

In Conversation Edgar Martins and David Company

David Company: Edgar, your work baffles me in the most pleasurable way. I suspect it has this effect on you too. Is this so?

Edgar Martins: I like to convoke different strategies in my work. For a while I thought I would be a writer, and I have also experimented with video and sound. But whatever medium I have used, I have always been interested in communicating ideas about how difficult it is to communicate.

In my first book, *Black Holes and Other Inconsistencies* (2002), I was interested in very simple polarities, in places primed with a sense of purpose yet marginal, fragmented, and dispersed. But I think I was trying to deal with too much, too soon. Since then I have tried to strip down the visual language of my images. For me that's become the challenge, to make images that are engaging but also universal.

Company: A feeling of isolation pervades all your work. I sense that you are soaked in the world's processes but also at a certain remove from them. Photographers often are. The camera joins them to the world but separates them too, and the viewer of photographs feels this. You seem to make a virtue of this rather than trying to overcome it. For example, you've made pictures in very functional spaces, such as roads and airport runways, but you photograph them as if their meaning were far from obvious, far from functional.

Martins: I am interested in a space between reality and imagination.

Company: . . . and the more apparently simple the reality, the more space for the imagination.

Martins: Exactly, and it is valid as both.

Company: The minimal also comes into the work with the absence of specific temporal reference.

Martins: Definitely. I deal in long exposures because I seem to be drawn to places that are incredibly badly lit. (The unphotographable . . .) So I often don't know for certain what I am going to get. I may be aware of the kind of image or ideas I want to convey, but I am not necessarily aware of how it will pan out. But I always strive for a dynamic play of reality and fiction, where my images provide the viewer a canvas on which to project his/her ideas, memories, thoughts, or even a narrative.

Company: I think something odd happens when viewers encounter a visually precise image that eludes precise meaning. They get left in an odd space, either second guessing the artist's intention, or trying to confront their own not knowing. The precise minimal image can be a space for imaginative projection, as you say, but it can also be confounding, unnerving even. That's been a key plank of photographic art from Eugène Atget and Walker Evans onward. The viewer cannot deduce the process that has given rise to the image, whether it has emerged from

spontaneity or calculation or a mix of both. The photographer may have had a chance encounter with the world, but the viewer sees only the inscrutable image.

Martins: I think that is an aspect of photography that one cannot escape. I have always found photography to be a medium highly inadequate for communicating ideas. I don't think it can ever engage with the world adequately.

Campany: Despite the physical, indexical connection between the world and its photographic image . . .

Martins: Yes, despite that. You can push the boundaries here and there, but ultimately it's a specific medium with specific parameters. In my own work I try to reference the parameters that have traditionally defined photography. You could say my work is somewhat self-referential in as much as it also deals with the process of producing and reading images or, moreover, art. You can work outside the parameters of the medium only if you understand what these are.

Campany: Even so, defining what the parameters of photography actually are is a tricky question. It depends who you ask, and it depends when you ask. In different cultural contexts and at different moments, different ideas and emphases have defined the photographic. I can see that you adopt and then adapt certain parameters, almost like a self-imposed restriction or challenge. You adhere to the frontal, generally rectilinear, tripod-mounted use of the highly descriptive large-format camera. Those are conventions that make the most of photography's capacity to describe the static, or near static, surface of the world. It's an approach that was exploited early in the medium's history, when there was a positivist faith in the idea that the meaning of the world was carried on its surface. Here in the twenty-first century, art photography in particular uses this mode to explore or exploit the realization that meaning is far from visible. Moreover, yours is a lens-based art of space, not a shutter-based art of time as it was for, say, Eadweard Muybridge or Henri Cartier-Bresson, who were concerned with other photographic parameters.

Martins: Photography is appealing because of its language and structure. It provides a very basic tool to move between registers – real, imaginary, metaphorical – without having to give up any one of them. Many artists have spoken of the fear of the blank canvas. I do not share this anxiety, but I think if I were using a medium like painting I'd never get past the first brushstroke. Photography allows you to start with basic structures – photographic structures and structures of the world. I like the realism inherent to the medium and its deceptive qualities.

