

## LAURENCE AËGERTER

*Laurence Aëgerter was born in Marseilles in 1972. She lives and works between Amsterdam and Marseilles. Her practice includes photography, in situ installations, participatory projects, textile work and artist's books. Her work is included in many private and public collections, including the J. Paul Getty Centre, Los Angeles; the New York Public Library; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Dolhuys Museum of the Mind, Haarlem; the Fries Museum, Leeuwarden; the Museum Van Loon, Amsterdam; the MAMAC, Nice; and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. She is the recipient of the Nestlé International Prize for Photography awarded at the 2015 Images Vevey Festival, and the Rencontres d'Arles Book of the Year Award in 2018 for Photographic Treatment©. She is the author of 11 books to date.*

Congruence is probably the term that could best define the work of Laurence Aëgerter, an amazing artist, both in her appropriation practice and her collaborative research. She also has an inclination for re-enactment, which goes as far as to re-interpret photographs taken by Claude Lévi-Strauss in Brazil in the 1950s, by the inhabitants of a village in ... the northern Netherlands! While the book is one of her favourite playing fields, intervention in the public space is also part of her explorations. Appropriation has arguably become

an established artistic genre, and Laurence Aëgerter offers a singular approach to the principle, often taking hold of dated publications, dictionaries or museum guides, twisting them around in uncanny ways. Meaning that the selected publications always carry an emotional charge for her, which may not be directly brought forward but is nonetheless underlying her work. With *Photographic Treatment*©, recipient of the Author Book Award at the Rencontres d'Arles in 2018, Laurence Aëgerter closely brings together three of her major interests: appropriation, collaboration (even as a social practice) and the work of art. Conversation in my library. In a cordial yet humorous gesture, which I didn't immediately perceive, Laurence offered me two pots of heather, a subtle echo to her book *Meer Vreugde Met Kamerplanten* [More joy with house plants].

She also brought some of the very limited editions of her artist's books, so that we could explore the various levels of meaning she develops.

*Rémi Coignet: Appropriation is a large part of your work, even if you often deliver hybrid versions of it, away from the practice of the great predecessors of the 1980s – I'm thinking of Sherrie Levine, among others. A special feature of your work is not only that you appropriate images but also already existing book forms. What does this mean?*

*Laurence Aëgerter: Why do I make facsimiles? If we look at 180° Encyclopaedia; Tristes Tropiques: illustrations hors texte; Catalogue des chefs-d'oeuvre du musée du Louvre; and Meer Vreugde Met Kamerplanten, this will help me*

to answer. I will try to reply book by book. Because it's hard for me to do a global analysis, but I'll try.

RC: So, the four books you just mentioned are: an encyclopaedia; a dictionary; a catalogue from the Louvre; and a gardening manual. It's a double appropriation.

LA: Yes, and there is also *Cathédrales*, a book about France's cathedrals and churches. What does that allow for? Well, in *180° Encyclopaedia* and *Catalogue des chefs-d'oeuvre du musée du Louvre*, for example, this was absolutely necessary, since the point was to infiltrate the book itself. The form

of the work had to be accurately similar to that of its source.

It had to be a double that takes you elsewhere. There is a slightly subversive side to this.

But for me at least, it's always more

of a tribute than irony or derision. Of course, I select books that

I like very much. I wouldn't be so crazy as to work with books that bother me. It's

always a tribute in the beginning, because they are books that interest me for what they

represent or what they are. For example, I love the lyricism of the text and

the graphics in the Louvre catalogue. For the encyclopaedia,

it was a love-hate relationship because I was annoyed that

a book could describe the world as it is. How could I express this, because it shrinks

everything ... Of course, it's convenient, but somehow, it's unacceptable to describe the

world like that! [Laughs] So consistently, so rigorously, when for each proposal, there

are endless underlying perceptions, which is why I worked on the reverse of the depicted landscapes.

RC: We're going to talk about that, yes.

