

Enouncing the city Notes on The Builders

«Method: we should either give up talking of the city, talking about the city, or else make ourselves talk about it in the simplest way in the world, talk about it in obvious, familiar terms. Get rid of all preconceived ideas. Stop thinking in ready-made terms, and forget what city-planners and sociologists have said.»

Georges Perec, *Espèces d'espaces*, 1974

The tradition of public commissions for photography almost dates back to the birth of photography itself. The ways it operated were still extremely haphazard when, back in 1851, through the voice of Mérimée and the Historic Monuments Committee he chaired, the French State asked five photographers to present pictures of 175 buildings in Paris, with a view to their restoration. Up until the very latest Datar Photographic Mission and its many imitators, the photographic commission was often associated with listing buildings, dwellings, and the lie of the land. From one commission to the next, the challenges of document production have evolved. In the best-case scenario, objectivity criteria have been dropped or, more accurately put, patrons now reckon it is standard that transparency is a style, like the "documentary style" worked out by Walker Evans. Something to do with the specular and the established is nevertheless anticipated, for the public people involved are forever going along with photography, when what is at issue is the depiction of a city, region, or area.

Producing a photographic series depicting Hérouville-Saint-Clair was the task assigned to Sabine Delcour by the Lower Normandy Contemporary Art Centre in 1999. A way for the patron to include his own city in an exhibition devoted to the imaginary aspect of spaces and their arrangement ("Let's imagine, a place", March-June 2000). For Hérouville-Saint-Clair has developed, from the early 1960's on, around an old village which nowadays forms one of its districts, and has been conspicuously marked by the utopias that have informed the construction of new towns in France. In addition to its design involving five areas linked by footbridges, a pedestrian circuit completely separate from traffic-bearing roads, traffic without traffic-lights, and the elimination of streets in favour of walks criss-crossing open areas are all, among other features, so many projects which have earned the place the nickname of "Normandy's Brasilia".

Referring to the freedom granted her, Sabine Delcour admits that "she could have photographed [her] feet in Hérouville"¹. Underpinning this matter of why this egocentric gesture, or any other no less minimal gesture, wasn't enacted, is the question of knowing what representing or depicting a city actually means, for this, in the end of the day, is the only limitation presented by a commission of this type when photography is accepted: the precision of the referent. Between the artist and the patron everything is played out in the reconnaissance of the premises. In the sense of the exploration of an unknown territory for one, and in the sense of the identification of a familiar environment, for the other. By shedding this latter restriction, in 1991, German photographer Michael Schmidt went as far as putting photographs taken in Berlin among those he had taken at Correggio, near Modena, at the request of his patron, Linea di Confine. He thus raised the issue of knowing what the specific nature of a place or city is, the quest for which nowadays informs the photographic commission relating to a territory.

From Louis-Sébastien Mercier to Georges Perec, the city only ever comes to mind where evidence of an understanding of it happens to occur. At the end of the 18th century, in an essay anticipating what Paris would be *L'An 2440/The Year 2440*, the former reckoned that "thousands of people coming to gather at the same spot, living in seven-floor houses, squeezing into narrow streets, eating away and parching already exhausted soil, while, on every side, nature opened up her vast and riant countryside, present a quite astonishing sight to the philosopher's eye"². The latter, in his exercises describing all manner of space and place says nothing different by suggesting "carrying on [observing the street] until this place becomes improbable, to the point of feeling, for a split second, the impression of being in an alien city or, better still, of no longer understanding what is or isn't going on, until the entire place becomes alien, and until you no longer know that is called a city, a street, apartment blocks, pavements..."³. Deterritorialization is one of the conditions of access to this way of seeing things, be it the product of an anachronism, or a transposition of the visible into language, to the point of exhaustion. In the case of Sabine Delcour, it results from her situation as a stranger in a city which, for a given period of time, has earmarked a space for her, a residence, in exchange for the product of her way of seeing things, with the expectation, de facto, that this way of seeing things should be exercised discreetly, and beyond transparency.

¹. Interview with the artist.

². Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *L'An 2440 (1770)*, Paris, Éditions France Adèle, 1977, p. 59.

³. Georges Perec, *Espèces d'espaces*, Paris, Galilée, 1974, p. 73-74.

Although it took part in the industrial revolution, which was also an urban revolution, up until the end of the 19th century, photography did not recreate any of those upheavals, and the turbulent movement and emergence of the throng that stemmed there from. Through the fixedness that it demands from its subjects, it even counteracts their specificity. It just shows a deserted city, at times crossed by ghostlike bodies. Devoid of citizenry, Sabine Delcour's photography seems, in a way, to return to the primitive state of photography. From the hospital complex to the metal water tower, whose determinedly modern shape graces the coast of arms of Hérouville, by way of the chimney of the old foundry and the Carrefour shopping mall, each one of her images shows an architecture or a site that are transformed by their aspect and function into a landmark for those who live and daily move about in Hérouville. But there is no vehicle or pedestrian near them to indicate that these constructions are caught in the network of urban activity. "I saw the city as a model"⁴, Sabine Delcour points out. But if this stance reflects the feeling of widowhood that she experienced as she wandered about Hérouville, it above all incorporates this series in the continuity of an aesthetic project formulated with the territories that she criss-crosses as instructed, be they the suburbs of Paris or the countryside around the Dronne valley in the Dordogne⁵.

