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FRANÇOIS MÉCHAIN

CREST-LINE : SCULPTURE — PHOTOGRAPHY

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Introduction by Paul Ardenne

**FRANÇOIS MÉCHAIN AT WORK - SCULPTURE FULFILLED
THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY**

François Méchain can be presented in a multiplicity of ways. He is a landscape artist (and in this capacity he has worked in Greece, Canada and many other places), but also a precise creator who on occasion embraces the great pictorial tradition (for example, with the xylographic print of *L'Arbre de Cantobre*). He is a conceptualiser of public spaces (notably in the Gorbitz district of Dresden) and a demanding photographer. But there is a dominant axis that has structured his work from the outset: in the same way that the world according to Mallarmé was destined to end up as a book, the world according to Méchain condenses into the substance of an image (photographic, as it happens).

With Méchain, the photographic image never owes any debt to an apprehension of the instantaneous type. As a trace, a memory, a proof, a sign, it generally represents the artist's completion of a project which in most cases is sculptural. At Kaisariani, near Athens, he constructed an entire "ruin" out of plants, in the form of a column that was reminiscent of the Parthenon, as seen from afar. At a site on the Black River, in Canada, he piled up wood to duplicate the crest of a mountain. In La Réunion, he opened up a passage into a tropical forest. And so on. The images he produces in this type of situation are like property handed in at a left luggage department: they comprise both having and being, time and gesture, an intention and an action – a precious content, and highly indicial, in which can be found the past history of an experience that will perpetuate, and conserve forever, its enfiguring. With Méchain, the density of the photographic image is in no way surprising; it is the result

of an accumulation of the organising actions that anticipated the taking of the photograph – actions that can be guessed at just by looking at the image. *Lassalle River*, for example, shows three tree trunks placed horizontally on the ground. There is nothing in particular to be seen, except, beside each of them, the print left by its mass. And these prints can be clearly made out, for two reasons: because to begin with, Méchain displaced the trunks, in an act that disrupted the natural arrangement; and because the angle at which he positioned the photographic oculus turned this displacement into the very object of the image. The document, in this respect, is also the final moment of the work, when experience chooses to add nothing further, and winds up in the activation of the photographic event. Sculpture is the fulfilment of photography, and vice versa.

François Méchain's every image speaks of an obsession with producing a renewed configuration of a world that has become an instrument as much as a form of material, and an object of work as much as an occasion for getting down to business. Here, the categorical imperative is *transposition*. To move one's own body, as an artist, through places that one is going to espouse, wholly or partly, and to experiment with different scales; but also to move from one artistic medium to another; and, finally, to shift materials around, placing them end to end: wood and paper, word and sky, canvas and vegetable matter – where Méchain's work, beyond its own inherent symbolism and recurrences (the theme of the tree, the skyline in the landscape, natural material as a sign of the world, etc.), does not fail to evoke, in a way that stimulates the spirit, a variety of uncertain places: the place of the work (where exactly is it located?), the place of the body which, as an artist, one leads round a concrete landscape (where am I; and why, how am I to position myself in space?), the place of the image itself (where and how is it to be classified: as a documentary formula, a lyrical exposition, a conceptual construction, or what?). Uncertainty and an absence of definitive answers are the underpinnings of *duration* in Méchain's work. Failing the possibility of seizing what might be yielded up by it as manifest sense, it needs to be looked at, and returned to. As spectators, our eyes plunge into what can be seen as a compilation of *postures* expressing the multiplicity of the human: now a stroller, now an aficionado of chosen places, now a producer of signs, now a designer of qualified viewpoints... and yet the same person throughout.

With Méchain, the order of things is repeatedly being worked over anew. As if to say: I refuse to submit. Nature, as the artist uses it, is remade, reconfigured, sometimes refashioned, up to the infrathin character of the sign. In any case, it is never celebrated for its own sake. This is a poetics of "displacement", as Colette Garraud aptly put it in her reflections on Méchain's work, whose deliberative posture is mandatory, as can be seen in his rejection of the spectacular as a tactic, a calculated practice of figurative discretion. Méchain's photographs of his concrete stagings make a point of never dominating the viewer's perceptions.

They do not generate more noise than necessary; they do not enjoin the image to be silent, but simply to produce a background murmur that will solicit the ear without deafening it.

To rework the "found" world, and to do so in a way that is less polemical than poetical; to position oneself in opposition to the art of the real (and its complicity with the aesthetics of the banal) which has been in fashion since the 1960s... François Méchain is an anti-realist – a transforming artist; a scenographer of the world, as of images; a dealer in the symbolic, between gestures, adjustments, sculpture and photography. Everything, for him, culminates in the image. Is it calm, or placid? In any event, it supervenes after an inner war, and is the archetype of the decision as such, like an attestation to a crisis overcome.

Paul Ardenne, December 2005
Translated from the French by John Doherty