LA: The images in the encyclopaedia are deceptively objective and definitive. In this case, I really needed to start from the source object, very clearly, to achieve this infiltration that allows a reversal of the situation, of the gaze. A gesture that leads the reader who

is holding the book in hand to adopt a reflective attitude in relation to the usual use of an encyclopaedia, a dictionary or a museum catalogue. The readers find themselves placed in a surprising, slightly uncomfortable situation that can sometimes be humorous while somewhat disturbing, since we all have reflexes, habits in our use of these referential objects.

RC: Let's look back for a moment on your first book from 2005, *A Meeting on Paper, the appropriation of a Dutch encyclopaedia*. And, in fact, you only kept the lemma, a word I didn't know.<sup>1</sup>

LA: Me neither, I only found out when I did this project. [Laughs] It's a nice word.

RC: Very beautiful! So, you kept the lemma at the top of the page and the image that coincidentally was underneath, and deleted the rest of the page.

LA: Yes. You see, for example, we have an Osaka pagoda, and above, it reads “Osborne”.

The attitude is the same as in the two books we previously mentioned. It’s about blurring the lines. And perhaps, behind it, there is a will to loosen up the meaning and open the field

<sup>1</sup>*A lemma is the word printed in bold and placed at the top of the first column of a dictionary page. It shows the first entry of the page, allowing you to quickly find a precise word in the alphabetical order.*

of possibilities ... As a way to leave more freedom in the approach of the world, perhaps. In any case, I grant myself that freedom by doing this work, and I wish to share it with those who might be sensitive to it, who might enjoy it by watching this work.

*RC: On another page of the book, you selected the lemma “Dictator”, and underneath, there was a photo of a potted plant ...*

LA: Yes, because anything is possible. Once again, it raises many possible reflections, free associations of ideas ...

Can a plant be a dictator? Can a dictator be a green plant?

If so, under what circumstances? And what stories can develop from this starting point?

So, in fact, these are proposals

to generate an infinite number of scenarios.

*RC: We’ll talk about green plants later with your book that has a Dutch title that’s ... well, unpronounceable and incomprehensible. [Laughs] Fortunately, Google helped me translate it.*

LA: Yes, *Meer Vreugde Met Kamerplanten* [More joy with houseplants].

*RC: You often associate images and texts. This is the case in A Meeting on Paper, but also in your second book, in 2006, LA LA LA LA, which we have here, with video stills of karaoke. I see it as a Dadaist poem, or cadavre exquis. What was your purpose with this book?*

LA: Well, there were a lot of possible combinations of images and texts, but these are just pre-existing combinations.

I simply extracted them from reality, they are “24ths of a second”.

*RC: Yes, film stills.*

LA: That’s it. I first collected a large number of images and image-texts that I found of interest. And for one reason or another, they contradicted or complemented each other. In any case, the two elements interacted with each other, which

surprised me in a way. Then I restricted my selection, because I had gathered, if I remember correctly, almost 200 of them. I kept 16 that coincided with my state of mind at the time.

Ideas and feelings that inhabited me. So, even if it's completely invisible, I made it into a kind of self-portrait of my concerns of the moment, not at all in a literal way. So, *cadavre exquis*, perhaps the expression of the unconscious. Though this literary game was played collectively.

*RC: Yes, the surrealists each wrote a word to form a sentence.*

LA: Let's say that in this case, the cameraman was certainly not very professional – well, mostly the producer wasn't. The cameraman actually looks pretty good. But, between us, it looks like it was done with friends. As for the people who pasted the texts under the images, it's clear that they have given no thought to it. So perhaps they too were surrealists.

Seen from this angle, they were around the table with me to write this poem, this "exquisite corpse". [Laughs] Let's say that I extracted from these video stills the few elements that I could associate with the most.

