COULD YOU TALK ABOUT

MATHIEU
BERNARD-
REYMOND

MBL A

MATHIEU BERNARD-REYMOND

Interview by Joël Vacheron

CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE STEPS BY WHICH YOU ARRIVED AT A CAREER IN PHOTOGRAPHY?

I studied in Grenoble for some time, where I took a preparatory class in literature, gained a degree from the Institute for Political Studies and studied art history for a year. I was attracted by the multidisciplinary nature of the political sciences, which fitted well with my desire to pursue a career in journalism. Photojournalism, to be precise, because I was already a keen self-taught photographer. During my studies, as I discovered the demands of journalism as a profession, I realised that I wanted to go further, to take a more philosophical approach to my relationship with reality. This is why I enrolled at the School of Applied Arts in Vevey (CEPV), which offered post-graduate training in photography open to students who, like me, did not necessarily have a good technical grounding. In a way, this choice was largely driven by my rapport with the truth or, more specifically, with our means for fabricating and playing with data to make it seem real. From that moment, I have concentrated entirely on thinking about ontological questions and the nature of the photographic image rapidly became my favourite field of research. At the same time, this training enabled me to find the working practices and atmospheres where I am most comfortable.

WHAT SPARKED YOUR CURIOSITY ABOUT DIGITAL IMAGES?

I soon developed an interest in the impact of computing on photography. When I was a student at CEPV, between 1999 and 2002, these things were still in their infancy and we were among the first cohorts to have access to those sorts of tools and classes on digital technology. It was an emerging field, but you could sense the

huge changes that it would bring about in the way we produce and consume images. I was immediately won over by its open-ended nature, because I felt there was so much to discover. I realised at once that there were several stances that you could take as a photographer in the digital domain, and my approach has always been to maintain a link between two ways of doing things. On the one hand, we can take a more "traditional" approach to digital tools, particularly with the help of retouching software like Photoshop. On the other, we can question what the idea of "reality" or "truth" really entails in the digital era.

GIVEN THAT THIS WAS SUCH A PERIOD OF TRANSITION, DID YOU FEEL THAT YOU HAD TO MAKE A CHOICE BETWEEN TAKING A MORE TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE NEW DIGITAL TOOLS THAT WERE AVAILABLE TO YOU?

That is a hard question to answer definitively because, every 15-20 years, technical innovations come along which bring us ever more elaborate and illusionistic new ways of reproducing reality. To the point that we may find it increasingly natural to view the world around us through the prism of simulation. The conceptual approaches taken by digital photography often tend to suggest a gap between reality and fiction. In my opinion, it is more interesting to look into the way a medium evolves and is used, as well as its characteristics. Digital tools are mostly used to extend a range of traditional photographic operations, such as the stages of development, editing or retouching. Whether analogue or digital, photography still presents the same duality in that it makes a distinction between reality and fiction. The emergence of digital photography has only amplified

the ambiguity that affects every variety of photographic production. This is why, right from my very first series, I have tackled questions which still inform my work today. How can I test how far I can manipulate an image? How can we mix up our reading habits through limited use of the tools available to us? Through these questions, I have attempted to reveal the point at which our relationship with images remains enigmatic, even when we feel as if we have all the right skills to decode them. This is why I hope my photographs can be read both as highly structured, complex images and as entirely familiar, without too much obvious artifice. My aim is not to answer questions or to resolve problems. I would much rather limit the potential of these reproductive tools and their capacity to play with the power of our imaginations.

DOES YOUR APPROACH COME UNDER THE UMBRELLA OF ANY PARTICULAR THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OR TREND?

