

A CONVERSATION WITH QUENTIN BAJAC

– When you decide to go to one place or another, is your choice determined by a subject, a country or an event? Or does it operate through the intermediary of an image you've seen in a newspaper or elsewhere?

– There has to be a photograph in the newspaper. Or an image which comes from reading an article. The journalistic way of relating facts, which is incomplete, without affect or commentary, is the best stimulus for my imagination: I see situations. Nothing which happens during these first moments can help me later on, except by setting something off, but that's still where everything begins. There's a kind of echo between what happens for me with the newspaper – the shaping of images, the relationship it's possible to have with something which isn't real but has a clear connection with the real – and what may happen for the person looking at my photographs. Between these two moments, my work is just to add a degree of experience to a fraction of reality. And there's something else, with the newspaper. Once you open it up, it's as if the whole world is there to be seen but it remains indecipherable in its totality, anarchic in proportion to its visibility. The more you perceive, the less you understand. I have to go through that saturation of facts and absence of meaning before I decide to set out, and at that point setting out amounts to plunging into reality,



in a fairly primitive way actually, with the idea that confronting things as they are might put an end to this confusion. But that doesn't matter. What's important is that I'm following the news, that my glance is superficial, changeable, and that I'm trying to hold on to that, like a treasure to be guarded: like the reporter I used to be, completely open to what comes my way. And that I make sure it's still possible.

– In the past, you sometimes photographed official situations related to the 'regulation' of the international order but you're no longer doing that.

– I don't do it any more. There were some attempts in the early years and several images have remained. When you first discover the possibilities of the large-format camera, there's a temptation to back away so as to include a maximum number of details. It was a kind of experiment, for me and for the camera, an experiment in order to see what it could record, what it could take in, from these big events staged for the media. And there was the idea of the 'spectacle of the world', a rather empty concept which that particular world, the one of international leaders and summits, lends itself to with the active indulgence which has also been called the 'spectacle'. It's not this indulgence which bothered me – by definition, the spectacle doesn't offer resistance locally, it's even trivial at that level – but, rather, its pendant: that ironic, critical tone which images made in these situations automatically generate with the descriptive possibilities of the large-format camera. The image is caught between assent and demystification, an ironic distance which is also a form of collaboration and acceptance. The spectacle traps the image, neutralises it. And it makes it impossible for me to proceed in my usual way, which involves a certain innocence or unconsciousness, whether genuine or not. If the image can challenge reality, it's not by accepting the rules of that kind of game, which I prefer to avoid entirely.

– But the pictures made in those situations were also images of co-operation and dialogue. Between these photographs and the ones taken in the field, in the chaos of the real world, one might have the impression of a vision which voluntarily contradicted itself. Was that deliberate? And do you think that the fact you then stopped dealing with these international events gives your work a different tone?

– I don't think so, and whether my pictures are seen in one way or another isn't really in my control; I don't try to present an interpretation of the world. I mainly photographed those events because it was possible to do so and if I stopped, this is also because it became tiresome, because I didn't like being in that very constricted environment which is organised for the media. It's the image of a world you don't want to live in, one which seems perfectly unreal and offers no fascination other than that for emptiness. That's also why I spent such a long time in war zones.

– What do you mean by that?

– That in a world that is subject to so much control, with so little immediacy, reality itself has lost ground. As a young reporter, I wanted to see the places where life might be more simple, even if it's also more difficult. It was an escape, the classic theme of

running away from yourself: when you feel so characterless, it can become imperative – or in any case, tempting – to confront something radically different. Going off somewhere, without even having the intention to bear witness, exporting a personal feeling of unreality to places of hardship, was probably like a spoiled child's fantasy. But the taste for freedom doesn't burden itself with excuses. And yet, I knew that such an elsewhere was a myth which only exists for those who don't understand anything about the place where they are, who don't understand the language spoken there. That it's a fictitious territory. It was a motionless journey, from the sensation of unreality given off by our world to the fiction of another world where the real would finally be real. But I was cultivating all the signs of idiocy – I had the knack – and this is what I still retain from those years. Even today, it seems important to me, in order to make a photograph, not to try to understand what's before my eyes and above all, not to talk, not to believe in exchange. It's the role of the fool, for whom everything happens without resistance and without leaving a trace. He has forgotten everything and nothing is important; he's thoughtless to the point of disappearing. Such a frame of mind goes well with photography because this continuously repeated disappearance gives rise each time to the possibility of an image.