Campany: Has this evolved in your work, or is it a fixed and constant condition you work with?

Martins: Past works inform future works. The title of one of my recent projects, *The Accidental Theorist*, resonates with how I sometimes work: I stumble into ideas, theorizations of ideas, locations, projects. There is a progress, but not necessarily a program.

Campany: The problem with such formally perfect work is that it never looks accidental. It looks as if it were the result of immaculate conception. But of course we all know it never is.

Martins: In 2004 I was commissioned by the Centro de Artes Visuais, Coimbra, Portugal, to produce a body of work that deliberated on the geographical development of specific Portuguese sites. I was immediately drawn to coastal locations at the fringes of the city. Returning from a shoot, late at night, I came across a nearby beach and was struck by an arrangement of poles in the sand. I didn't know how I wanted to photograph them or what they meant, but I liked the idea that my perception of that space, at that time, seemed to enter a different register. In that place where sea meets land and where both dissipate into nothingness, it felt as though I were having a glimpse of the edge of the universe. I am drawn to spaces that prioritize poetic memory over concrete topographies. This is often how I find the subject of my images.

Campany: I presume you photograph forms that you really like, in themselves. It's not as if the metaphorical potential is there but you find the image itself indifferent or ugly. I presume these scenes grabbed you as scenes, on a fairly immediate level.

Martins: I guess they did, but one can be grabbed without knowing quite why. The unconscious always plays a part in these matters, but there are multiple factors that draw me to specific places or subjects. When I was in Iceland, I was very interested in the idea that photographs are read differently at different times. I was thinking about the topographic studies made by photographers in the nineteenth century, the role those images played then, the roles they have now, and how they differ (and why they differ).

Campany: Those images are fascinating, particularly the pictures by Carleton E. Watkins and Timothy H. O'Sullivan. They were often commissioned as functional documents, for railroads, government agencies, or real estate firms. Later, they were repositioned as forerunners of the genre of landscape photography. Some saw this as a dubious art historical sleight of hand, others pointed to the fact that even when asked to photograph land in an instrumental way, we cannot help but see it and represent it through the conventions of "landscape." Even if we try, we cannot look at land just as land in its brute obstinacy. Nevertheless, the moving of those images from topographic archives into art was a "defunctioning." As art, they become unemployed documents, in the sense that Walker Evans talked about documents having a purpose whereas art is really useless.

Martins: Yes, art has its conventions, but they are not those of the document as it has been traditionally defined. When I use a more orthodox formal style I do it in the full knowledge that that approach has a long history outside of art.

Campany: Although you make no physical interventions beyond framing, your work feels highly theatrical. Your way of shooting makes the world appear to perform for the camera.

Martins: And that is precisely why I titled the series of forest fires *The Rehearsal of Space*. There is no theater there at all – I didn't start the fires, and of course they burn according to the laws of nature – but I agree that the camera does have a tendency to theatricalize even the most natural occurrences.

Campany: It's not just that you are documenting things; it is as if you were

recording the world's performance of itself as a set of facts and processes. The attention inherent in photographic observation dramatizes the observed.

Martins: In photography there is a complicity between the observed and the observer, but there is also an element of theatricality that transcends this personal relationship.

Campany: When I look across your work, I am filled equally with a sense of excitement about the world and with a sense of dread. More than that, the two seem intertwined. The dread, which feels at times like inescapable menace, is always there, despite the fact that the images are so beautiful and engaging.

Martins: That's the only way the images could work for *me*. For example, the images of forest fires depict a very real threat, but as photographs they draw on far more comforting and familiar ways of depicting arcadia.

Campany: That makes them seem very real but almost like painted backdrops.

Martins: It is funny you mention that! I am thinking about making some photographs that incorporate hand-painted backdrops—inserting them in the landscape perhaps. A different way of working for me, but it feels like a natural progression of ideas . . .

Campany: Changing the subject, what is the serial form for you? Obviously one cannot imagine photography outside the serial in terms of the archival principles that shaped its evolution. And one cannot imagine photographic art without the serial after Pop and Conceptual art of the 1960s and '70s. Even so, it rarely means the same thing for different artists.

