything is difficult in the work of an artist. Unlike the scientist who arranges the world to fit an idea by defining it in a way that corresponds to what science is capable of saying about it, or just about, the artist knows that he is working without this fine web of concepts and definitions that prepares the real to give itself over to being tackled. For an artist, the complexity of the world can never be made to be parenthetical; it is the hand that he has been dealt and he can not turn a blind eye to it without repudiating himself.

François Méchain does not turn aside. He tackles the unjustifiable activity that is art, fully aware of the stakes. In the grand tradition inaugurated with the start of this century, when all categories were tossed pell-mell into the great hotchpotch out of which, one day, a novel language was to emerge, he starts by taking up questions of principle. On principle. For an artist who does not first pose the question of knowing what he is doing when he acts (some say creates), shows nothing more than his own blindness, and this is unimportant, superfluous, and obsolete even before coming into being since in the realm of blindness we are already well endowed. So, undertake what, and how? The terms of the issue are well known. On one side the artist, the I, or perhaps the we, at any rate the side where human thought and activity is affirmed. Man as the measure of all things? Probably. We can't get around it and it is even Man's honor, in the universe, to be a consciousness at work. This is all well and good, but what is to be done with this "being in the world" ? What is to be done with this reflexive capacity when the concepts that we forge of this world err by their very subjectivism, by their very relativity?

The attitude that François Méchain has adopted toward this question is to declare himself present, an active presence, in the relationship with the world that he strives to formulate. And he has makes this presence of a thinking, feeling subject visible through a form of signature: the bar code. This bar code identifies his body characteristics — height, 170, and breadth, 150 — but also, indirectly, his strength as expressed by the maximum weight that he is capable of manipulating.

It could be said that this signature adopts a highly anonymous code, that of objects scanned at the cash register. This is true, of course and we can see in it a hint of a subjectivity that is intended to be less individual than human in general: the measurements of François Méchain, born in 1948, placing himself on the scale of an object or a landscape on this and this day at this and this hour, considering himself, in his activity, as a man among others, a human being confronting nature.

The subjective content of the bar code registers the field of necessities determining the parameters of the work that will be realized, and confers probity upon the artistic act.

It is unlikely that François Méchain would ever resort to the use of powerful bulldozers in producing his work. He does not work in the tradition of artists like Mikel Heizer and Richard Smithson who move mountains. What I term probity qualifies a concern with the measure determined by the human body. It involves a question of scale. François Méchain does not eschew the fact that our technical civilization has equipped itself with powerful instruments; these, after all, are the body's normal instrumental extensions at the end of the 20th century, no more and no less so than the hammer and the saw. His stance should not be regarded as a refusal per se of technical possibilities. On the other hand, behind his discrete attitude there might just be a code of morals, prescribing that the artistic act should maintain its intimacy with the person who acts. This intimacy implies a proportional relationship between the law by which materials abide, and the law of human forces engaged in the operation, and the latter are understood to be part of nature's order. The artist must ensure that the logic of instrumentation does not become the law of the work.

The bar code is thus a generic signature by way of which a dialogue is engaged with the world outside man. From this punctual encounter in time and space, a work is born. The two sides of the event are well known. In our philosophic tradition, one is called "subjective". We can read in it the trace of François M. struggling with stones or branches, with external space and the grey mass of his memory. The other is called "objective". Something is produced by this encounter, a sculpture, for instance, or an installation.

This traditional dichotomy has long proven itself to be reductionistic and bankrupt. As convenient as it might be in terms of discourse, no one ever truly thought that subject and object in art could be sustained and described separately. In fact, all artistic work, insofar as it is aware of its conditions of practice, endeavors to overcome this artificial separation.

Each artist, in his own way, creates a bridge between the banks on either side of this chasm in thought. Each artist, using his own specific technical means, attempts to create a living link between subject and object by addressing a third party: the beholder, the public. He gets around the chasm by inviting a third term to enter into the dance. Aesthetic perception, a third party activity in the adventure of art, actually creates a new category, a synthesis of the elements separated by dualism.

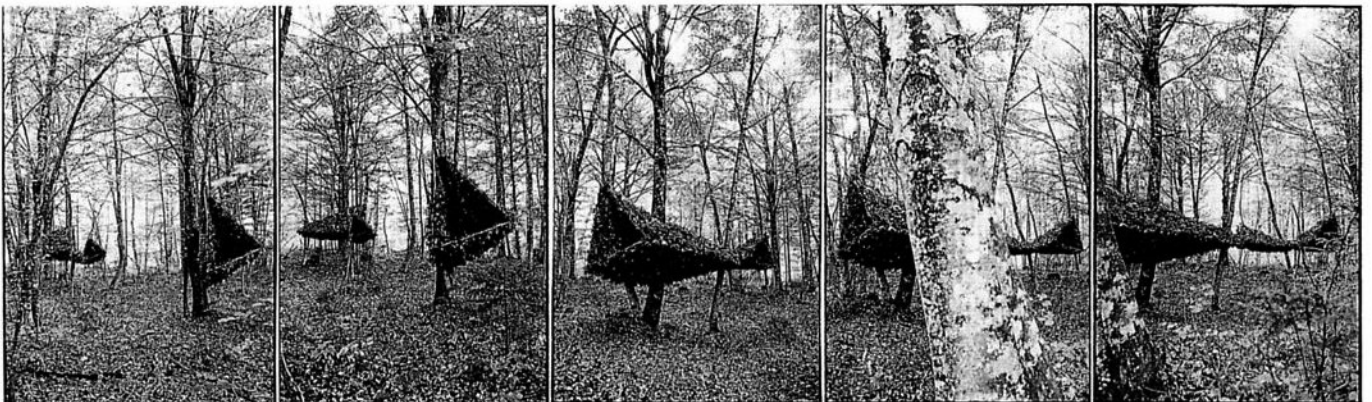
Yet this aesthetic perception is in the realm of the spectator, and, as such, to a great extent it eludes the artist who merely organizes the conditions of possibility. What happens afterwards is outside the artist. He prepares an event but has no real control over it. François Méchain strives to bring an element of response to this dispossession. Not only is he the subject, the producer of an object, but he also gives a reading of it, establishing his own relationship as a spectator to his product. He accomplishes this task through photography.