– *You're addressing two quite important issues here: the choice of war as a subject and the question of your presence/absence when you take pictures.*

– Yes, I can't separate these two things. With war, you know why you're going the first time: to see what it looks like. But what made me continue afterwards was the fact that it offered certain possibilities. At the time, it was still very confused; all I saw was that in these situations where reality is disrupted, matter and human matter expose themselves and become more visible. Obviously, this isn't an objective or supernatural phenomenon but a simple perceptual illusion which could be due to the differential between the surrounding disorder and the inner one, which calms sensitivity and makes it more alive. An illusion you're ready to accept, like everything which might be useful. The exposure process I'm talking about is very partial, moreover, it just skims the surface of what might constitute a full reality. But this improved visibility seems to give the camera a grip on things, so that it can function 'alone'. My way of taking photographs is very simple, minimal: being there and only doing what's necessary, holding the camera. I believe in the power of recording and I'm just working on that, on what constitutes the singularity of photography, what belongs to it alone. The actual recording isn't a mysterious process; it doesn't happen by itself, like magic. But this first step, this mechanical intrusion into the domain of thought, memory and imagination, marks a shift. It's more decisive than all the other steps which will be accomplished by the mind itself. That will always be photography's strength. It doesn't have the extensive means at work in film, literature or elsewhere, but it does have this intrinsic power. Which is probably why documentary photographers are not or should not be seen as artists exactly like the others: their medium is too powerful, which means that their own intervention is not all that significant or at least it doesn't follow the logic of a sequence intentionally going from conception to realisation. We might say that a photograph is always a construction, or even that it betrays the standards of the society its author belongs to (how or why would that

author escape it?). All of that is obvious, but I think it's also important to understand that a photo is above all the document, the trace of the photographer's experience, of his or her essential and contingent presence. Photography is phenomenological. If they don't see that, photographers are doomed to play on a field which isn't

Il n'est pas nécessaire que tu sortes de ta maison. Reste à ta table et écoute. N'écoute même pas, attends seulement. N'attends même pas, sois absolument silencieux et seul. Le monde viendra s'offrir à toi pour que tu le démasques, il ne peut faire autrement, extasié, il se tordra devant toi.

FRANZ KAFKA
(*Méditations sur le péché,
la souffrance, l'espoir et le vrai chemin*)

Epigraph of *Un homme qui dort*, by Georges Perec

their own but that of painters or writers, where they will never really have things under control. So for me, making a photograph amounts above all – as Robert Bresson said – to being 'sure to have used to the full all that is communicated by immobility and silence'. Immobility, speed – the same thing – silence, indifference. I've often used indifference, and still do, as a strategy of disappearance. Intention is a violation of this rule of the primeval presence; the recording only achieves its effectiveness through the operators' neutrality, or neutralisation, transparency, when you've become a machine, have abandoned that intention, managed to withdraw from yourself and disappear into the things in front of you. I think that situations of chaos, of dislocation, allow this unity to be attained more easily because reality is more open in such circumstances, sometimes even wide open. In this sense, war is an artificial means for me and I know just how limited my field is. What I'm describing is perhaps only the most elementary form of photography, a tautology, a statement of the obvious, but I have to say that it's just one moment in the work, and especially that, in order to get my point across, I'm being excessive. The purity of the recording process is never attained; it's only an ideal which *leads you on*. And as for disappearance, it doesn't happen either. It's even desirable for something you have inside yourself to make it fail: if not, there's no picture.