Martins: My earlier work was less serial, but looking back I see now that I was looking to map out the way of working that now defines my practice. Not so much in terms of subject matter, but motifs and approaches to the world. Working in series poses many challenges: producing, editing, and sequencing work are different disciplines in their own right. I have always likened my work to film stills to some extent, and how film explores subject and narrative. And I have also always thought about my work in terms of the book form. So there are several strands that make the serial attractive.

Campany: The serial raises interesting ideas about, well, about ideas. It allows the photographer to approach things in several ways within an overarching scheme. The serial also takes the burden off you as a pictorial artist, no? None of the images offer themselves up as a singular Picture, with all the associations that may bring.

Martins: Well, my work often seems like a journey of recognition; it gives me a tool to help decipher my relationship to photography, to resolve things. But the process of resolving is always much more interesting than the resolution, which I never get to in any definitive sense. This allows ideas to flow from one series to the next.

Campany: Do you work on different series simultaneously?

Martins: No, not in a literal sense. Of course there are many ideas and concerns that cross over, above and beyond subject matter. So I can imagine edits or sequences that cut across the different series to draw out concerns beyond subject matter. But sometimes, while working on specific projects, I may start grooming certain ideas, locations, or projects that I feel could well provide a platform for a follow-up project.

Campany: Do you ever photograph places and things that interest you only metaphorically rather than actually?

Martins: I am not sure I can distinguish the two. I am very much interested in the places and things I photograph. I like their particularities, their specificities. But there is always something more going on.

Campany: Is this what separates you from documentary photography?

Martins: In a way, but I truly am concerned with the photograph's objective facets. I see those as fundamental to my work. With the images of fires, I was interested in the physical nature of fire and how it ravages Portugal's woodlands every year. I was interested, but not just from an environmental point of view. I am also interested in how photography can be deceptive, because in the end the real is unattainable. I like to question, and I like the viewer to question, the validity of the photographic process. This leads to a questioning of the space around us, and ideally it helps to open up thinking about our place in the world. My work makes reference to reality but looks beyond that. The viewer is invited to look both literally and metaphorically, in order to arrive at a more critical stance.

Campany: I see this as a kind of visual training—over time, one is somehow trained by the work or by its effects. There is a flow of small but incremental adjustments (as there is in any long-term relationship!).

Martins: I agree with you, but the paradox is that if a photographer sets out solely with the intention to train, he risks becoming too didactic or even dogmatic. You would hope that the work has that effect on the viewer, but this can happen only if the path laid down by the photographer is one that demands a more heterogeneous conception of his subject. Photography should be fluid, relational, migratory. I try to avoid any quick fix.

Campany: I would say that your work is characterized by a "quick fix" combined with something much longer. Your images are some of the most highly visual, high-impact, ultra-accessible photographs I know. They are gorgeous, visually arresting, intriguing, and immediate. In this, they are quite in step with certain strands of commercial image making. I assume you are playing on this, because you clearly don't operate in those commercial arenas. More than that, I sense your work wouldn't be what it is without that tension between the very immediate and the enigmatic or latent.

Martins: Yes, but strangely I don't set out that way. I think I have arrived at this by wanting to engage myself and the viewer on different levels. I like to operate within a landscape of uncertainty, within a cultural landscape of flux, transition, and opposition. For example, Hidden is a very simple and attractive set of pictures. One

can engage with them only in terms of form and color, but the series came out of my thinking about the paradox of how to represent a specific issue, theme, or idea without physically referencing it. The colored panels are sound barriers intended to muffle the noise of the traffic on the highways. This is all that the photographs offer us at first glance. The irony is that these beautifully designed barriers had the effect of dividing the communities through which the roads passed in the south of Portugal. So this series deals with the impact of modernism on the environment. But it also highlights photography's inadequacies. Like the barriers, photography is a medium of façades.

