

The Space and Time of Machines

Edgar Martins' work predominantly records the insides of hydropower stations (corridors, tunnels and wells, different types of machinery, turbine halls and control rooms, control panels, work tools, cable bundles etc.) and adds to them some points of disruption by means of occasional images of canals or sheets of water that, on the outside, power the process by which electricity is generated.

In considering a possible title for his work, the artist sought to find productive meaning in *The Time Machine* and also tried enriching this meaning in a subtitle for the series, such as "*an incomplete and semi-objective study of hydropower stations*".

The first possibility reveals the temporal operation which these photographs undertake: "time machines" are not only the machines in the hydropower stations (their technological accessories and the architectural spaces where they are installed) but also the photographic cameras with which he records and freezes the time of the other machines.

The second possible title indicates that these photographs (which admit the always incomplete nature of any survey) reveal a semi-objective character. In other words, they are considered as aesthetic images and not as historical documents.

In the published book, the sequence in which the images are displayed is as important as the individual images themselves. The same criterion will apply to the arrangement of the photographs in an exhibition. The artist's declared intention (which was also made explicit in all of his other series of works and is the guiding thread that runs through his oeuvre) is to establish a visual narrative on the basis of fixed themes.

In this case, Edgar Martins is offering us the narrative of a time that we perceive as past but which remains present. But it is a time whose recuperative power and aesthetic fascination involve the spectator in an exercise of decontextualisation and aestheticization.

The survey recovers a past of exciting technological innovation and optimistic belief in the

future. It records spaces and objects that characterise a suspended time, that of the modern: machines and rooms which simultaneously place us in genuine science-fiction settings and in an unavoidable field of nostalgia. Because the future announced there is here now; and now we know that nothing has happened in the way that the ideological narrative of the modern wanted us to believe that it would.

Light and Movement

These photographs are a product and testimony of the long history of electricity. They are a product because the photographer needed the light produced by electricity to create them. They are a testimony because the objects of interest in these photographs are precisely the places, machines, and instruments that serve to artificially produce this physical phenomenon found in nature: electricity.

Movement and light emerge as being intimately linked both to the production and to the products of electricity. But Edgar Martins, in revealing the forms by means of meticulous and staged lighting, insists on simulating a negation of movement, another predominant characteristic of his work.

Yet the light that makes sight possible and reveals the images to us results from a scientifically measurable movement and the photographic machine adjusts both the time and the amount of light that enters through the lens and exposes the film. The fixity which the images possess is therefore an artificial recourse that produces intense visual results: it appears in all of the fields in which images are created and presented; it takes the photographed object itself into a dimension of artificiality that isolates it in space and suspends it in time, making it ghostly.

Some spaces

In Edgar Martins' photographs, space is considered on several levels: that which exists (which is created) between the photographer (ideally, we repeat the photographer's gaze) and the motif (machines, objects, the landscape); and the space around the machines, which contextualises them, and in which they sometimes stand out and sometimes are diluted.

The machines and objects define the space surrounding them as protective capsules; and their bodies are affirmed in this void. At times, the void is the real space where they are presented, stripped of references: a black background, which we can imagine to be sidereal; a space outside of (our) immediate space, outside of (our) immediate time.

All of the images are frontal and between the photographed bodies and our body there tends to be no space at all, as if we had lost our depth in becoming one with the things that we see. The large images of graphic control panels, recorded as two-dimensional and abstract images, are those which best attain this degree of dematerialisation.

On the other hand, the solutions used to spatially contextualise the objects lend them a more historical dimension by stripping them of any individual protagonism, dissolving them in larger assemblies, in the vertigo of certain “interior landscapes”, such as the huge galleries and control rooms.

The term “landscape” is justified by the nature of Edgar Martins’ panoramic gaze. The term is generally reserved for natural, open spaces rather than closed, built spaces. But this is a case in which extremes touch and overlap. The term “interior” is the touchstone of the overlap between agoraphobic vertigo and the weight of claustrophobia; it permits several readings, all of which are valid: everything really takes place in an interior space; and above all, or from all, a cloak of subjectivity is thrown. The recorded spaces are doubly interior (the insides of rooms inside the Earth) before they are subjectively interior.

Some machines

The most numerous and, to a certain extent, main “characters” in this series are the machines. They are photographed from the front, as if for a sales catalogue, with neither complementary emotion nor internal tension. However, this operation, by which Edgar Martins deliberately uproots the machine from its context, ends up introducing two dimensions of subjectivity, an effect which is enhanced by the rich formal meticulousness and chromatic subtlety captured in each of the images, the way in which the spectator perceives their uselessness (they serve neither to sell the objects in a catalogue nor as a means to study them; the images can only be contemplated), and the direct comparison between the plane from which we are looking and the plane where the machine rests.

Emotion, because the inevitable fascination with the machine, which the modern has introduced into the code of our imagination, now seems to be confronted with an impossibility: that of thinking of technological development as being faultless. *Tension*, because this impossibility, which can be replaced by critical thinking in relation to these societies, subsists here as a largely aesthetic stimulus that is capable of upholding the beauty of the machine against the background of social injustice or the destruction of nature which can stain it. The constrained, clean and immediate space, which the

previously mentioned compositional solutions establish between the gaze and the object, is ideal for developing these feelings.

It is clear that these machines are “good machines”. Independently of the destruction which, together, they might have caused (from the extraction of the raw materials used to create them to the transformation of these materials into their components, as well as their assembly, transportation, and installation by exploited workers), the subsequent effects are infinitely positive (resulting in the production of clean and renewable energy, albeit in the service of an unjust society).