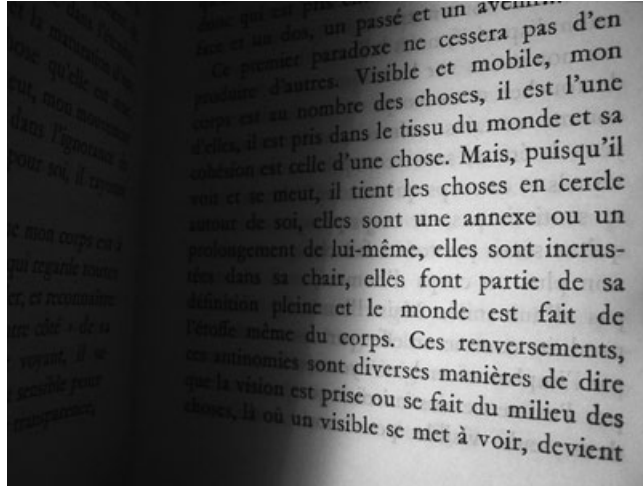
– *You speak about yourself, your state of mind, but how about what's in front of your lens?*

– I just want to speak about the continuity extending from the self to things and say that in photography, this continuity can appear, paradoxically, in an extreme emotional and intellectual withdrawal.

– *Which is expressed by a physical withdrawal?*

– When we speak of 'things', 'reality' or 'the world', we're mainly talking about the human being, or at least for me: that's the subject of my pictures. The distance is the central question, the one which determines the others and is never settled. Within the image, it becomes the assertion of a stance vis-à-vis reality, whether that position is sought or not, accepted or not. In a way, it's the photographer's first statement. And when we speak of a particular photograph in terms of the 'right' distance, it's not because this 'rightness' is absolute or definitive but because we feel that this element is

coherent with the others, within the system of the image. Some distances – the most common ones – give the impression of a better understanding of the facts of human existence. But it's necessary to make constant adjustments between two misleading desires: that of moving closer, with the impossibility or taboo of being very close, and that of moving away, with the risk of losing the human content. Moving very far away often amounts to reducing the world to figures in a setting; when otherness disappears, I lose interest. I used the word *adjustment* like I might use *learning process* and, far from that kind of humility, I've been tempted by the impossible balancing act which consists of combining a good portrait, the precise description of human relations and a successful landscape in one and the same image. That's



Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'oeil et l'esprit*

also why, at the beginning, I decided that my pictures would be large format. It's the dream of the total image which would contain all the aspects of human life, like a great novel, one which would make the viewer feel everything and understand everything. And it's not completely futile to be unreasonable: you tell yourself that with a little luck, and improvement, that totality will eventually appear in the sum of all the images. But reality always catches up with the photographer and I've often taken pictures from a distance for the simple reason that it's hard, really hard, to get a good image close up when you're in the thick of the action with a large-format camera in your hand. To counter this excess stemming from the lack of control, I've made every effort to come closer in order to place myself at the distance where the human relationships are visible, multiple, active, where they remain problematic. As a photographer who works outside, my domain is the social being, the public space. The most important reality for me is composed of people who act upon it as much as they are subject to it. Bodies in history. These active distances, proper to every human gathering, can be found in the theatre, with its relationships between the actors and with the audience, the freedom of the actor and the inevitability of the text, and the stage as a locus of spatial constraint and the expression which is made possible precisely by this constraint, by the human scale of the space. The photographer's position is that of the audience: close enough to see each face, distant enough to see all of them. Because photographers come from elsewhere, they remain strangers among the others (their solitude comes from the very fact that they're among the others) and they're subject to a tension between conflicting forces, their balancing act: belonging to the world and not participating in it.

– You just used the word history. Is it what we call 'History with a capital H', or at any

rate the one dictated by the media, which interests you and leads you to work mainly on current events?

