

The oscillating image

What does it mean to represent and perceive places *photographically*? How is it that the photographic, with its limitations and potentialities, has the privilege of 'disassembling' the appearance of the territory and, consequently, of inviting a broader, more emotional and more intricate experience of its hidden meanings? How do places connect and configure themselves in accordance with social, political and ecological phenomena? These are pressing questions for many contemporary visual artists for whom working on place and landscape involves an ever more necessary challenge: that of rendering visible and interrogating the ways in which space is appropriated and transformed, and salvaging some vestige of the events, dilemmas and reverberations wrought by history on the territory. Thus, reproducing, constructing and representing images of place also means scrutinising their physical, social and symbolic meanings.

We know that a place is not just a portion of space or an imaginary point. It is also a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world. In effect, looking at and thinking about the world as an aggregate of places shapes a very particular outlook: we come to discern unique aspects, to perceive connections and distances between people, objects and spatial contexts, and to assimilate experiences and particular meanings. Consequently, place also figures as a field of images and languages in which geography intertwines with its historical, fictional and ideological resonances and implications.

The work of the photographer Edgar Martins has been linked to this series of reflections and motivations. With an artistic practice that began to become established in 2003, Edgar Martins has undertaken an authorial journey of recognized uniqueness and coherence via a photographic practice that alludes to genres ranging from topographical representation to landscape and architecture. However, in Edgar Martins' photography these genres are subjected to an approach that is simultaneously descriptive, speculative, and *reconfiguring*, lying as it does between the documentation of spaces that are suggestive and paradigmatic in symbolic and visual terms, and the assumption of the image as a privileged form of aesthetic and critical (re)appreciation.

This publication is produced within the context of Edgar Martins' exhibition at the Centre Culturel Calouste Gulbenkian in Paris. It is the largest solo exhibition of his work to date and brings together images from series created during the last five years, making possible a transverse appraisal of his photographic production, its unique characteristics, as well as the prospective lines that his work has been adopting more recently. The seven series are: *When Light Casts no Shadow* (2008), *A Metaphysical Survey of British Dwellings* (2010), *Dwarf Exoplanets & Other Sophisms* (2007), *The Accidental Theorist* (2006-08), *This is not a House* (2008), *Reluctant Monoliths* (2009) and *The Rate of Convergence of Two Opposing System Trajectories* (2008-09). The fact that he works in series immediately allows the spectator to perceive one of the structuring characteristics of Edgar Martins' *modus operandi*: the series is the conceptual platform, the domain within which his working method and technical and aesthetic options are generated; on the plane on which the images are received, it functions as a system that not only lends the work conceptual

and thematic coherence but also frames his semantic judgement by granting a context of signification that enables the various images to be discerned and related.

Despite the enigmatic and metaphorical nature of their titles, these series focus on real and concrete places such as airports, an urban setting used to train the British police, various beaches in Portugal, neighbourhoods and houses that have been abandoned or where construction has been halted following the sub-prime mortgage crisis in the United States, and several places and buildings that bear witness to the transformation of the industrial landscape in a region of France. These places are congruent with those depicted in other, older series (which do not form part of this exhibition), such as the photographs of acoustic panels on motorways, landscapes in the Arctic, and images of forests ravaged by fire. In relating all of these places, we are confronted with a world in flux in which the traditional antinomies between built and natural territory, or between the urban and its multiple derivations (suburban, peri-urban, rur-urban), between real and virtual space, are being redefined. It is a topographical approach that makes it possible to highlight and reflect on some of the paradoxes and inconsistencies of an "emerging" geography, which, under the effects of the phenomena of economic and political globalisation, has been becoming ever more *abstract, generic and undifferentiated* and therefore increasingly devoid of history and cultural identity.