Even so, lay readers of this book or visitors to the exhibition find it impossible to determine (or are uninterested in) the role that each part plays in the production process, or are indifferent to whether the part still works or is now a “museum piece”. This indifference is the same as that revealed by the artist, and ensures that it is essentially a question of recording artistic objects. The precision of the technical captions accompanying each image, on which Edgar Martins insists, does not so much fulfil a desire for rigour as it does form part of the aestheticization strategy mentioned previously.

It is true that there may be an effect which, in time, or in its aims, overcomes the purpose of these images – one day they will open themselves up (the speed of technological renovation perhaps justifying this process) to the supplementary role of documents of industrial history. But for now, expressing the subjective side of the artist’s choices, his recording methods and layout/editing solutions, these images will assert themselves in the domain of the nostalgia for a certain technological modernism and its cultural and ideological interpretation. And they will do so by incorporating, in their procedures and in the criteria that we use to judge them, traditional categories of art such as the portrait or the still life.

Some instruments

This dialogue with the genres of classical painting is enhanced by the attention that Edgar Martins pays to the objects, instruments and tools that are specifically related to the machines.

We return to the domain of the individual. However, the abandonment of the large machines is replaced by the isolation of certain elements: machine components or tools used to assemble or repair the machines. Such objects range from the infinitely large to the infinitely small. The artificiality of the black backgrounds negates all spatial referents and the composition of the images allows both the forms and the form-colours of their practical function and technical and historical reality to be

autonomized, since it prevents us from interpreting the scale (which is revealed only in the captions).

In the series *Reluctant Monoliths* (2009) or the earlier series *The Accidental Theorist* (2006), Edgar Martins presents the objects as monumentalised archaeological documents and reduces the (industrial or coastal) landscapes to the re-contextualisation of the objects shown in them. In this series, the objects exist as “artificial” (mechanical) still lives, which ultimately function as portraits of objects or even as simulations of sculptures – unique signs whose physical and aesthetic authority the artist wishes to recover in order to grant them the value of *object-images*.

Some people

The absence of people from these images is a representational solution that interlinks the aesthetic choice made in Edgar Martins’s work and the reality of the desertification not only of the technical sites which house the machines but also of the natural and human landscapes where the dams were constructed.

No more than half a dozen people, including specialists and cleaning and security staff, run places which, in some cases, were intended to house up to 250 workers just fifty years ago. These people and their families were intended to live in real villages, hubs of population and urban development in a future which, today, has ultimately emerged as uninhabited.

At each dam, the automating of the machines has alienated the concrete and immediate power by which reality is governed and concentrated the control of a complex hydroelectric system in a distant centre, lending consistency to the possibility of fictionalising the controlling of man by machines which he himself created.

What can now be considered as false expectations of the future, or broken promises, stems from projects that were conceived when man and machine formed part of the same future, when the particular submitted to the universal. The artist alludes to the paradox of this impossibility and his images are a testimony of the link that has been broken.

Some water

Among the vast series of images captured, the only ones which take water as their theme do so by introducing a deviation in the internal narrative of the published work, the compositional rhythm of which speeds up or slows down in the alternation between machines, objects and large interior

spaces.

Why this near refusal, given that water is at the root of the project, its commissioning, and the places where it was realised (because it is the driving force of hydropower stations, their *raison d'être*)? Edgar Martins resisted the seductive power of water for conceptual and compositional reasons. The solutions used to tackle the exteriors of the dams (which, for decades, have been lacking in heroic and/or descriptive images) seemed fated to contradict the compositional clarity and the frontal nature of the images "invented" by Edgar Martins, unbalancing the structure of the work. For this reason, it only seemed admissible to use them as preludes, endings or "diversions".

Lastly, the photos were taken at Alqueva and Castelo do Bode, which are the first and last large dams to be constructed in the country as well as being two dams that are extremely different not only in technical terms but also in terms of their function in the productive system and their interaction and dynamics in relation to the surroundings. The bodies of water, which are made infinite by the absence of any terrestrial mark and by the way in which they dissolve in the hazy atmosphere, or their containment by the constructive geometry of the access canals, completes the register of tension/relaxation, acceleration/fixity of the whole project.

And with this solution of limiting the representation of dams' most natural and abundant resource and the excessive representation of their artificial assets, Edgar Martins highlights a deliberate cultural and fictional path trodden by the modern. In the face of the insistent, singular and symbolic presence of machinery and its infinite forms and components, spaces and times, the near absence of water is the suggestion of a secret: matter which we know to exist (out there, up there, or in the adjacent cave) but which does not materialise in the paths along which our gaze settles on objects. For this reason, water hovers over these photographs like an impossible image, a symbolic presence, a testimony of the natural in the face of the built, an abstract idea which saves or destroys us, the complement of light or its absence.

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He has been an art consultant and programmer for the Fundação EDP since 2000.

He was the President of the Portuguese section of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) during the 2004-2007 triennial and was also the programming director of the Elvas Contemporary Art Museum between 2007 and 2010.

As an art critic, he published numerous articles in the printed press between 1984 and 2001.

He has staged numerous high profile national and international art exhibitions since 1985. He was the curator of the official representation of the Portuguese galleries at the Arco International Contemporary Art Fair, Madrid (1998) and the Estampa International Print and Contemporary Art Fair, Madrid, 2005.

He is the author of numerous texts published in co-authored publications, including *Contemporary Portugal*, ed. António Costa Pinto, Stanford University Press, 2nd edition, 2011, *Historia da Arte Portuguesa*, ed. Dalila Rodrigues, Fubu editores, Porto, 2009, *História da Arte Portuguesa*, ed. Paulo Pereira, Círculo Leitores/Temas e Debates, Lisbon, 1995.