

Questions for Marc De Blicck

Steven Humblet: What returns in all your dealings with photography – from your investigation of the relation between time and space in the early landscapes and your dalliance with photogrammetry to your more recent pictures of world heritage sites and artworks on display in museums – is an outspoken fascination with the radical, absolute break that photography introduced in the visual culture of the 19th century. But, in contrast to many other photographers and artists, you locate this difference in the optical innovations of photography, while ignoring the chemical side. What is it exactly that you find so interesting about photography's optics, and to what extent is that interest associated with your background as a painter?

Marc De Blicck: I do think the question of how my painting work led me to photography is an interesting one. Everything I painted was heavily informed by the process of perception, but at a certain point I had this feeling that it was primarily being read as an expression of painterly skill. And that bothered me to some extent, because for me it was an experiment in looking at the world. Then it turns out there's this machine capable of easily resolving that issue; one that, moreover, was specifically understood to be an instrument for replicating human perception of the world as faithfully as possible, for effectively representing what we can optically perceive. That transition to photography was definitely related to that optical, mechanical view of the world and not to the effect of light on light-sensitive material or the chemical component, which you could experiment with in entirely different ways and use to build an oeuvre. My question was more about the degree to which the photographic image corresponds to my original optical perception of the world.

Yet, in quitting painting, I traded one problem – the risk of a skilful hand – for another – how my enthusiasm for pure seeing provokes a certain resistance in the viewer. An important point here is that notion of 'pure seeing'. Something I hadn't originally realized was that the viewer attempts first and foremost to read the photo, tries to figure out what I, as a photographer, meant to convey with that photo. Why had I positioned myself at that spot, framed it in that way, and so on. Anyone looking at a photo attempts to force it into a coherent image (a readable picture), whereas for me, it was all about the unreadable, at best traceable, details. So, the driving force behind my work became the question of how to transform that quest for sense, for meaning, on the part of the viewer, into an act of pure seeing. That's why I'm so interested in 19th-century photogrammetry. In

that strictly defined practice, the photographer is nothing more than an instrument: he operates expertly according to a preconceived system. In this situation, the question of the sense or meaning of the image never arises: the meaning of the image is not to be found in the photographer's intentionality, but in the system that produces the image. The photographer thus disappears, in a certain sense, into the anonymity of the procedure. His images do not represent an expression of something, of a feeling or a concept, but are rather the outcome of a process. And because the image is no longer loaded with the photographer's programmatic content, it starts to draw all the attention to itself. Those photogrammetric images often do look somewhat strange, of course, or at least unconventional – because we cannot immediately identify them in terms of composition, for instance, but also because they do not seem to fit the rules of familiar photographic genres or practices. What makes such images so interesting is this very tension between their tremendous recognizability and the inevitable abstraction caused by the photographic optics.

SH: This understanding of photography as a specific optical effect would suggest that the emphasis is on the photographic hardware – especially the lens attached to the camera. At the same time, your recent work includes some intriguing diptychs based on optical transformations created in the virtual darkroom of Photoshop and thus achieved using photographic software. What is the role of those diptychs, exactly? Do they, in fact, articulate that tension between photographic hardware and software (between the device and its programme) and thus shed light on how today's shift toward the digital might be characterized?

MDB: Maybe it's very sentimental of me to still be working with cameras. The physicality of the camera, the sensuality of a beautifully made apparatus or a good lens – I am a bit of a sucker for that. But I do not for a moment consider what my camera indiscriminately produces as an image. The images that I print, and thus release to the public, would almost all be impossible without software. Yet, I still cannot bring myself to take that final step, to go ahead and leave the camera out of it and create images entirely with software. Maybe that stems from a sense of melancholy or a desire to hold on to an activity that is so familiar to me, a ritual almost. In terms of my practice, I do always ask myself whether the images I'm producing are still meaningful in a world in which we can create perfect photographic images without using a camera. So, in that sense, the digitization of the

photographic eye serves as a background against which to test my images.