– It's true, I'm almost always in the domain of the news event, which the media produce and consume to justify their existence. If my work were a critique of the mass media and their mystification of reality, I'd do things differently. But this isn't my approach. I'm an action photographer – I look for situations and I look to put myself

in them. Within the indefinable mass of the manifestations of the real, at least the ones which are meaningful with regard to what we call the shared destiny, the news event probably plays no more than a marginal or symptomatic role, but for me it's more of a means than a subject. I don't go here or there in order to relate what everyone knows is happening there, what the newspapers have already spoken about, but to gain access to situations which, by virtue of their direct relationship with the topical event – and, regardless of their exemplary nature in this respect, far from the 'symbol' the press is looking for – are worthwhile primarily for their own sake. People, a story. I should also say that when I started with photography, I was drawn to the news event for another, totally different reason. At the time, I was too shy and too lost to be able to take pictures out in the street, and I saw that being a reporter could give me both



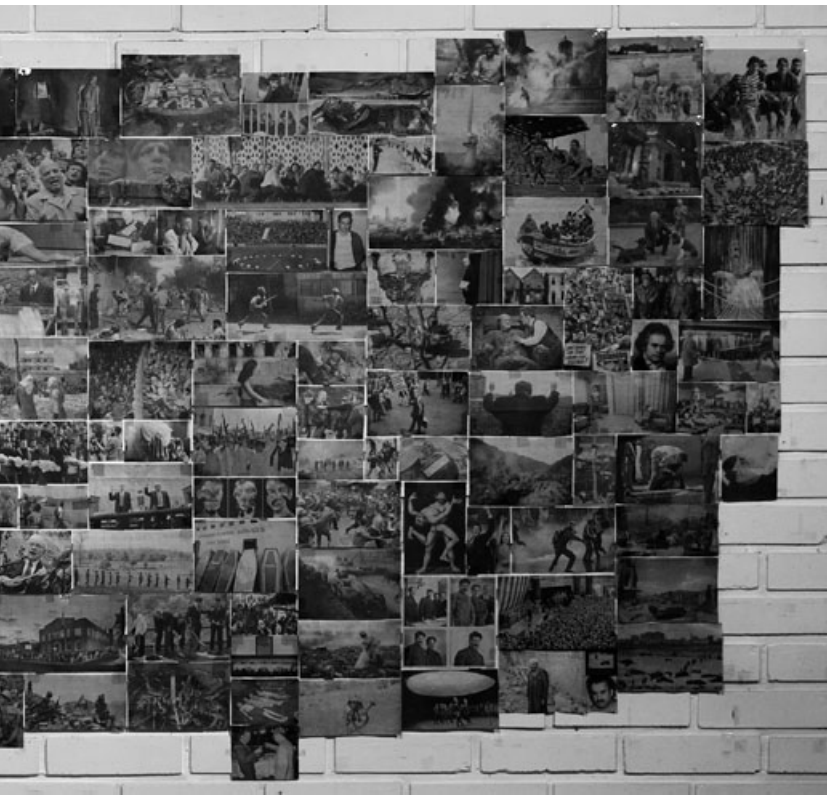
legitimacy and a subject. A limited subject and a superfluous legitimacy, that's for sure, but which were necessary for me all the same. It was a cover and a vehicle, and that's still more or less the case. That form of passivity which consists of being at the mercy of current events in the thoughtless way of the reporter makes it possible to reach certain kinds of situations almost in spite of yourself, by neutralising the question of the subject. I'm a little distrustful of the idea of 'having a subject'. I think that presumes a preconception, a kind of belief in the established nature of the real, which runs counter to its intelligence and flexibility. And that this amounts to asserting yourself, unilaterally, as an objective fact. By reducing the equation this way, it is in fact possible to give yourself a feeling of responsibility in relation to the world – in its most hypothetical form – and the comfort of a viewpoint. But this position of authority over reality quickly becomes ridiculous and ineffective when you're taking on something as general as world affairs. It's pointless to call reality into question without taking the risk of open-

ing yourself up to it, in total uncertainty. Of attempting to encounter it, rather than competing with it. How then is it possible to reach that point of intersection, if every movement takes me away from it? The solution, however impure and ambiguous it may be, is to 'occupy' my forces by letting them follow the quite predictable whims of the media caravan. We know that the media system is everywhere and that it makes everything look alike, reduces everything to a generic condition. But this system, because of its very arrogance, is also a soft underbelly and it's more than easy to subvert

it from within and, curiously, make it a means of access to the world.