In this respect, Edgar Martins' work recovers what has been one of photography's most determinative abilities throughout its history: as a means of representation which facilitates a model by which spatial, social and cultural phenomena can be rendered intelligible, and as an effective means of capturing visible changes in the world. For this reason, it is necessary to highlight the way in which the photographic act creates a sort of *medusa effect* because it interrupts and petrifies temporal continuity; it suspends the present and pushes the perception of history towards the sphere of speculation, thus creating the possibility of another way of understanding history.

Edgar Martins photographs with a large-format camera, a complex piece of equipment which requires time to prepare and must be handled with skill and care. It is a type of technical apparatus that forces the photographer to slow down his movements and obliges him to think about and *idealise* the image even before it is executed. In this case, therefore, it could be said that it is a question not so much of taking but of *making* the photograph. According to this reasoning, the photograph delimits, arranges and totalises reality as a unique image, a peculiar microcosm in which the plane and the elements of the image reveal a discursive intention.

When looking at Edgar Martins' images, it is easy to recognize that they obey a rigorous and calculated formal architecture. Frontal and rectilinear planes predominate, and the details of the scene are framed in such a way as to highlight an appealing (photogenic) geometry in the subject. Thus, for Edgar Martins, representing a place involves making a commitment to visual verisimilitude so that the image is "similar" and tied to the real referent; on the other hand, the artistic challenge lies precisely in superseding its strict documentary function in order to connect the image to a pictorial culture, in other words, in adding a significant aesthetic meaningfulness to the reproductive and testimonial value of the image. As we know, this attempt to adjust reality to the image – in order to make it attractive, suggestive and pleasant – has been at the heart of topographical photography since the nineteenth century, as a genre that aspires to the artistic by interweaving

principles and conventions borrowed from painting and science, and as a practice that has made it possible to link the tradition of the *tableau* with the topographical expectations of modernity. Consequently, photographing landscapes, urban scenarios and architecture according to a documentary style prefigures certain types of *subject matter and motive* as well as a certain model of visuality, a *culture of framing*: a distanced vision which assumes as a rule a fixed, geometrised, stable and autonomous character in which each image is formed in its own unified integrity and each one totalises and frames a microcosm, with no unforeseen elements, obeying a rigorous sense of composition and internal organisation. In this respect, to represent corresponds to an exercise carried out within the conventional parameters of harmony, where the measurements and elements that structure the image are respected in their apparent equilibrium. See, for example, the series *When Light Casts No Shadow*: nocturnal images of airports in which the composition and framing are arranged in accordance with the line of the horizon and the layout of the marks on the tarmac, in particular the lines marking out the ground movement rules for the aircraft and support vehicles. As such, formalism here carries out the function of "defunctionalising" the place itself and of adjusting the real to the artificial nature of the image.

However, it must be made clear that the principles by which the image is constructed in Edgar Martins' photography do not seek merely to enact a formal or poetic digression; rather, they are presented and thought out within his topographical consideration and within the concrete domain of photography's documentary and metaphorical capacities. From a certain point, therefore, what we see is no longer just an airport but also a visual scene that is favourable and open to all types of fictional, phenomenological and visual deambulations. The same is true of the series *The Accidental Theorist*, which reveals a series of photographs taken on beaches at night in which the structure of the composition remains unchanged: a horizontal view, divided by the horizon line, which separates (or joins) the plane of the sand and the black sky. The images reproduce the most diverse themes and occurrences. Some of them, to a certain extent, are predictable and logical, like the rows of wooden posts and sun umbrellas, a beach hut, and vegetation on the edge of the sand. But others introduce a sensation of the uncanny, such as the rain umbrella lost in the middle of the beach, a series of black pipes resting spontaneously on the sand, creating a peculiar design, a wooden platform that appears to be an abandoned stage, a ball in motion and some (very few) solitary moving figures, from among which the most iconic image of the series stands out: that of a woman walking towards the sea (which in the image means the black of the sky) holding a significant number of coloured balloons. What unites these images? Were they staged? Is there a narrative thread?

