

## The Rehearsal of space

“We sow corn, we plant trees, we fertilise the soil by irrigation, we confine the rivers and straighten or direct their courses. In short, by means of our hands, we create a second nature within the natural world,” Cicero (1).

“Today our sight is weary, burdened by the memory of a thousand images ... We no longer see nature, we pictures over and over again,” Cezanne (2).

“Ruins: Induce reverie; make a landscape poetic”, Flaubert (3).

At the private view for Edgar Martins’ solo exhibition *The Diminishing Present*, guests could be observed adopting the stance that has come to characterise the stereotypical gallery-goer: hands clasped at the small of the back, feet shoulder-width apart, the torso gently inclined towards the object of scrutiny, eyes narrowed in conspicuous concentration. Although such a posture has its absurdities – vulnerable to exploitation by the more physical comedian – it nevertheless possesses something appropriate as a way of navigating the world constituted by Edgar Martins’ photography.

In that world, the image cannot be accommodated by the glance that grasps things wholesale; instead we are compelled to occupy the terrain identified by Vilem Fluss where “wandering over the surface of the image, one’s gaze takes in one element after another and produces temporal relationships between them. It can return to an element of the image it has already seen, and ‘before’ can become ‘after’” (4). Encountering a sequence of Martins’ work in a gallery setting exacerbates this process of scanning beyond the boundaries of the single frame as the viewer is induced to engage with elements between separate images, establishing yet more complex relationships of Fluss’ ‘before’ and ‘after’. As Martins has steadily accumulated a public body of work, this relational viewing has correspondingly intensified, with junctions and disjunctions emerging between distinct series of images, for example, between those of the *Diminishing Present* collection and those of *Black Holes and Other Inconsistencies*.

Confronted by a Martins’ photograph there is always the temptation to succumb to the vertiginous sensations afforded by such scanning of the surface, a temptation heightened by the opportunity to shift scale; to pass from a close exploration of the interplay between elements within the frame, to a more remote navigation of the elements that diverge and convergence between frames, to, ultimately, pulling back to explore the intersections between disparate series of images.

Whatever the immediate and sensual pleasures to be derived from such scanning, this form of analysis does not exhaust the potential embodied in Edgar Martins’ work. Back at the private view, the attention of viewers could be seen to occasionally migrate away from the images themselves to focus on texts mounted on foam-board or vinyl-lettered on the gallery walls. The text that was interspersed amongst the large format prints and light-boxes was neither a personal statement of the photographer’s intentions nor the choice citations drawn from the pool of approved philosophers that so frequently adorn exhibition spaces. Instead this was an extended and intricate meditation on Martins’ work conducted by the cultural critic Peter D. Osborne, author of the influential *Travelling Light*. The carefully-positioned presence of this text - paralleling the discursive commentaries on Martins that appear in his monographs and in the publications that

feature his images (*Daylight, Eyemazing, Hotshoe, etc.*) – signals the need to augment a relational scanning orientated towards decoding the visual density of Martins' work with an equivalent negotiation of the ideas with which it resonates.

Among the striking compositional aspects of the Martins' photograph included here is its delicate disruption of the conventions of vanishing point perspective. The coarse arrangement of the walls that border the path falls out of configuration with the lines of projection that are expected to run parallel to the lens axis. This subtly disquieting effect is aggravated by the refusal of the trees that frame the image to conform to the vertical axis; the trees list to either side in ways which, when explored with Fluss' wandering eye, defy easy assimilation. The predicted vanishing point is itself deferred from the image, any potential horizon obscured.

This displacement of vanishing point perspective works to attenuate the anticipated dimensionality that such composition normally introduces. This is an image that contracts, lending it the tenor of a photograph of rigorously coordinated film set. The impression of a cinematographic image – of an artificiality derived from being flattened in projection and from having its elements orchestrated – is further worked through by the aberrant gradations in colour tone from the left to the right side of the image and by the equally anomalous restriction of the presence of the fog or smoke to its background.

In the world of Edgar Martins, such interrogation of the grammar of photography is neither casual nor cold. Not casual because this image joins a body of work already distinguished by a willingness to patiently examine the moribund dogmas of perspective (*Hidden*) or composition (*Black Holes*) or portraiture (*The Reluctant Sitter*). And not cold either because while the presence of art historical reference may be as discernible as conceptual context, this is not work of closed calculation but of open imagination, of questions asked and asked again rather than answers bellowed in finality.

In this image, shot in the immediate aftermath of the terrible wildfires that caused such death and destruction in Portugal in the summer of 2005, are condensed some of the questions that have animated Martins' projects. Questions about borders and boundaries: the collision of the human and the natural, the presence of a second nature within the natural world, about the guilty poetry of ruins, about the limits of reason and, ultimately, the limits of representation.

Angus Carlyle  
2006

Citations:

(1) Cicero, *De natura deorum*, in John Dixon Hunt, "The Idea of the Garden, and the Three Natures," in *Zum Naturbegriff der Gegenwart*, Stuttgart, 1993.

(2) Paul Cezanne cited in Jeremy Melvin "Meaning, Mapping and Making of Landscape", *Architectural Review*, January, 2004.

(3) Gustave Flaubert, Bouvard and Pecuchet and *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

(4) Vilem Fluss, *Toward a Philosophy of Photography* (1983) (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).