– *That's fine, but does your work include an ambition to relate an aspect of history? Is it, in that way, a documentary project?*

– No. And yet, when I started ten years ago, I saw possibilities for that as well. I told myself that current affairs had never really been seen in that way, through something like a super-lative version of the reportage. There was a context: the 'end of history' had been announced, but history seemed to be getting going again; there had been talk of the 'death of the event' – owing to the never-ending production of such events – but it was back on the agenda in its integral form. But as I said, in the face of such a complex subject, a body of photographic work cannot aspire to this kind of account. Especially if you've chosen the single image, one which



is not confronted with others in a series or through montage, or which isn't shaped through text. The single image, especially when it's given the form of an autonomous object, is bound to seem somewhat closed, almost obtuse, impenetrable. It makes deferred use of its information value by playing on, or against, its formal properties. In 2003 I had the unfortunate idea of calling a book *History*, which created a fruitless misunderstanding. In reality, the slightest over-intellectualising would be incompatible with the insignificance of my position in the field, which is the basic principle. I'm too busy trying to resolve the immediate information coming from reality.

– *So the documentary part of your work would be elsewhere. How do you define it?*

– My work is a composite whole which could be described at the very most as a record of current affairs, an arbitrary, incomplete record. In and of themselves, however, my

pictures have a documentary value, I think. But they're so hybrid that it's difficult to define. Through their link to current events, they belong to reportage; through their production conditions, the sum of refusals and affirmations which has made them possible, I'd like them to be the free form of an apprehension of reality as well – or at least the elucidation of a pathology. They speak of what they show, literally and in every sense.

– *But your images don't fall out of the sky. Every document is a constructed fact.*

– Or the constructed trace of an 'experienced' fact. For me, the construction lies in the establishment of a fixed term: the stance. I can't say that this stance is 'documentary' because, as we've seen, its motivation is elsewhere. But it contains the possibility of the document. The very strict protocol which corresponds to this stance *also* favours the production of the document. And then, I think that the fact my images aspire to a certain form of beauty is what leads them towards 'knowledge work', as it's called. Or at least I hope so.

– *And to go beyond that issue, you don't situate your work within the relatively limited concept of a documentary style, which would insist on luminosity, readability, a certain degree of frontality. That doesn't seem to apply to what you do.*

– Because I'm attracted by things which don't belong to that style. In the past, I was often drawn towards fairly subdued tones, with relatively soft effects; in the recent images, like *Camp Texaco*, there's much more light, but even so, they remain at a distance from the documentary canon because what's involved is the pursuit of an overly intense luminosity, a harsh vertical light. Thinking about that kind of merciless light brings the word *existential* to mind. I've always been attracted by it but it's difficult to control. It flattens everything, even time, duration, meaning. And obviously, it doesn't really improve the readability.

– *Your photographs also have a certain degree of lyricism, albeit fairly dry, which you don't disavow.*

– That's true. It remains cool and contained but it colours my images. It seems to arrive as soon as they represent people, especially when they're involved in an action with a tragic dimension. Lyricism is a quality which has disappeared from our advanced societies, where people are limited to the individual, utilitarian and ultimately absurd gesture; it's clear that I don't photograph the world as it is but either as it should not be – hardship – or as it should be – the human being restored to history. A shared and uncertain destiny, a possibility of fellowship. But I have the impression that I've been speaking to you about my pictures as I'd like them to be, not as they really are.

– *Another key element of the documentary style is frontality. You're often frontal, but not always.*

– All I can say about frontality is that it's not a system for me. Frontality is something

within me. I never think about moving around a subject in order to find the 'right' angle. I take things as they come in the instant of the relationship, whether it works or not. For that matter, I never try to make what's called a 'good' photograph, and when that happens on occasion, like a mistake, its vulgarity hits me like a slap in the face. To put it another way, I always see what's in front of me as the *face* of the thing or the situation; I can't disassociate its appearance from my experience of it. I don't recognise the objectivity of its outward manifestation. The frontality also comes from the fact that my presence in a given place is often the outcome of a struggle; I don't calculate the approach, it's frontal and sometimes brutal. Nor do I recognise myself in frontality which corresponds to a search for flatness. I'm incurably attached to the story, narration, and this calls for depth. The depth of the image is the space open to action; it's the metaphor of time on a human scale, the time of life and the time of the story.