With its obvious cinematic and theatrical qualities, *The Accidental Theorist* is constructed on the basis of the enigmatic potential of each photograph, in which, symptomatically, the level of indetermination of each image is what supplies and awakens its projective potential. The spectator is placed in a game of uncertainties, in which it is not possible to disentangle the levels of spontaneity and construction involved in the image. Although the image contains a latent realism, the spectator is given the task of dealing with a suggestive but inevitably inscrutable image.

The way in which Edgar Martins invests in this rhetoric of ambiguity immediately enunciates a concrete understanding of the nature of the photographic: as a visual regime linked to an extraordinarily unique type of image; an image involving a high degree of figuration of reality, which reduces (cuts down) the

perception of time and space to a fixed unit, constituting an imagery of separate instants; nevertheless, it is a mode of representation that *oscillates* between a remarkable descriptive ability and a precariousness and incompleteness which endows the image with an unavoidable disruptive quality, in which the experience of looking is interwoven with the experience of thinking in order to establish a complex game in our persistent attempts to gauge the real.

In parallel to his use of analogue devices, Edgar Martins makes use of image processing technology. These are processes which allow the impulses behind his construction of the image to be intensified and energised, and are therefore a way of working on the photograph that conclusively distances him from photographic circles which are obsessed with a certain purism bound up with the truth of the photographic. Moreover, elaborating the image in this way also creates the possibility of convoking other types of visual experiences, such as the cinematic, the theatrical, the pictorial and the sculptural as categories which are strongly linked to poetic, 'artistic', and fictional expression, with the indeterminate nature of the works, and the call for reflection, acting as legitimate and necessary forms and means of representing and reconverting reality, and of reinforcing the possibilities of the image as a sign that expresses time as immersion.

Consequently, it could be said that Martins works the photographic image as a fundamentally paradoxical, dialectical and hybrid representation, as something that brings together a series of irresolvable contradictions, where the two great myths of photography – as truth and as a lie – are mixed up and shuffled in order to reveal the fragility of our visual powers and our inability to hierarchise the forms of the visible. This tenuous but dramatically imprecise and perceptive realist capacity lies at the heart of the images comprising *Dwarf Exoplanets & Other Sophisms*: they are photographs that apparently represent planets, but after looking at them briefly we realise that we are faced with an illusory experience. We do not know what has effectively been photographed. Doubtless it was some type of surface (of a metal, or a stone) that the photographic representation, and the skilled use of lighting, was able to convert into something else, or which at least was able to refer us to the idea of something else. At this point it is possible to perceive the extent to which the photograph is accepted as a territory of fantastic experiences, in which reality is reconfigured – and rewritten – as a formal imagery that reinforces a particular way of seeing and thinking. *Dwarf Exoplanets & Other Sophisms* therefore plays a central and illuminating role in the context of this exhibition because it is the series that best clarifies the spectrum of perceptive possibilities awakened by Edgar Martins' images: as work that links reality and fiction in order to establish a necessarily contradictory domain between the presence of a representation and the illusion of recognition.

As mentioned earlier, this exhibition brings together work created since 2006, which allows the spectator to gain an awareness not only of the rhythm of Edgar Martins' photographic production but also of the conceptual, technical and aesthetic nuances that his work has been absorbing. At this stage, attention should be drawn to the creation of the series *This is not a house* (initially entitled *Ruins of a Gilded Age*), which highlights a subtle inflection towards a more clearly metaphorical, speculative and critical imagery, albeit one which maintains its formalist matrix. The work is the result of a commission placed by the *New York Times Magazine*. Its main aim was to examine the sub-prime mortgage crisis, which unleashed the greatest social and economic crisis in America since the Great Depression, a crisis which has had devastating consequences throughout virtually the entire world. Edgar Martins' images document the exteriors and interiors of houses, neighbourhoods, golf

courses and roads whose construction appears to have been suddenly interrupted. Some images reproduce disconcerting situations, such as the photographs of interiors in which construction appears to have finished but where holes appear in the roof, dry leaves are scattered across the floor, and a chair hangs on a door. Where exteriors are concerned, we see the green of a golf course with its yellowing grass, the facades of houses with broken windows, and areas strewn with detritus. They are scenes of desolation, in which the state of abandonment produces a strangely ghostly atmosphere.

