

The exhibition *Littéralement et dans tous les sens* brings together five artist-photographers who studied at some point in their career at the Geneva University of Art and Design (HEAD) where I teach Information/fiction since its creation in 2011. Far from being a retrospective and without attempting to show the diversity and wealth that characterizes the practice of photography at the school, the exhibition, which does not have a specific theme, is intentionally subjective. First shown at Centre de la Photographie Genève by Joerg Bader, it enables me to experiment and by holding another role, allows me to express a certain stance with regard to photography. However, the exhibition *Littéralement et dans tous les sens* is not a manifesto, although perhaps the title can be read as one. It is an excerpt from a letter by Arthur Rimbaud to his mother and to me, it seemed appropriate for a photography exhibition.

Photography has often been criticized for being too literal. Even today, a certain element of mistrust prevails with regard to the medium, even if it is no longer viewed in the same terms as it was in the 19th century, when it was criticized not for its inability to choose one element to focus on in a composition, but for describing everything literally, without hierarchy, and with the same precision. For this reason, it could never compete with painting (in other words, a photograph would never be an artistic image). Lots of photographers have literally proved that photography is not painting, in every sense possible. And this demonstration pushed them to define what exactly photography was —sometimes even placing it outside art. For example, in 1981 in the text of the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Ils se disent peintres, ils se disent photographes*, Michel Nuridsany quoted a statement made by Christian Boltanski during a discussion about the aforementioned exhibition: ‘Photography is photo journalism, the rest is painting’. As recently as 2006, Jeff Wall admitted that he himself had led a struggle against a certain idea of photography, that of reportage, but that he had lost, that photography is always reportage, and that he felt ‘rather happy to have lost’. Undoubtedly these two artists were referring, each in their own way, to the same thing: that ‘the photographic image that results from the process of recording, is not essentially, a product of the imagination’.

It’s true. One of photography’s most important operations is certainly not imagination but selection. This occurs at all stages in the production of a photographic image. It begins with the choice of subject, the terrain into which the photographer plans to delve, and continues right up to the moment of the shot and beyond, to all stages of post-production. Every photographic project begins with a decision. Interestingly, the word terrain resonates strongly with the notion of movement. As everyone knows: in order to take photographs, one needs to move. Raising the question as to where. The destination is certainly important but on the condition that this is not the sole criteria of the artwork. I think that none of the five photographers participating in this exhibition was especially

interested in depicting the reality of the Alps, Mexico, or a refugee camp in Calais. Of course, by choosing to go to a certain place, their photographs are the record of the specific data of each place. But beyond these specifics, each and every one of these photographers is on a quest to capture the present time, the actuality, and in so doing, they designate the direction of a future, not always a cheerful one for that matter, particularly for the Western world, where incarceration appears as the dominant image of our way of life and it looks as though this is set to last, or so these photographs seem to tell us.

Mélanie Veillet in her series *Tools of Disobedience* photographed objects illegally made by inmates inside Swiss prisons: objects used for comfort, defence, attack or escapism. Samuel Lecocq on the other hand, visits the first and only deradicalization centre in France, where he attempts to understand how enclosure is intended to put offenders back on the right track. But where exactly is this track and which one is the right one? Does it lead through the desert? Is it a path that puts people's lives at risk as they attempt to migrate to the first world, attracted by its wealth and abundance? This is what Florent Meng seems to suggest in the series realized on the border between Mexico and the US, in the town of Sasabe. Or is it a path that leads to a makeshift camp on the French coast opposite England? Does one need to hurl oneself against the walls of mountains and climb them at the risk of losing one's life?

Through their studies, each of these five photographers has learned that the terrain is saturated with media-friendly images and that it is through such images that we read and understand the world. But more important than this, they have learned to combat such representations through a meticulous work on form. It is for this reason that these photographs and video share a certain sense of peace. It is from a boat floating peacefully on the river Loire on a sunny afternoon that a woman's voice tells us about the deradicalization centre in Samuel Lecocq's video *Fragility and Obsolescence*. When people are photographed, they seem relaxed, confident. By choosing to have volunteers pose for photographs alongside refugees in the series *Chemin des Dunes*, Elisa Larvego voluntarily challenges (our?) police-like tendencies to identify and categorize. The horizontal shots of the Arizona desert by Florent Meng and vertical shots of the Alps by Christelle Jornod are strikingly beautiful. Their clear and limpid composition reinforce the impression of insurmountable barriers.

We see the world through form. This idea has allowed me to think about fiction in the way that Philippe Dubois imagines it in a text on contemporary photography. For him, fiction is the best way of theoretically apprehending the status of the contemporary photographic image. In this way, photography is no longer the trace of 'something "that was there" in the real world but something "that is here" in front of us, something we can accept (or reject), not as a trace of something that

once was, but for what it is, or more precisely for what it shows itself to be: a “possible world”, neither more nor less, but one which exists in parallel with the real or actual world’. (3). Here, it’s about not forgetting the representation of the actual world. Or rather, it’s about not leaving the representation of the actual world to those who rely on ‘it was’. It’s about opening up, in every sense of the word, the scope of perspectives and thinking about what constitutes the world. This is something done by all five of these artist-photographers.

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(1) Jean-François Chevrier, ‘Documents de culture, documents d’expérience’ in *Communications*. Des faits et des gestes, no.79, Paris: Seuil, 2006, p. 63. The quotations by Jeff Wall are taken from the same issue of *Communications*, p. 187.

(2) At the time of writing this text, I was reading a book by the philosopher Christiane Vollaire: *Pour une philosophie de terrain*. Taking inspiration from certain philosophers who had abandoned the ivory tower of philosophy for sociology and a commitment to action on the ground (Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Simone Weil), she gives a brilliant and sensitive analysis on the motivations behind such a transition, of this descent towards the terrain, which she herself experienced. My insistence on the notion of ‘terrain’ owes much to her book.

(3) Philippe Dubois, ‘De l’image-trace à l’image-fiction. Le mouvement des théories de la photographie de 1980 à nos jours’ in *Etudes Photographiques*, no. 34, 2016, p.60.

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