– It's true, your work has an almost fictional dimension, or at least one which is strongly narrative ...

– ... and which can seem old-fashioned, which looks like a kind of naïveté for someone who doesn't see the effectiveness of this approach, its permanence and contemporary relevance. Some outdated aspects of representation in painting can be usefully revived today and put in the service of photography and its phenomenological hold on the real. The refusal of narration in photography probably leads to a 'vision' of the world, not to mention richer formal possibilities. But such an approach has become as banal as humanist photography could be fifty years ago. In the best of cases, this refusal can offer a challenge but, today, it's more often the simple repression of our 'soft' side in the face of a disillusioned world, a way of rising above it all, which actually amounts to an inept form of description, a state of affairs devoid of critical power, a literalness without any opening for the imagination. And besides, there's been so much description. The world never stops looking at itself. Description alone no longer seems to be strong enough as a weapon, or even a comfort, when it leads to an image which mimics the world, when the image becomes as unbearable as the world and winds up superfluously acquiescing to it. That said, my attachment to a form of narration may stem solely from the fact that the camera is the means of a physical projection onto the world – the instrument of freedom, the object which sets me going – and that, through a kind of identification, I can only use it in the way it was originally conceived: as a system for projecting light which obediently respects the conventions of perspective established centuries earlier. Geometric projection defines the playing ground.

– Does this interest in narrative explain the fact that your titles, even when they convey a certain amount of information, often contain little description and do not follow a standardised format of the place-and-date variety?

– I haven't come up with the right formula. The photograph is found as much as it's made and I'm often torn between the totally anti-artistic desire to give my images 'good' names in order to exorcise their accidental origins and that of remaining more strictly descriptive, closer to the caption. Paradoxically, this second approach leaves more possibilities for the image by avoiding a needless tension with its referent. But

it's not simple when an action has to be described as well. The title can shed light on an image or make it unnecessarily obscure.

– *Why are they in English? And why are there some exceptions?*

– Because, in certain cases and not very consciously, I look for a correspondence between the picture and my memory of that moment. The places I visit have been sufficiently trampled underfoot by the worldwide media; they're often thankless, unlucky areas which have that pathetic air of global resemblance and seem to be devoid of culture. The title comes to me, by association, in that limited, all-purpose English called 'international'. It increases the neutrality, since the image seems less threatened by a title in an impoverished language. And for me as a French-speaker, there's also a certain beauty in that purely functional language: the words, in their banality and transparency, ultimately resist meaning. But however obvious what is represented might be, the title is an interpretation, at once a minor act of violence against the image and a source of misunderstandings. And yet, the image can't really do without it.

– *You mentioned the autonomy of the image, which brings us to the choice you've made to express yourself through the tableau, an autonomous form which is delimited by the frame and can sometimes assume large dimensions. What are your reasons?*

– The tableau is perhaps the form corresponding to a kind of egotistical expression/self-inflation, and nature's just revenge on someone who used to lay claim, probably by arrogance, to disappearance. Or an ingenuous appetite for art and a desire to elevate simple photographs, to set them apart. Which is true, just as it's true that this choice came from the intuition that only that form had enough *girth* to accommodate the successive displacements, the sequence of disappearances and appearances, transfers and counter-transfers and

resolve them in an indecisive way, without interrupting them, like a last overture (these developments preceding the final form are not intended to be seen in the image, and if they are seen, it's like the sketch underneath the painting, or the painters' brushstrokes, their technique and their craft; what I'm trying to describe is nothing other than the *craft*). Only this form, through its pronounced materiality and the dimensions it can be given, can bring this very physical process to completion. To paraphrase Flaubert (with a certain degree of liberty), we've been everywhere in the image – not the hand, not the eye, but the entire body – ; we've made our way through these fields and demonstrated a certain energy to the point of vanishing into it and – now, in the image – not being visible anywhere: the authors are conspicuous