François Méchain is not a photographer in the first place. He is so afterwards, subsequent to another work. Confronted with one of his vegetation sculptures at Arte Sella, the spectator can take his time and stroll around it, discerning in it three separate volumes, grasping the light shimmering in the leaves or, quite the opposite, the Prägnanz of the structures bearing this ephemeral volume. All this exists for the spectator and has an inalienable right to exist. It is the fate of the work as an object to change over time, all the more so when the material is ephemeral and changing by nature. It is also the fate of aesthetic perception that on a specific day the

spectator will focus on the formal value of the work rather than on its symbolic content or just the opposite. The artist can do no more than acquiesce to this destiny.

François Méchain puts an end to the aimlessness of signification. In a photo that will be the only remaining trace of this ephemeral work, he fixes the viewpoint that he has selected and thereby compels the volumes dispersed in space to become a single whole in the perspective adopted. For amidst the countless ways of looking at an object, there is one that has a particular value to the eye of the artist and that, in contradistinction to the others, is susceptible to objectivization. The picture that the artist takes of his own work is an objective landmark in the stream of aesthetic subjectivities. It is an objectivization to the power of two of the "artist subject". This discovery was made in the twenties by one of the seminal sculptors of our century: Constantin Brancusi. Faced with a picture that his friend Stieglitz had taken of one of his sculptures in New York, Brancusi could assess the gap between what appeared on the photo and what he had meant to show. No 20th-century sculptor can avoid taking an interest in the pho-

Struttura movente



tographic fate of his work. Right away, Brancusi made up his mind that from then on he would photograph his volumes himself. With the help of Man Ray, he produced more than 900 negatives and, far from being a mere record of his work, these pictures are an integral part of it.

The relationship between sculpture and photography in François Méchain's work is particularly complex and can be placed in the context of the reflection inaugurated by Brancusi. The role of the photographic shot is to overdetermine sculptural volume. The latter is first determined by the form given to it and by the materials employed. But, as we have seen, the object perceived remains wholly subject to the modifications imposed by the spectator through viewpoint, framing and lighting. And these characteristics of the work's perception are exactly the same as those that define photography and constitute its field of competence.

We therefore have the right to consider that the dual register of sculpture and photography provides François Méchain with an overriding control of the perception of his work.

His desire to control is manifested in a very interesting manner when he deliberately gives up certain aspects of this control, as when instead of building a sculptural object he employs an element of the landscape, such as a tree in the manner of a natural ready-made. François Méchain probably does not regard nature as spontaneously productive of aesthetically interesting objects. The notion of the ready-made is radically foreign to him. In the *Territoires* series, consecrated to trees in the Brittany countryside, it is not the visual qualities of the tree in itself that interest him but rather the relationship between tree and wind, the tension between force and resistance, or as he himself has written on his photograph, the tension between the branches' *flexibility* and *resistance*. His intention is apparent to the spectator in the sharp, clear rendering of the trunk in its stability which stands out against the out-of-focus quality blurring the outlines of the branches, especially the most slender among them which yield most easily to the wind. It seems, though, that to François Méchain this reading of the work is not sufficiently determined, notably because the tree-sculpture was not the object of any work on his part. This shot therefore is the first degree of artistic intervention, not the second. He then goes on to overdetermine the reading that can be made of this picture by covering it with arrows in black ink that focus perception and determine what is to be seen. This then is the second degree.

Méchain labels this picture a "preparatory photo", which is a surprisingly temporary status to give to this work. To begin with, it is presented in the form of a large size print that has all the appearance of being definitive; it is certainly neither a sketch nor a rough. What's more, the autonomy of the work is all the more apparent when it is considered as a sort of conceptual version of the problematical issue leading to the veritable sculpture or installation, *Territoires II*.

We know the latter through a second picture that shows the same tree but this time its branches are tautly held by a network of cords that, in the reality of the site, thwarts all branch movement.

The variety of reference objects (site-specific sculpture and photography) unleash paradoxes that turn what is motionless on the site, because it is fettered, into the very manifestation of movement on the second picture. By steeping the branch parts most susceptible to movement in blurriness, the first picture gives but a hint of the movement. The cords that hinder branch movement in the *Territoires II* installation become, when seen through the photograph, the visual equivalent of the selfsame movement, its intaglio representation in reality, just as the arrows and the blurriness were movement's visual reality on *Territoires I*.



Territoires/Traouiero I
1992
Bretagne
Photographie noir et blanc
préparatoire, flèches noires
151 x 122 cm.

Thus, by way of the photograph, the real and the virtual swap properties. Photography is always the trace of a "this was", but it is at the same time evidence of the absence of the very reality to which it refers. By playing on two registers, photography and ephemeral site-specific sculpture (which is by its very essence absent to the eye of the picture's beholder), François Méchain explores one of the most disturbing dimensions of the modern issue of image.

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