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Interview by Joël Vacheron

CAN YOU TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOUR BEGINNINGS IN PHOTOGRAPHY?

I completed my studies at the Ecole supérieure des beaux-arts de Nîmes in 2008. At that time, I had already begun to take photographs in video games – in *Grand Theft Auto*, in particular. Thus, I was never a "photographer" in the traditional sense of the term, but the results of my work are always visible in the form of photographs, printed and framed in a traditional way. At first, I even used the passe-partout, or other formats that accentuated this photographic effect a bit more, even as my images were, in a sense, simple screenshots. I continued on this path through a series of portraits of soldiers entitled *First Person Shooter* (2011) and of landscapes photographed in the game *Call of Duty*. Subsequently, I began to wonder about the development of French peri-urban areas based on HLM (rent-controlled housing) models present on such platforms as Google Earth. This is how I worked on the creation of a *Typologie du Virtuel* (2014). I was quite inspired by certain drawings of architects who, by drawing in white on clear paper, represented the contours of buildings solely by their light. With the series presented at the MBAL, entitled *Territoires Circonscrits* (2016), I continue to be interested in constructed environments and landscapes, though I have changed my method somewhat. These days, I go directly into the physical space to then produce digital environments using a 3D scanner. This technique allows me to make extremely accurate readings that I then rework in postproduction to make videos and photographs.

WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS INSIDE THE VIRTUAL SPACE OF VIDEO GAMES?

It started somewhat by chance, about ten years ago. It was before Facebook and social networks, and at that time there was not much interest in taking photographs when playing video games. Accordingly, there were still no specific features for exchanging information between players, the way there is today. I noticed that one of the missions in *Grand Theft Auto* was to blackmail a politician by taking photographs of him in the company of prostitutes. Among the range of tools and weapons available to players, there was therefore a camera. As it happens, photographs taken with this camera were saved directly to the hard drive. So that's how I started taking photographs for my series *Vice City* (2007-2012). I was completely fascinated at being able to retrieve images of this type, taken during escapades in virtual universes. At that time, I was working in a museum and I was looking for atmospheric qualities in the game that reminded me of Romantic painting. After a while, I learned to manipulate the program, to change settings such as time or brightness, but my basic tool remained this simple camera that was available to all players.

DID YOU HAVE AT THE OUTSET ANY THEMATIC PREDILECTIONS IN YOUR PHOTOGRAPHS?

At first, I mainly took photographs of spectacular events or action sequences, but I gradually began to meander within the game, to look at what was happening in the area, exactly as a photographer would do. This completely changed my understanding of these environments. Video games have their own temporality. 24 hours pass in 24 minutes, and I learned to choose my viewing angles based on the position of the sun or to wait for the right level of brightness. In a way, this goes against the logic of a video game, because when a player does not
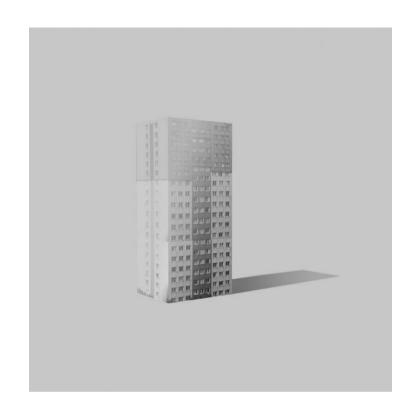
progress in the action, time seems in some way frozen. I felt a little like a character in the film *Groundhog Day*, as if the same day repeated itself continuously. There was something very meditative about it, and it still happens that I go back to immerse myself in these atmospheres that seem a little outside of time.

DO YOU HAVE SPECIFIC REFERENCES OR INFLUENCES THAT YOU USE TO ORIENT YOURSELF IN THESE UNIVERSES OR TO GUIDE YOUR SHOTS?

Other artists had already worked in this direction and I was looking mostly at what had been done before me. It seemed to me that something was often missing, and that I was arriving at the right moment, because the tool had become good enough to allow me to obtain troubling results without being too perfect. Today, I find the images produced from video games to be too bright, too polished. Speaking generally, I do not know of many people who do this type of exploration, and there are enough opportunities for everyone to be able to develop their own aesthetic. Truth be told, when I started working on *Vice City*, I wanted to do something that would be situated somewhere between painting, especially of the Flemish and Romantic traditions, and the strange atmospheres of the *X-Files* series.

WHAT DO YOU DO TO INJECT A SENSE OF TEMPORALITY AND SPATIALITY TO YOUR SERIES?