*RC: In 2007 you introduced a new and important aspect in your practice: collaborative work. 180° Encyclopaedia is a facsimile of the 1972 Petit Larousse. You replaced 167 images of places and monuments presented in the dictionary with images showing the exact reverse of the place depicted. For example, instead of the representation of Notre-Dame de Paris, you show a bus passing by and the police headquarters right across the forecourt. In addition, you invited friends and artists to participate, to contribute to the project according to a very strict protocol. I have several questions. Where does your obsession with dictionaries, catalogues, etc. come from? And why show what, according to the editorial "institution", is of no interest?*

LA: So now you're asking me a question that I need to take time to think about. Where does that come from? I can tell you that the dictionary I used for *180°* was mine when I was 15 or 16 years old. I used it for school, but I also used it to dream.

It allowed me to discover the world through the vignettes of landscapes. It offered me an escape from my daily life, in fact. And I couldn't wait to be 18 to be able to do what I wanted and go on an adventure. To literally jump into the vignettes. But, as I said earlier, at the same time it also annoyed me a lot because it was too restrictive in a sense. I still have that dictionary, on which I had written in large letters and red pencil: "A dictionary is sacred", followed with something like three or four question marks, on the flyleaf. So, for me, this was a statement. [Laughs] And in fact, it was ironic, because it was both the case and not so. Yes, it is sacred, because we need these references and they fascinated me.

*RC: A dictionary is a bible.*

LA: You're right. But it is not so, because it says a lot and at the same time nothing. Many things are wrong or could be said much better or differently. In any case, it would be good not to claim to be right when everything is always changing.

*RC: Nor to be complete, because each year there is a new edition of the dictionary.*

LA: Exactly. And with each edition, the authors present themselves in the prefaces as very modest and doing their best. But when you look at the object critically, this person is very important and is going to have so many lines, and that one, perhaps less considered, is still on the page but only with two or three lines.

*RC: And they will vanish a few years from now.*

LA: Yes. So, in the section of the proper names, we have monuments, famous people, artworks, mainly; and countries, an interesting field as well. But the question also generally arises for catalogues. There's something magical about classification because it openly gives you the opportunity to deregulate the mechanics of it. It's an invitation to play the game: since rules are already laid, we can fiddle with them, upset them. Yes, maybe that's what I like doing.

*RC: And is playing important for you?*

LA: Oh, very important! It's the main thing, because I think it's through play that we best express the most serious and deepest things. And that we can achieve the most profound transformation. In yourself and in others. I strongly believe this.

*RC: Starting with 180°, you developed a very important collaborative practice. And for this specific project, you invited other artists or friends, according to a relatively strict protocol.*

LA: Yes, very strict. And in total contradiction of course. [Laughs] But it was necessary that the protocol be strict because otherwise it would have been a mess. It was therefore necessary to determine a precise approach, not exhaustive either, but properly developed all the same. If I remember correctly, at the time I had calculated that I had replaced about half of everything that was photographed outdoors, monuments and landscapes, in this *Larousse*. I covered a few countries myself – France, Italy, Belgium too. And for the rest of the world, I asked my friends for help by sending them the original little vignettes and asking them to use them as control photos,

to find the right place, and be very accurate in re-photographing them: if this meant going up three flights of stairs, well it was absolutely necessary to climb them. The exact position had to be determined, which is not at all obvious at times.

And then simply turn around to take the picture you see in my book.

RC: Yes, and the protocol suggested to your friends can be found on your internet site.

LA: Oh really? I can't even remember having put it online! [Laughs]

RC: It's very interesting to read.

LA: Yes, it helps to understand. I was pretty strict about it because otherwise, as I said, the work would have lost its

value and purpose. This kind of work requires a German-style upstream precision. [Laughs] It had to be correct.

RC: Apart from the practicality of having correspondents all over the world for this specific project, what is the greater interest of collaborative work?

LA: The interest of collaboration is to bring air. To reach beyond my own limits, my own eyes, my own choices, my aspirations ... Furthermore, an encyclopaedia aims to reach out to the largest audience. It's really for everyone. In this case, of course, there was a very practical aspect: I couldn't run around the world on my own. And it did take me a year and a half, or even two years, to complete the project. But above all, it was very enjoyable to share this adventure with many friends and friends of friends. To see what they collected during their strolls or in their resorts, to recover the elements, receive their messages and the stories that sometimes came with them. This is a personal wealth that I didn't explore, that I didn't put in the book, because I didn't want the project to become documentary. I wanted it to stay pretty dry. And finally, the protocol I was imposing was so precise, it shows that I'm absolutely interchangeable [in the process].