It was in 1992, as part of an assignment to do with transport in Seine Saint-Denis, that Sabine Delcour decided to drop her sovereign confidence in photographic recording –at the hub of the history of this medium– and work from resources offered by its deficiencies, and its bankruptcy. This latter, for example, is clearly revealed in relation to the depth of experience and real life inevitably attaching to the grasp of a territory. She proposed putting into the actual space of her photographs snippets of descriptions and hints given by old tourist guides about the villages that Drancy, Aulnay-sous-Bois and Bobigny once were. "Note well, wrote Perec, that the city hasn't always been what it was. Remember, for example, that Auteuil was for a long time in the country"⁶. What resides in this kind of anachronism is the semantic wealth of the hiatus which, if it proceeds from interruption and abrupt transition, it also, according to an age-old accepted sense, what offers a solution of continuity between two states and two situations. In his *UK 76* and *US 77* series, Victor Burgin had already explored the critical distance that might be produced, for example, by the inclusion of a Victorian poem celebrating the family in a photograph depicting a mother and her children beside an astronaut's spacesuit, in a space museum. With Sabine Delcour, anachronism slips right into the technique of shots. Actually, since that the first commission in Seine Saint-Denis, she has been using a 1930's darkroom whose state doesn't guarantee that there won't be any alteration in the emulsion of the film shot. Whence the various dross and the edges veiled by some untimely ray of light, which appear here and there. Like the deposit of dust that Duchamp asked Man Ray to photograph before affixing it once and for all on the huge optical surface that forms the *Large Glass*, traces such as these take cognizance of a certain fallibility; better still, they incorporate the defect in the system, the accident in the tool. In addition to the inclusion of the photographic process, the images also bear the mark of the producer and the device. They are often taken at floor or ground level, and first of all have to get rid of a vague mass of matter, before perspective reclaims its rights and lets a truncated, amputated cityscape appear. By following Sabine Delcour, we might well wonder whether Hérouville, like most of the sites she photographs, might not resemble the city of Zembrude whose shape, as Marco Polo explained to Kublai Khan, was determined by the "mood of the beholder. [...] If you walk along with your chin on your chest, clenching your fists, your eye will go astray along the earth"⁷. This blurred zone, earmarked to accommodate the descriptions of another time in the series *Transport* (1992-1993), here forms something akin to a natural pedestal, upon which, turn by turn, feature one or two kinds of bachelor architecture. Calling to mind one of the basic principles of building, which consists in introducing a relief to the plan, this kind of image organization also reasserts the part of the earth against which the aesthetic ambition of architecture is formed. Discovering a new city by walking around in it is, straight through, having the physical, visual and intellectual experience of a desire for arrangement and organization, that can be deemed to be successful or otherwise. For those who do experience it, the challenge lies in the appropriation of this desire, and of this development plan. "We all have the feeling that we're in the process of constructing, we're not in the progress of altering, it's different in spirit", we can read among the snippets that Sabine Delcour gathered on her walkabouts in Hérouville –in the city, the passing stranger unravels tongues. For far from overlooking the share of language and the vital dialectic that it sets up vis-à-vis images, like an ethnologist, she is given over to the "strange pride [contained in] the claim to want to listen humbly to what people are saying"⁸. In the exhibition *Imaginons, un lieu.*, alongside the eight photographs delivered to the patron, there was a selection of descriptions transcribed with a view to preserving something of the oral expression. These words were inscribed on

⁴. Interview with the artist.

⁵. See «Photographie en Val de Dronne », regards sur le territoire, Bordeaux, Éditions le Festin, Centre culturel de Ribérac, 2000.

⁶. Georges Perec, op. cit., p. 84.

⁷. Italo Calvino, *Les Villes invisibles*, trans. from the Italian, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1984, p. 81.

⁸. Pierre Sansot, *Poétique de la ville*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1997, p. 20.

a surface the same size as the photographs (130 x 100 cm) and freely handed out in a booklet titled *Les bâtisseurs*. Through the evocation of amorous relationship with this city, or of the downtown area missed by the architects, the absent figures of the images thus re-emerged from the vigour of the living word. In an analysis of daily urban practices, Michel de Certeau talks of "pedestrian speech acts", seeing in the praxis of the pedestrian the transformation of the city into space, and the articulation of buildings as language. "Footsteps, he writes, are forgeries of space. They interweave places. In this respect, the movements of pedestrians form one of these "real systems whose existence actually makes the city. [...] The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language and to proffered declarations"⁹. This act acts like "a process for appropriating the topographical system by the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and assumes language)"; walking is "a spatial *realization* of the place (just as the speech act is an acoustic realization of language)"¹⁰.

Emmanuel Hermange, *Wharf 02*, November 2001.

⁹. Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien*, vol. 1, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, p. 147-148. De Certeau, for his part, quotes Ch. Alexander, "La cité semi-treillis, mais non arbre", in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, 1967.

¹⁰. *Op. cit.*, p. 148.