I do not think I have developed enough of a research-based attitude to be able to talk in properly theoretical terms, I am more drawn to an experimental approach. As such, one of my earliest inspirations was the work of Joan Fontcuberta, particularly his ability to play on a whole range of levels at once, yet without building up theories. By borrowing from the codes of both documentary photography and the world of communication, he is able to develop stories which serve as parables. I am fascinated by the "falsification" facet of his approach, as well as the subtle questions he can prompt about the way we use images to imagine or think. All kinds of visual images, from photography to television news, are involved in shaping certain ways of looking at our environment. My work questioning the role of "photorealist" imaging technology in creating artificial
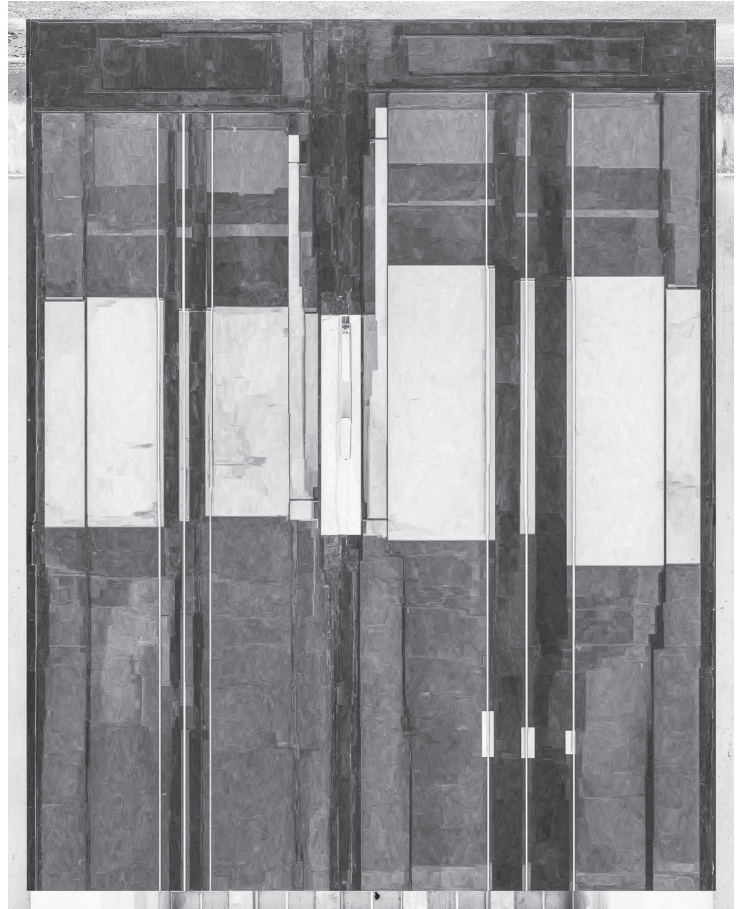
Transformation 48, *Transform: Power* series, 2015

environments definitely echoes with this perspective. This is the case in video games or promotional catalogues (such as those for IKEA), which show us entirely staged habitats. If we want to understand the world we live in, it is important to reflect on our constant predilection for creating images that correspond to the "worlds" in our imaginations.

IN WHAT FORMS DO WE FIND THESE ENQUIRIES AND PRACTICES AROUND CREATING IMAGINARY ENVIRONMENTS IN YOUR VARIOUS WORKS?

The series *Disparition* (2000) uses muted colours to present sketchy architectural landscapes. My aim was to produce environments which evoke a certain emptiness. The images were taken in the classic manner before being slightly modified using Photoshop. Although the images are modified, the use of digital technologies does not follow a strict procedure and did not involve creating or using any specific software. This is also true of the series *Intervalles* (2001) where you see characters duplicated at several points in the same image. This technique has been used since the early days of photographic experimentation, and using digital technology does not involve much change in the way we read the image. There again, other series are more obviously part of what you could call a computational approach. This is particularly true of *Vous êtes ici* (2002), which presents isolated characters set in landscapes created entirely with purpose-built software, made specifically for creating landscapes. My intention was to use the figures as motifs through which I could create the fictional environments around them. Each landscape is thus literally recreated from the "texture" of the figures present in the image. This transposes an urban environment with more natural seeming ones. It was the first

time that I had used computer technology to displace the information from one world with that of another and to create an imaginary intersection. *Monuments* (2005) takes a fairly similar approach. Financial statistics take the form of somewhat improbable architectural elements. The digital aspect is not the method, but rather the idea of passing from one world to another. Namely, transferring data that would generally be published in statistical bulletins into natural or architectural environments.

