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DAN HOLDSWORTH

Interview by Joël Vacheron

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**COULD YOU TALK ABOUT THE SOURCE
OF YOUR INTEREST IN THE CONDITION
OF THE LANDSCAPE AND ITS EVOLUTION?**

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I was brought up in an area that's really at the edge of England, an industrial area in the North East. There was heavy industry all around – steel works, chemical works – then on the other side, close to where I lived, is a big national park. When I would drive home at night, on one side it would be completely black with stars and then on the other the sky would be lit up. An orange, burning sky from all of the industry, with no possibility to see the stars. My father worked in the chemical industry, in an area of innovation to create new plastics, a highly technical field developing materials for the space industry as well as for photography and electronics. My mum's a gardener and was always really into the environment. My family also always went walking in the national park every weekend. So everything was kind of about landscape, different aspects of it. My parents lived in Germany in the sixties and my mum said that everyone recycled everything. In the UK everyone got out of the habit of recycling anything until fairly recently – the last 10 to 15 years. My mother was always really conscious of this. So I was kind of brought up with a lot of different things; my mum's interest in gardening and the environment and my dad being really into mountains, but also with his background in science, industry and technology. I was really aware of all these issues and contradictions. But I think it's fair to say that my interest in the more formal aspects of landscape grew out of my direct environmental experience of it.

**YOUR AESTHETIC IS VERY ABSTRACT
AND PURE. HOW IMPORTANT IS THE
CONCEPTUAL FRAMING OF YOUR WORK**



Continuous Topography

TO ILLUSTRATING THE COMPLEXITY OF THE ENVIRONMENT?

Yes, the works are generally really reduced to minimal forms, but I'm always trying to generate some provocation in the image that creates some difficulty or tension. Hopefully this then triggers some kind of response in the viewer that makes them feel motivated to explore further. I hope that through the reading of the image people want to read more, not just specifically about what I'm doing but parallel ideas. The science and technology is a part of the field, it's part of the subject, the material itself. In a sense it's just the starting point for the viewers. For example, with the recent mapping works. We're all now quite aware of the technologies that we're using and I guess these kinds of work are making kind of interventions into that technology by giving someone a different starting point to think about the way they interact with the world through them, fracturing it just slightly to give a different perspective.

YOUR WORK SEEMS TO CHART THE TECHNOLOGICAL EVOLUTION, ADAPTING TO THE TOOLS THAT ARE AVAILABLE. HOW DO YOU ENGAGE WITH THESE EVER-EVOLVING TOOLS?

Back in the early nineties I became really aware of what was going on around me in the digital revolution of imaging, especially seeing the work of Andreas Gursky. With the change of environment in the way pictures were being understood, the construction of the image changed. The language of photography started to shift. We were reading the world with the knowledge of the digital. So at that time I was interested in the idea of the digital image as well as the larger scientific and technological effect. But I was still at that time working

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analogue, so I wasn't physically integrating the technology so much. It was more the idea of self-consciously making images in which I developed a language to them that alluded to the digital. Of course now I've moved from analogue to the digital, extending out from what would be called, strictly speaking, "photography" to the extensions of photography dealing with new 3D mapping technologies. So the images have still to do with volume, but in a totally different way – from volumes of photons to volumes of data points, a volume of light to a volume of measurement. Historically, cartographers would extrapolate and use photographs as data. I'm using data to make photographs. So it's a sort of reversal. In 2011 I got involved with a university in Newcastle, Northumbria University. I had been researching these ideas of 3D mapping in the landscape, and I thought I had to get involved with this more seriously. It was a big commitment and involved a shift in my working method from what I'd been doing earlier, as well as a financial commitment and a huge commitment of time. I didn't know exactly where it would go, but I had a strong feeling that it was what I should be doing. And so I started investing a lot of time and energy into working with these new mapping technologies and collaborating with scientists directly to make the work.

EXTRACTION, DATA POINTS – IT SEEMS THAT YOU ARE FORMULATING A NEW VOCABULARY TO TALK ABOUT YOUR WORK, AND IN DOING SO TRYING TO DEFINE A NEW GENRE OF PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION.