Even if my images do not seem to cohere a priori with the idea we generally hold of a decisive moment in photography, this does not prevent them from being able to always represent a precise place and moment. For example, in the *Vice City* series, the date and time

Untitled 1, *Typologie du virtuel* series, 2014

of shooting are indicated in the title of the images. In *Typologie du Virtuel*, the photographed buildings were modeled by Internet users. There is an application on Google Earth that allows users to add buildings to the platform using very simple tools. In this project, I downloaded these buildings and integrated them on backgrounds of the same color as the facades. In a certain way, I simulate an atmosphere by immersing the building into a kind of fog, as if it were lost in its own material and revealed itself through its shadow. In a second stage, I took a look at the time and date when the anonymous Internet user transmitted the model of the building, in order to place the sun precisely in the place where it was at the time of the model's creation. That way, there is nothing arbitrary in this series, aside from the angle chosen for the shot. In some respects, one could say that this situation nevertheless implies a form of decisive moment.

TO WHAT DO YOU LINK THE NOTION OF VIRTUALITY IN YOUR *TYPOLOGIE DU VIRTUEL* PROJECT?

These are buildings that actually exist in physical space, but their models can be made by anyone. They therefore present many inaccuracies and subjective choices. For the sake of efficiency, some users used existing models, with only a few minor modifications. Through my research on the French peri-urban areas with Google Earth, I realized that some models of buildings in Calais or Dunkirk were actually buildings at La Défense (Paris business district). In other cases, some buildings were only depicted starting from the 5th floor, because the lower floors were too difficult to represent due to trees or other more complex architectural features. In this project, I was very curious to observe the inconsistencies and forms of discrepancies that exist

between the reality of the buildings and their modeling. In terms of rendering, this participatory action is never perfect and the resulting accidental aesthetics allow for many interesting discoveries. This occasions an inaccurate typology and, in my opinion, it is at this level that the virtual is located. At present, it is no longer possible to do this type of work, because Google has corrected all the buildings visible on the platform and most buildings developed to random standards have therefore disappeared. In a way, we have lost a little of the poetry that could have been attached to these types of collectively constructed environments.

CAN YOU SAY A LITTLE ABOUT *TERRITOIRES CIRCONSCRITS*, THE SERIES THAT IS AT THE ORIGIN OF THE WORK YOU ARE PRESENTING AS PART OF YOUR MBAL EXHIBITION?

Territoires Circonscrits extends this reflection on the virtual, but this series is in some ways the exact opposite of the approach adopted in my previous projects, particularly in *Vice City*. Indeed, this project incites me to go on site in order to make sequences with the help of a 3D scanner. The feeling this provokes brings us directly back to sci-fi movies, in particular *The Matrix*, when the action stops and the protagonists wander around in the frozen environment. What makes this device interesting is that it allows me to produce very accurate images within which I can also move. It is sort of as if time were frozen and I could move about in an environment in which I can produce my images.

DOES THE CREATION OF SUCH IMAGES INVOLVE SPECIAL SKILLS?

The scanner is a loan from the company Leica, and although it is not very complicated, it still requires

Untitled 14, *Territoires Circonscrits* series, 2016

a brief period of training to understand how it works. Typically, these 3D scanners are used for topographic data measurements or to model with precision locations marked out for investigations in geology as well as criminology. The scanner works in two stages. At first, a laser scans everything in the area. The landscape and the elements in it are converted into a collection of points in space. Depending on the level of resolution sought, this procedure takes between 3 to 6 minutes. Then, when the data is transferred to the computer, a color is assigned to each point based on the data collected. As the shooting procedure takes nearly 30 minutes, many things happen that disturb the evidence of the photographed scene. For example, forests often offer stunning results. As the leaves and branches move continuously, it can sometimes happen that we find the color of the sky on the treetops.

WHAT WAS YOUR OBJECTIVE WHEN YOU STARTED WORKING ON *TERRITOIRES CIRCONSCRITS*?

The device is heavy, you have to put the scanner on a tripod, the procedure is long and laborious, you have to wait a few days to see the results, etc. We replay in a sense the origins of photography when doing work like this. Likewise, there is a lot of exploration of the territory that is of importance and the choice of scenes is at times somewhat secondary. The device cannot photograph water, and I imagined that it would be a good starting point to observe its reaction in situations where it is, as it were, blind. My objective was to follow the French coastline. As I had use of the device for only 10 days, I departed from Belgium and went down to southern Brittany. At first, I wanted to highlight the voids, but the photographed motifs are not very important. What interests me the most is that landscapes

and people become simple membranes. They present themselves solely through their contours. The other peculiarity is that all the elements that compose the image merge with one another, as though they were intimately interconnected.

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO COMPLETE THIS SERIES WITH FILMS?

At first, the images were so mysterious and opaque that the filmed footage only served to make the orientation I wanted to give to my work more apparent. In particular, it allowed me to show how things appear in the form of membranes, how people, stones, buildings are in fact only their own outlines. The films make it possible to accentuate the hyper-factitious character of things as well as the anamorphic effects of these images. In general, I have always enjoyed testing out new ways of producing images. Before working with this professional 3D scanner, I had started to experiment with this type of image using a Kinect camera that I had altered in order to be able to make scans. However, I do not really do this in a conscious manner. I simply explore certain leads that present themselves. My point is not to query the medium; I just let myself be carried by the fascination that I feel for these universes.

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