THERE ARE CERTAIN RECURRENT THEMES IN YOUR WORK – I AM THINKING IN PARTICULAR ABOUT THE FINANCIAL MARKETS, WHICH WE SEE IN YOUR SERIES *TRADES* AND *MONUMENTS*. WHY DO YOU FIND THEM SO INTERESTING?

My interest in the financial markets was principally sparked by the fact that this is probably the big data that has the greatest impact on our daily lives. The press is constantly producing graphic representations designed to make us "see" this data in ever more complicated ways. These graphics offer an enormous quantity of shapes and data to draw on. *Trades* (2013) consists of a series of 3D graphic representations created from the fluctuations in Lehman Brothers stocks shortly before its collapse. In terms of process, my initial aim was to construct a "framework" through which to channel all this data to produce a field of points. As in an economic graph, the data are represented by a cloud of points, whose shape is determined by time and the number of shares traded. In this series, the parameters are set to produce a graph more reminiscent of a horizon or an ocean which looks, relatively speaking, as real and mysterious as Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Seascapes*.

Transform : Power, exhibition view, 2016
Courtesy Galerie Heinzer Reszler, Lausanne

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE TECHNICAL DIMENSION IN YOUR WORK, IN TERMS OF EXPERTISE AND DEXTERITY?

It is hard to pinpoint where artistry comes into play when you are using equipment supposed to automate the process. My work does not rest on any kind of technical skill in computer programming. But, on the other hand, I need to understand the tools and problems that arise from digital technologies. This is why I do not consider myself truly as a digital artist, but rather as someone more capable of creating metaphors for the computational approach than of codifying it.

THE INSTALLATION *TRANSFORM: POWER*, EXHIBITED IN YOUR SHOW AT MBAL, COMES ON THE BACK OF A PREVIOUS WORK ON POWER STATIONS IN ALSACE. CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THAT PROJECT?

Well, the project began in 2015 in response to a proposal by Emeline Dufrennoy, in coproduction with the La Chambre gallery in Strasbourg and the EDF Electropolis museum. Three photographers were invited to photograph various power stations in Alsace. I was fascinated by the way nuclear plants work, by their enormous scale and the level of engineering you need to develop this kind of infrastructure. The materials, the colours, etc. – everything serves a precise purpose, everything is hyperfunctional. I started by photographing only the places, in a documentary style, concentrating specifically on the built space and machinery. My aim was to use these images as material from which to create a subsequent layout that would convey the feelings evoked by this power output. In general terms, I always see the stage of taking photos as gathering primary material, rather than as an end in itself. This work was first shown

in the group exhibition *Image Electrique: Regards sur les centrales du Rhin* (La Chambre, 2015) and represented what you might call a hybrid version of what I was going to do later. It emphasised issues of scale, quantity and detail, and this research got me imagining ways of feeding my images through a "machine", a bit like the water that flows through hydraulic turbines. The idea was to create a machine for "producing images" and I wrote a Photoshop script which let me produce a hundred abstract images from one photo. The challenging part was not the technical side, but the selection criteria for the parameters I needed to run the script. When an image interested me, I could then "rework" it, by feeding it back into the same process or by modifying the script directly. After going back and forth a few times, I had got the kind of abstract images I wanted, particularly in the ambiguity of the details. You perceive the differences in scale between original elements which become details, and details which initially seem insignificant but become far more imposing. The final images are abstract and digital, but the information offered by these "details" perpetuates a certain photographic authenticity.

COULD YOU EXPLAIN WHY YOU CHOSE THIS KIND OF HANGING?