RC: In 2009 you initiated a project on a 1976 book, a catalogue of masterpieces from the Louvre Museum. The book is a facsimile of the original, kind of kitsch today with its 1970s aesthetic and graphic design. But you replaced 48 of

the original images with others you took yourself for 3 days "as a tourist" in the Louvre. You photographed with an amateur camera and you can see the visitors in front of the artworks. Obviously, it reminds me of Thomas Struth's Museum Photographs series in the late 1980s. Was it a reference for you? Or did you want to take the flipside of it? Or was it to disrupt the reading of a catalogue designed for a general audience?

LA: It's not a reference to Struth's series, because I didn't know it when I started the project. Quickly, friends showed it to me. But it didn't bother me at all, because I thought he had

an extremely different approach than what I was looking to design.

RC: Yes, between 3x2-metres prints on a wall and small vignettes in a book, there's a difference.

LA: True enough. And moreover, I reduced the framing of the images to the surface of the painting, so the environment and even the frame are excluded. The starting points are really different. I really feel his approach to the museum is more of a sociological, ethnographic or documentary study, an aspect that is not primary in my work. Obviously, considering the context, there are commonalities, because people wear the clothes they wear, have the hair or the hairstyles they have. But I didn't feel it was a valid reason not to do this project, because for me, they are completely different spheres. What was the second part of your question?

RC: Was it to disrupt the reading of a catalogue designed for a larger audience?

LA: I don't really think my intent was to disrupt. Let's take an example: here I have *Saint Joseph the Carpenter* by Georges de La Tour with its Caravaggio light, and in front of it, the blond hair of an elderly lady. The point is not to disturb; it's a story of collisions, of total chance. I didn't spend hours waiting for the right "match", so to speak. I wasn't interested in that kind of approach either. Things were there in front of me, offered to me. I was able to wait sometimes two or three minutes, but if nothing happened, well, I would take what was coming and then I would go to the next painting. So, my point was not necessarily to disturb. What I really wanted to see was what chance could offer you in the perception of an existing work of art and perhaps also in the deepening of its understanding. There is certainly a disturbance, but mostly the notion of reopening, re-suggesting, and therefore even deepening. Indeed sometimes, and even quite regularly and surprisingly, situations seem to have been staged but that is not the case. When you look with that eye, amazing

little miracles often happen without having to produce much of an effort. [Laughs]

RC: A hanging is a staging.

LA: The hanging is the setting, yes, but tourists or visitors passing while you are there, that's chance. So, the work is like a double staging, if you will. There is a fixed aspect and a moving one. And that movement brings this project closer to that of the karaoke images. The difference being that the painting does not move. In a way, I place myself in a position to come across images that make sense in spite of themselves. Which are sometimes metaphors. And sometimes, they lead nowhere. It's a bit like you're a ball in a small pipe ... and there were many possible openings on the way.

*RC: You mean like a pinball machine?*

LA: No. But you have many small openings that offer exit doors. Though not all of them come through at the end of the day. Not everything is interesting. The question that I ask myself, and that I ask others, is to look at what is interesting or not. And to come to terms with the fact that, all the same, many situations are so. Without making much effort, they offer you unexpected exit doors that will enrich your experience.

*RC: Maybe this can bring us to your next book: 10 Days, 22 Months. It seems to me that this is your most personal or autobiographical book: the connection with the crash of a plane from El Al in a suburb of Amsterdam; the reproduction of newspaper headlines and photos published in the 10 days following the disaster; and the accidental death of your cousin, whose portrait you re-photographed over a period of 22 months, the size of the original photograph decreasing over time like a mise en abyme. So, it seems to me that time and space, through appropriation and collaboration, are two major aspects of your work. What is your relationship to these two notions of time and space?*

LA: Time and space sum up in merely two words the great adventure of being alive. They therefore touch on the essence of the human condition. And obviously, I do, again and again, ask myself these existential questions via multiple forms with various and varied emotions. They're exciting, they're fascinating. They affect us a thousand times more than an accumulation of anecdotes that can be interesting, but time and space, however, are the highlight of the story.