Part of the work itself is re-evaluating the history of photography. It's drawing on the history of 19th century mapping photography from the American West. It's this history that in turn connects quite directly to a

group of artists including Lewis Baltz known as the “New Topographics” movement who were themselves very aware of and influenced by early space satellite imaging of the Moon and by the first images of the Earth from space. The interesting thing about 19th century mapping photography was that it was the first of what could be considered as a kind of early virtual mapping of the planet. There’s also an interesting history of photography there in terms of the re-ordering of the chronology of Art history. Areas of the American West were often mapped first by photography rather than painting or drawing, so there was a kind of shift in representation of landscape – a move to a more industrial-technological kind of process, which was being explored by these photographers as kind of art works but also commercially for mapping. So I see the language that I am developing in work as very much within this trajectory.

**LINKING THIS TO YOUR MORE
RECENT WORKS IN THE *CONTINUOUS
TOPOGRAPHY* SERIES (2016),
CAN YOU TAKE THESE AS A CASE
STUDY TO SHOW A BIT OF YOUR PROCESS?**

In the first instance I spent seven weeks in the Alps, focusing around Mont Blanc, looking at a series of glaciers. I spent time exploring the glaciers on foot, and also using drones and helicopters, to survey larger areas. Then, back at the university, we processed these photographs. Say there was one particular glacier that I was interested in, we would for example input 200 images from the survey and then those images would be processed by a piece of software that then calculated the spatial coordinates from the photographs. Then from that we would use another piece of software to create a 3D model. Because the inputs are photographic you can retain the colour value from the original points. So when

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I work with a point cloud of the individual points of data, each retains a colour or tonal value that is representative of the landscape itself. So that particular way of working is in a sense very photographic.

**WHEN YOU SAY PHOTOGRAPHIC,
IT INDICATES THAT FOR YOU IT’S A
PHOTOGRAPH. BUT IT COULD ALSO BE SEEN
AS A 3D RENDERING, OR OTHER FORMAT.
YOU’VE ALSO USED THE TERM “WORLD
PICTURE.” IN DISCUSSING THE NATURE
OF THESE IMAGES THAT EXIST BETWEEN
PHOTOGRAPH AND “WORLD PICTURE,”
HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THIS
ONTOLOGICAL SHIFT?**

I suppose I call the end products photographs because I navigate them that way personally, being trained as a photographer. Also the idea of those images, as models or 2D renders, marks a moment in our geological time, and that geological time is a sort of telescope on our technological time. My hope for these images is that they represent a sort of self-conscious moment about human technology and scientific understanding.

**DOES THE *CONTINUOUS TOPOGRAPHY*
SERIES GIVE INFORMATION ABOUT
CLIMATE CHANGE?**

Well, they’re images of glaciers, which have a sort of opacity. You see through all the layers of the crevasse. You see a sort of fragment. To me they look like this glacial landscape that’s been smashed and is fragmenting on the surface geometry of a digital plane, and is disintegrating. So I think they have this kind of dual language in them referencing science, technology and our current understanding of the impact of human

- 9 nature on both the planets surface as well as its impact on us as human beings. I hope it serves as a starting point and can give a new perspective. It's both about physical change in the landscape and also change in the way we perceive through the technologies we use to look at the world. We become so used to navigating and consuming this stuff that we lose a sense of what it is. I think that's a problem, that technology is designed to be so integrated within us. The images become so integrated that we lose a sense of the significance of it. It becomes too smooth and we just consume it, but we don't really read anything or think about it. That's because of the invisibility of the image. In a way there's so much there that it's invisible. The work I make is hopefully some kind of interruption that jars people a little bit and makes them think about the material that's actually underpinning the stuff we are using and consuming everyday.

PERHAPS THE FORMAL OR AESTHETIC IS LESS IMPORTANT THAN THE NEW FORMS OF ATTENTION THAT IT CAN PROVIDE.