On the one hand, as a photographer, I feel like I am a receiver of images; on the other, every image can be, or rather is, manipulated. I hope that my images work on both fronts, that the tension is clear. That naturally rules out a whole host of photographic practices. When you can use software to so profoundly alter an image captured by the camera – by erasing, moving and even simply adding people and objects – then any photographic practice based on the notion of the 'decisive moment' becomes extremely dubious. The question I want to pose with these diptychs concerns not necessarily the manipulation on its face, but the issue of whether or not that manipulation makes the photo untrue. At the same time, such software manipulation can sometimes reveal something about what occurs in an analogue process. In the diptychs you refer to, I use Photoshop to straighten out an object I photographed at an angle, which thus also appears at an angle in the photo. It is a repositioning that transforms the space around the object, giving it a strange, trapezium-like shape (that is, if you do not crop it to a rectangle, which of course generally happens). This effect is, of course, not purely limited to digital photography; you can accomplish the same thing with an analogue view camera in which the lens and picture plane can move independently of one another. But that does not give you that strange trapezium effect, just maybe some vignetting along the edges of the negative. The difference, using an analogue process, is that you do not have that first image (the angled image). Although the manipulation is occurring, it is not visible in the final result. That is not the case in the diptychs: in those, I am showing the digital transformation process at the beginning and the end. What that does is highlight what develops between the images, an expression of two conflicting thoughts emerging from the same standpoint as you will. Not that a story emerges or narrative tension is created – it is not a sequence, it does not reveal a history – rather, it shows nothing more than the manipulation itself happening. It might have something to do with visualizing (the act of) seeing itself.

SH: There is an interesting friction between, on the one hand, a refusal to create images that make statements about the world – which adopt a certain viewpoint – and, on the other, the photographer's need to physically stand somewhere, which is to say aim the camera at the world from an exact location. In a great many of the images, this necessity of having to stand somewhere is underscored by the use of a wide-angle lens. This has two, at first glance contradictory, effects: it creates

optical distortions, which emphasizes the visual nature of the image – we are offered a view of the world we could never experience ourselves – yet at the same time, it precisely demarcates the exact place the photographer is standing. We get an expansive view of the space opening up right in front of the photographer. So, it is a confusing, unrealistic image of the world, which is at the same time highly localized and anchored in the world. Is that tension created by design?

MDB: I do, indeed, work in a medium that would seem interlinked with ‘viewpoint’, but at the same time, I look for ways to create images that purposely do not want to stand out by manifesting a unique point of view. I deliberately choose the expected point of view to reveal from there what was already visible, whereby the adoption of a point of view loses its articulation. It is a bit similar to how Walker Evans often chooses the obvious point of view in his architectural photography. The idea each time is to relativize the individual stance in relation to that thing in the world being seen within the frame of the photo, so that the resulting photo is seen not as an expression of personal insight, but rather as an iteration of a familiar genre or known concept. That then gives me the freedom to not have to worry about my insight, or more precisely, my lack of insight, into what the camera captures. In a fundamental sense, it is about a refusal to take a moral position in relation to what I see. What is always much more important is the sense of wonder about what I see, about the questions it raises for me, which are not so easily answered.

Maybe that is what photography is for me: to recognize and hold in suspense the question the photographed object asks me. The solution that presented itself to me for this paradoxical ‘viewpoint-less viewpoint’ was to embrace the cliché, the commonplace, the obvious. That decision was not a result of a well-thought-out strategy, though: it was something suggested by my study of photogrammetry. Precisely because of its rigid, impersonal method, photogrammetry allowed me to discover that my earlier attempts at achieving that ‘viewpoint-less viewpoint’ came across as extremely contrived, forced. The use of a wide-angle lens can thus be understood as a pragmatic means by which to turn the photo itself into an object of interest. In other words, the photo not only presents objects of interest – artworks exhibited in a museum setting or architectural monuments – but is also itself a visual ‘spectacle’. Because the wide-angle lens provides an image of the world that we could never perceive ourselves, the photo then becomes a unique experience. Which probably pretty much sums up what I think a good photo is... The unique viewing experience