Only this form, through its pronounced materiality and the dimensions it can be given, can bring this very physical process to completion. To paraphrase Flaubert (with a certain degree of liberty), we've been everywhere in the image – not the hand, not the eye, but the entire body – ; we've made our way through these fields and demonstrated a certain energy to the point of vanishing into it and – now, in the image – not being visible anywhere: the authors are conspicuous

by their absence. The photographer deserts the image so that it will be better inhabited. And to unambiguously position the person looking at it as the beholder. The image is a very special object because it's an object that thinks. And thinks about us and looks at us. This is what gives it the presence which retains our attention. We can't say that about every image – and even less so where mine are concerned: in this conversation, I'm only talking about the imaginary qualities of my photos – but only the one which, perhaps through the multiple relationships between its components and the obscure but organic coherence of this interweaving, permits the association of ideas which is the most 'distant and right', as Godard said, more or less.

– I also see this choice as a fairly pronounced desire to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable things. Withdrawal from the world and presence in it, openness to it, but also dramatic and documentary form, austerity of the recording and marked painterliness, and so on.

– That's right, and you've already written about the visual paradoxes of my images. They probably reflect my contradictory ambitions, in terms of both my relationship to the real and the images I make. To state things simply: I believe in the image. I had to go through severe periods of doubt in order to get there, some fifteen years ago, but today I can say that I believe in the possibility of the single image as a perfectly autonomous 'world' in itself. And I think that the large-scale tableau can contain these discordant forces and make a synthesis of them – if the image is successful, which is to say, among other things, if the photograph was shot with a certain orthodoxy.

– But beyond that orthodoxy, aren't you still trying to place yourself within a painting tradition?

– To begin with, we have to speak about the longstanding confusion which always leads to seeing a given aspect of a photograph as the reproduction of an existing motif from the history of painting. I'm not saying that there's no reproduction in my work; quite the contrary, in a more or less conscious way, we refer to what we already know, be it a painting or any other element integrated into our reality, because that history is also part of our own history. For that matter, the most amateur practice of photography implies the adoption of a basic element of that tradition: visual perspective. But we often forget two things. First, that representation, for the sake of verisimilitude, can never offer an infinite number of possibilities. To make an image work, the solutions available to the photographer are often the ones already found by the painter because they've acquired a cultural permanence in the history of seeing. And second, that the fact that painting came before photography doesn't imply the same relationship where the subject is concerned: what the painter saw in his time, the photographer can see today. If the painter used a corpse as the model for a dead Christ, we see the figure of Christ in the photograph of a dead soldier. Here, cultural determinism only comes into play on the viewer's side. And this is probably even truer in my case, given that I often work away from modern society, in situations which seem to come from another era – although I see them as having an extreme modernity. Then there's the question of deliberate reproduction through the use of the computer.

– Yes, because the painterliness became more pronounced at the time you were manipulating the images. How did you reach that decision?

– It's funny, but I only made that decision after I left Magnum. That goes to show the social weight of another tradition, that of Magnum and the reportage. But it also coincided with the time I was trying to come closer to the subject, to come close; as we've seen before, it's difficult to capture the presence of the subject in the borderline conditions I'm always confronting and with the rigour of the large-format camera. I used the computer like the musician uses drugs, to arrive at something I couldn't yet reach by myself, through what I've always considered as a real asceticism. Obviously, once a certain dimension of the image had been altered, it wasn't easy to recognise the limits of the intervention afterwards. I've never made a fetish out of the instant the shot is taken, but as I said before in a different way, I'm attached to what makes for the primitive strength of the image, its irreducibility – which is tied to the moment more than the instant, to a process of experience more than any so-called flash of inspiration. So I was afraid of irrevocably losing something precious, something that had always been fundamental to my approach. But I understood that it was possible to preserve this aspect, on the condition that the intervention remained limited, and that the 'moment experienced' was touched up with some of the same 'moment experienced'. There's something in digital manipulation which resembles the pursuit of a pipe dream, an apparently ideal image which in fact only follows that prescribed by the painterly tradition. The manipulated, image, because it is subject to the intention of its author and laden with his or her meagre references, falls short of what reality offers with its inventiveness and *imagination*. I've occasionally made some extensive interventions but, with the exception of a few moments of grace – so to speak – with the computer, all I could see in the result was the work of a minor painter, a kind of copyist. So the most common retouching for me consists of ridding the image of what qualifies it as photography in the most thankless way: distortions caused by the lens, eyes closed for a fraction of a second, things like that. In any case, you quickly realise that what seems like a defect in a photograph, a failed shot, ultimately belongs to its structure, its logic. If you touch it, the whole image resists. In some ways, we're more manipulated by the image than we can manipulate it ourselves, and if it has become important for me to spend time on an image, with the computer, the reason is to have a better understanding of that structure, to become a technician.