I want my work to be a little bit uncomfortable as well – like something damaged or broken, slightly unnerving. I want my work to be about the politics of perception. If you can't gain access to someone's perception, then the politics are lost. So you have to find a way of getting their attention, some sympathy or empathy, or perhaps make them question another kind of language. It's a very strange time, things are very black and white in a way, people have completely polarised opinions and perceptions of the world. Somehow a lot of this is a battle to gain access to that politics of perception. I get quite a bit of interest from the science community and I find that to be a really healthy thing, rather than an opposition, or being on the opposite side of the fence –



artists versus scientists. There are artists and scientists who are on the same side of the fence. I find that the scientists that I work with have a great deal of empathy for what I'm doing. The conversation can extend out to develop in different parts of our culture hopefully in that way.

AND *SPATIAL OBJECTS* (2015), DO THEY RELATE TO THE SAME TYPES OF QUESTIONS? OR IS IT MORE OF A FORMAL PROJECT?

With the *Spatial Objects* it was more directly aimed at the technologies of perception, looking at the underpinning architectures of what makes up a contemporary mapped 3D model of a landscape. The kind of thing that we're consuming a lot of through applications like GoogleMaps. The idea of *Spatial Objects* plays with the idea of Fontana's *Spatial Concepts*, of breaking the surface. In a way, they are like the broken surface of the image. That was done by going very close to the structure itself and seeing it breakdown into an underpinning geometry. Equally humans are now also spatial objects, gathering data. The image is a spatial data point, a GPS point, that in a way acts like a sort of metaphor for a human and the way that we inhabit digital space. The spatial object is a map that exists in the real and the virtual and that's obviously the new human condition, that we exist in these two parallel places simultaneously.

SO, HOW DOES IT WORK?

I took US geological survey data and my own mapped data from the Alps and transposed the material into a 3D landscape models. I then zoomed into the surface of the model, and in doing so to an extreme proximity, beyond the pixel. What you see in the *Spatial Objects* is the geometry of fragments of 3D pixels. But

Spatial Objects



importunately that fragment of pixel is also a rendering of a mapped GPS point. It's very simple but it seemed to me very uncanny, that you see this kind of infrastructure within the image at that level. All that stuff's invisible but we're just consuming it all the time. It's there in the makeup of the material. I think it's also a problem that we don't think of the digital as a material. We think of it as immaterial, but it's not. It's stuff that has particular specific qualities to it, and it has a real effect.

THAT'S WHAT YOU CALL THE PICTORIAL DNA, WHAT YOU ARE TRYING TO SPOT. PERHAPS YOU CAN TALK A BIT MORE ABOUT THIS IDEA OF MAKING TECHNOLOGY, WHICH REMAINS LARGELY INVISIBLE, VISIBLE, IN RELATION TO SPATIAL OBJECTS.

The idea for this work came from this idea of oxygenating the digital. Why do we feel the need to do this? Why do I feel the need to make a photographic print? Extracting the DNA of the image, these fragmented pixels, is creating an object that you can kind of relate to the real world. I guess it was sort of a way of creating something that confronted the viewer with this excessive language and material. I wanted it to be very material and take the photograph into three dimensions. The *Spatial Objects* are finally realised as a wedge shaped sculpture, with a highly reflective face. The object is interacting with the space around it – changing with the light and the reflections, in a way it's kind of humanising. It gives it weight and physical scale. I also play with ideas of the sublime, and shifts in scale, and shifts in sets of time and space. This is all time-based material, it's mapped material, mapped in a certain place and time, an exact measure. Obviously technology speaks of a certain place and time. So it has all these qualities of