In these photographs, as in most of Edgar Martins' work, neither people nor any sort of action can be seen. They are images which allude to a dilated time. In other words, they enact a temporality that is closer to an epochal understanding than to that arising from fleeting instants of time. On the other hand, they are visions in which authorial and aesthetic discretion predominates, and which seek to appear neutral and impersonal, following the parameters of the documentary style. Psychological containment is favoured and everything is treated in such a way as to convey objectivity, clarity and legibility with respect to the image and the subject that is photographed. It becomes clear that the photographer is seeking to provide us with a partial and ambiguous study.

However, it must be made clear that this ambiguity is intended neither as a lack of differentiation nor as a form of critical abstention or dismissal. On the contrary, it signifies a way of defining an open space that entreats the spectator to experience the possible meanings of the image and the place that is represented. In other words, a dialectical perception of the image is thereby reinforced by placing the spectator before the possibility of an experience of confrontation and doubt that discharges attempts merely to identify what is revealed in the image, because it also incites us to inquire into the *resonance of the images* of the represented referent. The coldness and precision of the photographic record, and the careful composition of the image, are therefore means which make it possible to take advantage of the limits and paradoxes of photography itself, in the sense of an interpretation which is not confined to the boundaries of the image, like a play of uncertainties which invites the spectator to mark out, release and question other images, other pressing issues of collective and individual concern. These images of Edgar Martins' remind us that, as spectators, we do not limit ourselves to passive observance. On the contrary, we are also (or primarily) visual producers.

After *This is Not a house*, Edgar Martins produced three new series. Three distinct approaches that allow new programmatic lines to be discerned, in particular in *The Rate of Convergence of Two Opposing System Trajectories*. This is a work that can be considered as a sort of allegorical and 'artistic' version of the series *This is not a House*. Inside a room that is rendered only in concrete, the images show small objects and building materials, mostly arranged in positions of equilibrium/disequilibrium, in an imagery that alludes not only to the conventions of the still-life genre but also to sculptural practices that privilege the reasoning behind the site-specific intervention. This sculptural sensibility is also present in the series *Reluctant Monoliths*, albeit with a different meaning and scale: in this case, it was primarily a question of exploring (and in some cases, monumentalising) the physical and aesthetic authority of unique objects – such as a pile of crates, an advertising hoarding, or an architectural object – in order to assert their value as an *object-image*.

Finally, there is *A Metaphysical Survey of British Dwellings*, a previously unseen work that is still in development. Following his reflection on the phenomena and derivations of urban space, Edgar Martins is photographing a fictitious city built to serve as a stage on which to train the British Metropolitan Police. The atmosphere is crepuscular, reinforced by the artificial lighting and the black skies, which lend it a seductive, filmic character. At the same time, these images express a dystopian cartography of an almost deserted city (the distant presence of a woman can just about be made out) situated in a confused historical time that is difficult to identify. The buildings are grey, which accentuates the contrast between them and the unexpected presence of the (coloured) names of banks and multinational companies.

Between real and simulated space, this series, like the whole of the exhibition, symptomatically entitled *The Wayward Line*, seeks not only to scrutinise images of places but also, correlatively, to reflect on the place of the photographic. These are therefore images which reflect the world of appearances in its inextricable uncertainties, not allowing the place, as the theatre of historical action, to avoid revealing its banality and strangeness, its evidence and counter-evidence, its truth and its fiction. The aim is therefore to mobilise one of art's most pertinent abilities, namely, its ability to directly question the spectator's convictions, expectations and the way in which he locates himself in the world.

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2010

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