I soon noticed the important role of grids in these facilities: electric circuits, flow diagrams, passing through security rings, tangled pipes, cables, ducts, etc. All this created a starting point that would guide the type of hanging to suit my first piece. I wavered between several ways of exhibiting it, but they ended up overlapping as my project went forward. As a result, it can be read on at least two levels. On one hand, you find the wallpaper covering the walls in the exhibition venue, and on the other hand, there is a collection of framed images, grouped so they overlap. The role of the

grid is even more apparent in the images "damaged" by the little algorithm I created. You see that the lines are no longer straight and that helps to increase the level of abstraction. It is rather as though the image producing machine had managed to impose its own logic on the interior of the exhibition space.

THE WAY YOUR WORK IS PRESENTED IS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT TO YOU. HOW DO YOU TACKLE THE SPATIAL DIMENSION WHEN YOU PREPARE AN EXHIBITION?

For a long time, I made models and 2D diagrams to help me visualise my hangings, but that keeps you on one level and kind of outside the space. Besides which, it is not easy to change the size and position of the images. Softwares, which let us create a 3D model of the exhibition space, have opened up new perspectives in terms of hangings in general. It takes much longer to make a 3D model, because you have to recreate the space using the building plans, as well as the textures and shapes of the images to be exhibited. All the same, it is much more effective in the long run because it gives you so much freedom and precision. You can try out original arrangements, even fanciful ones. You can check in great detail what will and will not work. That is partly why photography exhibitions include more and more items these days. These modelling tools make it easier to try out whether unlikely arrangements are actually right. As far as I am concerned, this all plays into the idea of using images as raw material, involved in the process, rather than as finished objects that are only waiting to be hung in a gallery. When we developed the hanging for *Transform: Power* at MBAL, our intention was to consider the gallery space as a soft, transparent space – I almost want to say a "virtual" one.

YOUR INSTALLATION TIES INTO A TREND TOWARDS EMPHASISING MATERIAL PROPERTIES IN PHOTOGRAPHY. WHAT IS YOUR TAKE ON THIS DEVELOPMENT?

12

Well, since 2010 or thereabouts, it has struck me that photographers are experimenting more and more with the physicality of the medium. It is now very natural for a photographer to create a sculptural installation and this has gone on to further shrink the old barriers between photographic works and visual arts. At the same time, photographic practice has become increasingly immaterial. You do not shut yourself away in the dark to develop your films any more, you do not soak your hands in chemicals, photographic paper does not smell and so on. The real things are always at a certain distance. We spend most of our time behind a screen, whether it is on a camera or a computer. Photography has lost that "physical dimension", that direct relationship that you can still experience with sculpture or painting. It is not surprising that some contemporary trends strive to give texture, materiality, back to photographs. This is a very interesting time because there is a dizzying array of possible options and a whole range of technologies that plunge us into increasingly intangible and immersive environments. I am intrigued to see the use photographers will make of augmented or virtual reality. As image makers, we are all interested in exploring these "New Worlds". This will mean that we can still interest the public in issues around images today.

Interview by Joël Vacheron
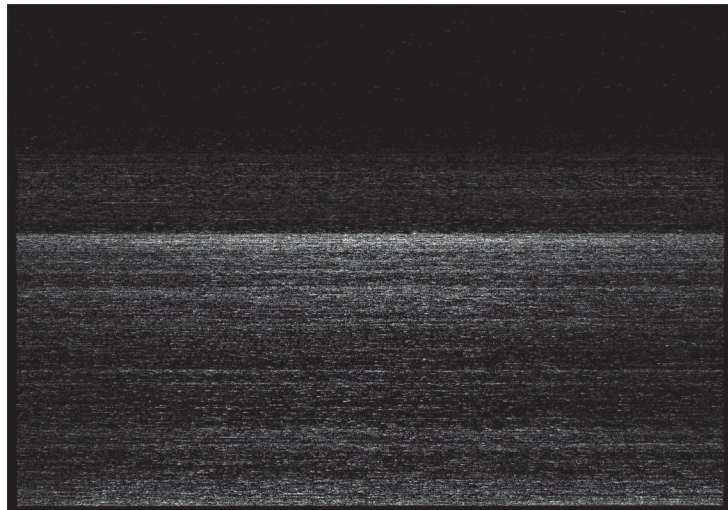
LEH_20080910, Trades series, 2012