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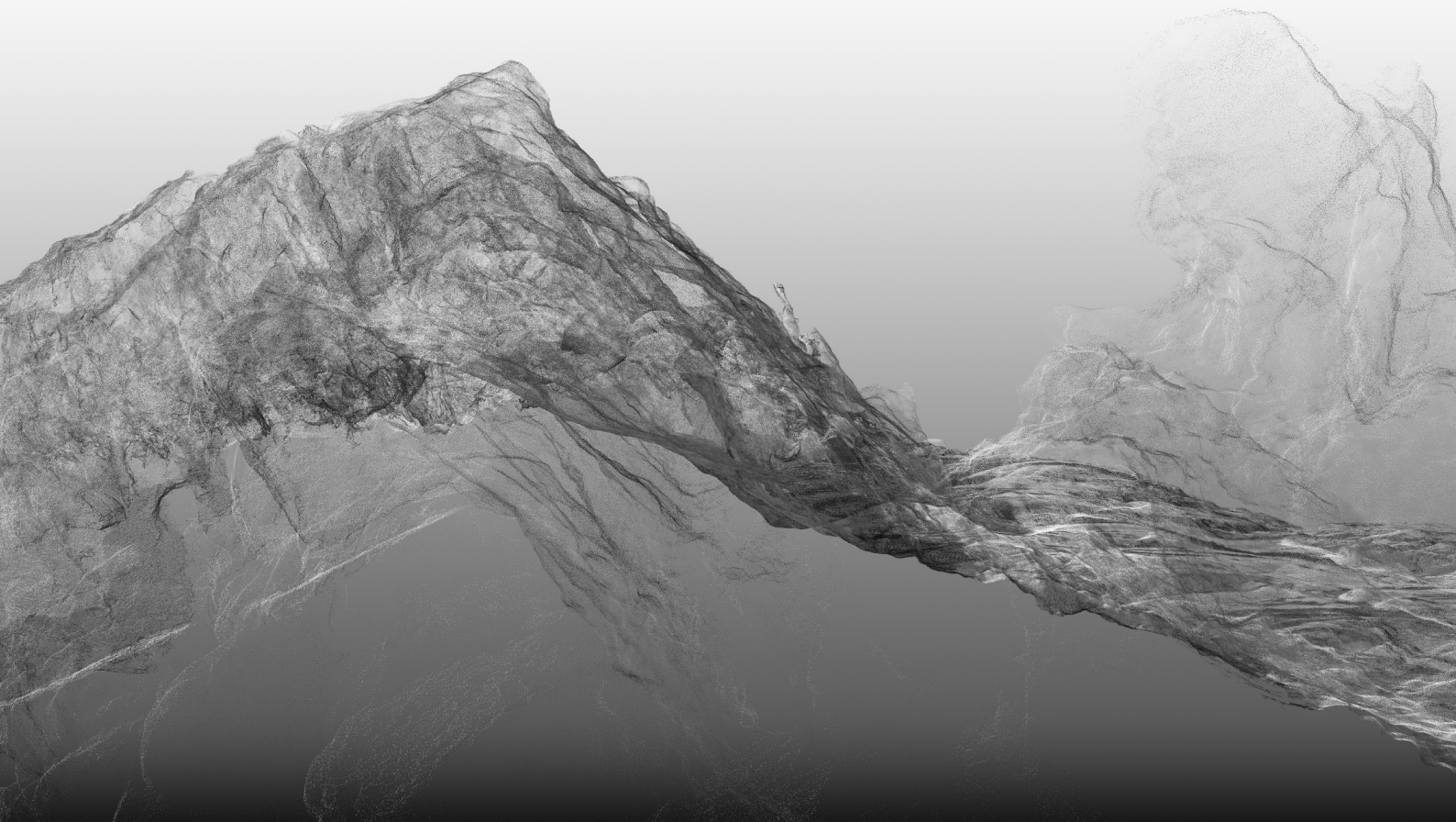
space and time that a traditional photograph does. It's in continuity with that history in a certain sense and other ways is completely discontinuous in that it is a product of this very self conscious moment in time.

WOULD YOU BE INTERESTED IN GOING DEEPER INTO THIS DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT, FOR EXAMPLE WITH OCULUS OR ANY OTHER FORM OF VIRTUAL REALITY?

It does really interest me, this idea of being immersed in a certain environment, in an image and the material of an image, also 3D printing. Converse to this though I recently made a piece called *XYZ Volume* (2012) where instead of taking the data and doing a 3D print, I just took all the data and made a PDF print out of it. It's actually difficult to do because the data is designed to be received by a 3D modelling program, and not printed. The final work takes the form of an A3 print out of 5 million data points in a stack of 6 thousand pages creating a data portrait of 300 sq miles of Yosemite Valley.

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