Campany: Your point of view, in the literal photographic sense, is absolute [how so?]. You seem to shoot from the optimal point that will render the subject most vividly. At the same time, this point of view seems entirely spectral and ungrounded. It is as if the viewpoint is so neutral it doesn't quite exist.

Martins: In photography, so many of the simplest and most familiar conventions, the default positions, if you like, are also the ones that provide a pathway into the strange or unknown. I am attracted to this neutral point of view because it can so easily become a sort of idiotic criticism of itself. By this I mean that I often draw on photography's rhetoric and conventions, on its factual and "objective" properties, to criticize the reality of certain situations as well as the structure of the medium and its primary semiotics. There are no givens in photography.

Campany: And it is a viewpoint that is inscribed in the very fabric [improve metaphor?] of our world, in everything from town planning and factories to video games and shopping centers.

Martins: I wouldn't want my work to be seen as a dispassionate view of the world. I am aiming for something that uses aspects of the dispassionate in order to open up other possibilities.

Campany: This is largely a matter of context: dispassionate images and objects in art behave very differently from their more functional counterparts in our everyday world.

I am struck by the fact that when asked why they like the medium, most photographers say it is because so much is possible. At the same time, many of the great photographers speak of its limitations that have spurred them on—not to transcend the limitations but to see what is possible within them. In contemporary art today, we see two tendencies. The first is interdisciplinary, mixed media, full of references, no sense of boundary, and so on. The second is a paring down, a working firmly within given restrictions, whatever they may be. Photography has a place in both.

Martins: I agree. Photography has a place in both. However, for a reason that is beyond me, I seem to have prioritized this medium over others. I have a lot of problems with photography, as we've discussed. I try to work these out project to project. I, too, like to explore what I see as the limitations of the medium. But what spurs me on is the silent dialogue that it allows me to establish between definition and approximation, while at the same time summoning a disquieting conjunction of reality, hyper-reality, fantasy, and fiction.

Campany: Photographers are always negotiating between forms in the world and forms in the image, recording the world but also transforming it at the same time. And there are plenty of things we don't like to look at or experience in the world but do like looking at in photographs. It is pleasing to look down a runway at night in an image, but less so in reality. It is pleasing to look at images of sound baffles on a highway, but less so in reality. Yet on some level, the viewer identifies with the photographer having been there, his travels, his choices of placement in the world, and so on. The viewer looks only at the image, responds only to the image, but fleshes it out from that artificial basis [clarify]. The photographer does the reverse—he has a richer experience of the place, but pares it down to an image.

In a photograph that is pared down, that contains only the elements one wants and nothing more – a kind of perfected image – a certain artifice results. Photography's forte has been its recording of more than one could want from the world, the undesired excess that will always intrude unless it is kept out. Artistic control of the medium has thus been about eliminating the unwanted in one way or another, be it staging, selecting, framing, types of printing, whatever, to produce an image outside of the world's inevitable compromise. But it is always at the risk of a certain loss of realism. One ends up with slightly hallucinatory imagery—precise and clear, but the meaning is elusive.

Martins: I am not sure that I do pare down my experience of place in my images. Artistic control is intrinsic to the creative process. But even in images as minimal as mine, there is scope for so much more. In "The Responsibility of Forms," Roland Barthes proposes the notion that every image has a third meaning. Beyond the informational and symbolical level, there are the signifying accidents, the theoretical individuality of the signs. I have always been very careful not to tamper with my images, in order to allow for this third meaning to exist. In the case of my work, what seems like a highly controlled and manipulated photographs is just a product of illusion—the illusion of the photographic process. This is especially evident in *The Accidental Theorist*. Most people assume that these images are wholly manipulated, or perhaps even staged. In reality, there is no darkroom or computer manipulation beyond the odd restoration/retouching job. At first glance, your eyes are drawn to the unforgivingly dark skies, or the otherworldly qualities of the beach. But then a sort of magic act takes place, and the objects start revealing their unique identity, their inconsistencies, and if you like, their "obtuse meaning" (which Barthes believes to have something to do with disguise).

My work is a product of negotiation between these different levels of register.

This interview took place in London, April 14, 2007.