comes first, and only then is there the question of what is being represented. For me, a photo is first and foremost an abstract picture plane in which points, lines and planes arrange themselves into ‘something’. Yet at the same time, I am wary of purely formal photography that doesn’t depict anything recognizable anymore, other than some orderly composition. The interplay, then, between the inherent abstraction of optical photography and the link to the world is incredibly important to me. Without that stimulating presence of a recognizable, apparently readable object, the image is in danger of veering into pure academic abstraction. It is about offering up something readable, while at the same time questioning that readability, because it too is fundamentally uncertain.

SH: An important element in your work is that you constantly stress the pictorial nature of the photo to make it clear to the viewer that they are looking at a photo, not at the reality allegedly hidden behind it. You do that in various ways: by showing the manipulation involved (digital or otherwise; see the diptychs mentioned above); by not avoiding, but, in fact, seeking out, disruptive reflections; by playing with the optical distortions specific to the wide-angle lens; by circumventing the question of subject matter (for it is immediately obvious); and by emphasizing the material nature of the photographic image. This final point is especially apparent in your most recent exhibitions, for which you have been employing a special printing technique in which the image is printed in sections that are then brought together. Is that attention to the material condition of the photographic image a way of responding to the current fascination for photographic materiality?

MDB: My decision to use this new, for me at least, printing technique – in which the image is sectioned into smaller prints on Japanese paper that are then incorporated into a large image, which I subsequently fold to the dimensions of an acid-free box – was indeed in response to something I felt was missing in my earlier museum prints. Despite how big and massive those images were, the printing process remained invisible, and as a result, the image lost its material nature. Searching for that photographic materiality is important to me because it is at odds with the optical transparency of the photographic eye. This fits in with a particular tradition in photographic culture that stresses not so much transparency as the image surface. Just think of the quest for techniques to create ever-more new effects: to imbue an image with a surprising tint, for example, or give it a certain graphic quality. To my mind, that attempt to give photographic images their skin back

correlates to the desire to give photos their manual nature back, but without drawing or painting upon them, without giving the image a personal signature. That absence of a personal stance is, in fact, a fundamental aspect of the photographic procedure for me, and bringing it back to the fore would signify a certain failure of photography. The role of the hand in the creation of these new images is clearly evident but also strictly delineated: it is limited to pasting together the various smaller prints into a greater whole. And it is only through this pasting and folding that the photo truly becomes an ‘object’. Another thing I noticed: when you emphasize the object value of the photo, the image is certain to receive a different kind of attention – an interest that engenders a certain level of commitment, even if it is just the commitment to exhibit it (and thus publicly reveal it) or to possibly buy it. It turns the photo into a unique object, one which cannot easily be reproduced. The artisanal, almost craftsman-like printing process subverts the anonymous, industrial nature of photography. It ensures that the photo then takes on something absolute, in the sense that it is not repeatable, but unique and one-off, like a painting, for instance.

SH: Your oeuvre departs from a mode of seeing that is constantly vacillating, shifting, being upended; one that attempts to maintain a critical distance from the photographic image (and the process that produces that image), yet repeatedly ‘reverts’ to a sort of naïve wonder at the emergence of ‘something’. What recurs remarkably frequently in your choice of subject matter are objects that, even if they are shown ostentatiously in a museum context – and thus at any rate deemed worthy of being looked at – still somehow remain impenetrable or opaque. We do see ‘something’, but that ‘something’ is also marked by a certain emptiness, such as in that shot of a picture frame painted with flowers that is missing the painting the frame should contain. Is this paradoxical situation in which ‘something’ appears that in one and the same movement also retreats your main reason for practicing photography? To repeatedly experience that state of perplexity (or turmoil)? And what does that say about the role of the photographer: does it mean that instead of being the maker of an image, he is first and foremost the receiver of it?