– To go back to an old debate about truth in art – I'm speaking about the main argument directed against realism in the nineteenth century, according to which exact reproduction could not render 'truth' because such truth exists beyond the appearance of things – do you consider these infringements on photographic reproduction, however infrequent they are, as serving the 'truth' of the image? Or is it simply to make them more harmonious?

– Honestly, I don't know. Even if it's almost gone, any remaining pretension of truth in photography implicitly raises doubts; it's an established reflex which, luckily, has freed the photographer from an obligation. As for the 'truth' of the image, as attained by

artistic means and in some way self-proclaimed, I prefer the idea of 'true' which is more assuredly recognised by its *effectiveness*, as Bresson said. And, to continue using words which are a bit too grandiose, it seems to me that the beauty of a photograph doesn't come only from its pictorial qualities but rather from its force, which is to say – but I don't know how to put it – from a competition between its subject and its form. Although the subject is only forceful because of the questions accompanying it (their insistence and their ramifications) and the form is only achieved with the dose of luck proper to the medium. It's through these questions, doubts or weaknesses that the photography of the real gives a critical twist to the classic duality between the thing represented and the way it's represented, which are mutually contingent through the instantaneity of the shot and the sum of the surrounding phenomena. A good photographic image might be like a good song: heard separately, the words and the music don't quite seem complete; together, they constitute a new form. In the same way, I think about the exhibition like musicians think about their albums: ten independent tracks, overall unity.

– *When I hear you talk about the belief in the image and its autonomy, I wonder about your position on the role of the image in the world, its responsibility if you like, and consequently, the responsibility of the artist in society.*

– As you already know, that's an idea which makes me want to run away. But wasn't there someone who said that human rights should also include the right to remain silent and the right to leave? Shut up and leave, that's my programme. I'm not ready to give in to that strange custom which forces the artist to produce a theory *in addition*.

– *But your pictures are intended to be seen.*

– They could tell us, like Rimbaud, 'my eyes are closed to your light. I am an animal, a nigger'. The image is only responsible for giving us the responsibility to look. A photograph can only result from one ethic – adjusting the relationship to the real – and it is marked by this, but in itself remains devoid of signification and moral thrust. In its openness to meaning, it can only be what the viewer makes of it. That can be seen as a weakness, or the source of its power, its irreducible nature. Through this silence, it becomes an object of fascination. But this same silence is difficult to accept because it leaves us alone in the face of ourselves. We wouldn't say that about a movie, which can serve as a model; it offers an analogy of life and film is a humanist art. Photography is simply inhuman, and it's from that position of inhumanity that it 'thinks' about our humanity. This may be why photography about suffering and misfortune is so difficult to look at: in misfortune, the absence of meaning is no longer tolerable. We would be more reassured if the human link of intention and meaning were there to guide us inside the image. We would also prefer – it would be simpler – that the image be poor, that it be aligned with the poverty of what it represents, in the name of sobriety and as proof of its honesty. That's the form taken by the minimum guaranteed commitment, so to speak: image of poverty, image necessarily poor. Restitution of the poverty stolen from the subject. Refusal of beauty – or of strength, or of this thing which is complicated to define –, which would only amount to seduction, an attempt

to neutralise the testimony. But beauty isn't a luxury; it's an additional cruelty and a resource for the intelligence. The image brings the testimony to us so that we become witnesses ourselves. It is only responsible for giving us back our gaze, and, along the path I've been describing, that moment is the last step.

*Text based on an interview carried out in June 2010.
Translated from French by Miriam Rosen.*

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