MDB: Creating an image where contrasting effects or aspects of photographic seeing are played out against one another is essential for me because it corresponds to how I perceive the world. Something starts to chafe in looking at the photographic representation, and that paves the way to contemplating the

matter at hand, turning the viewed object into an object you have to think your way through. This thinking that might reinvigorate the image needs to be contaminated as little as possible by any intentions the photographer may have had before making it, though. Every image derives from an experiment: I bring two or more elements together that may on the face of it rule one another out, to see what happens. And hopefully, the image manages to evoke a similar sense of wonder in the viewer. That seeing with wonder you mention in your question can be traced back to my lack of insight into what I am actually seeing. The impulse to pick up a camera starts when I am moved by something, while at the same time, I am unable to apprehend why this thing has touched me or made an impression. It's as if oftentimes I cannot seem to get past the outer surface of things. I believe photography is the perfect medium for exploring and representing that uncertainty. As a medium, it is subordinate to a relationship that already exists, one whereby I have recognized the importance of something and then decided to engage photography as my means of communicating that interest to a wider audience. Of course, the camera here is not entirely the neutral conduit one could think it is; it is a protagonist that helps determine what eventually gets shown. My photographic practice starts from a naïve wonder about something that lies beyond my reach, and photography is the intervening technological instrument that helps me make what I see visible, without me claiming that I necessarily 'understand' it. Photography is a means of keeping that question open, a way to not resolve it. Or rather: I make photographs because I hope it will help me learn more about what exactly intrigues me about this or that subject. I may not know it myself, but hopefully the apparatus can come to my aid. The ability of the apparatus to do that derives from the fact that it does not entirely coincide with my intentions: it is not an extension of the 'I'. There's another form of intelligence at work that I want to exploit to help clarify the mystery that the world is for me.

Of course, while photography might reveal many things, it also conceals things at the same time. I am always fascinated by that interaction. When it comes to the images I make, I only select those in which the subject, despite being captured clearly and razor-sharp, does not fully reveal itself. In that sense, that photo of the picture frame with a black mirror in the centre could indeed be considered a key work in my oeuvre. And key images like that are, of course, important, because at the very least they provide an indication of what binds the oeuvre together. At the same time, I cannot (and do not want to) overthink every image to make it fit into the same

theme, precisely because I do not want to have control over it; because I do not exactly know what I think or feel; because I do not exactly understand what makes me pick up the camera to capture this or that subject. Maybe photography is mainly a sentimental activity, after all, and I do not want to overload my sentiments with queries. Maybe that's where your suggestion about seeing myself more as a receiver of images than a maker of them stems from. Indeed, I refuse to take the position of someone who dominates the entire process as an autocrat. I would rather opt for the role of practitioner. I like to compare my photographer self to a musician playing sheet music, giving himself completely, in total concentration, to bringing that music to life. Or to put it in more photographic terms: I consider myself, in the insightful words of Vilém Flusser, a functionary who carries out the programme of the apparatus – with the understanding that within that programme, that protocol, I search for openings to create space for my often-unconscious convictions, desires, projections and so on. What I then receive as a photographer is not only the result of a complex technical process, but also a new reality through which I only then truly am able to see. It is only after this passage through the black box of the camera that I begin to glean what about the observation that preceded the shot intrigued me. And that is exactly why I keep being drawn to photography, because this medium is forever evading the question of authorship. In the photographic process, I am always more on the receiving end than on the creating end. In photography, the image is not the product of an author who has expressed his ideas through it, rather it is the image itself that gives pause for thought, precisely because it always comes from somewhere else. At the same time, this then offers a new perspective on the question of where, exactly, the authorship of a photograph might lie: it can no longer be considered to be in preparing the shot (in the so-called intention of the photographer) nor in its later processing in the darkroom or editing it on the computer monitor; rather, it lies in the choice of the context in which the photographer eventually attempts to give the images a place, of whom he shares his images with. That is where his images reach fulfilment; that is where the photographer perhaps determines who he is, what he stands for, what he envisions.

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