*RC: I feel like this is the project in which you are the most involved in, meaning that it's the one in which you have clearly highlighted the relationship between public and private.*

LA: True, you're right. Well, in a very visible and clear way. But you know, the Louvre catalogue was given to me by my father, when we visited the museum together when I was a teenager. So for me, there is also a private-public relationship. It was in my library. The same goes for the dictionary that we were talking about earlier, *180°*. There is, not always though often, a very personal dimension in the selection of the book, of the reference text. And in these cases, it's no easy task.

*RC: I guess it can be very painful.*

LA: It's painful because I wouldn't want to be, how to say ...

*RC: Dramatic?*

LA: You need to be fair. Both in the emotion and in the distance from it. You know what I mean? To not make a deep and personal sadness impermeable and cold. I'd be really



sorry

if I did that, you know. But I find these to be complex issues, very complex even. And you need to take a fair distance. Otherwise I wouldn't be interested, it doesn't match with

my character to act otherwise. So, finding the proportion in the distance established with the emotion is important in this work. Then, the result comes out of an intuition.

I'm not going to probe the elements for years on end. It's still pretty straightforward. You test things, and it's yes or no.

*RC: Moving on to something somewhat lighter. In 2010 you published An Alphabetical Index of Some of the Stories, which takes the shape of a Chinese restaurant menu on which each dish is usually pictured. What you did was to photograph the hands of diners and you replaced the images of the dishes with these. You say it's a tribute to Perec, why so? Is this an attempt at exhaustion? [Laugh]*

LA: These are people who say, "I want this, I want that."

They're the diners. And the dishes are really those in front of them. I bothered them and photographed them while they were eating. What made this possible is that the restaurant

had this long bench. I was sitting at a table that allowed me to talk easily to all my neighbours and integrate their story.

The title is *An Alphabetical Index of SOME of the Stories* because the restaurant offered a very large number of dishes.

I think there were 100 of them. I limited myself to the number of dishes on the menu.

[Laughs] The restaurant is located

in an underprivileged area of Amsterdam called the Bijlmer. They serve

Chinese-inspired Suriname cuisine. The reference to Perec comes from the fact that at the end of his book *La Vie mode d'emploi* [*Life: A User's Manual*], there's an index titled,

if I remember correctly, "Index of Some of the Stories"<sup>2</sup>.

That's where the title comes from. And my favourite part

in his book is the notion of the index. Naturally, mine is different from his. I don't remember his so well as to tell you the exact difference or the why and the how, because this work

goes back quite some time. But I was completely fascinated

by the book. All of Perec's work influenced me a lot at one time because he did all this work of classification, play, chance,

and the staging of chance.

*RC: It's also connected to the dictionary.*

LA: Absolutely. And then to establish this protocol of sitting always at the same table for several days over the course of a month or two, until collecting enough stories to match

<sup>2</sup>The exact title of the summary of *La vie mode d'emploi* is « *Reminder of Some of the Stories Told in this Book* ».

the menu, combined with people's chance sitting beside me and listening to what they had to tell me, keeping only

one sentence in the end. The one that most impressed me and which was in itself an invitation to an additional stroll.

Or a movie to be made. [Laughs] Beyond this, the social aspect is much more direct than in Perce's book, because in his case, it is constructed fiction. Whereas here, I'm working on the real ... You have the hands of different people who exist, eating what's in front of them. This is one of the most prosaic things in life, and at the same time, the most spiritual. [Laughs] So there are several layers of reading. In the end, it was about encounters, and I keep the overall memory that it was quite cheerful

to get in touch with so many different people and listen to their stories, even when they were disturbing. I felt like a little mouse in someone's life for a while, and took something out of it that

I would subsequently put back into play.

*RC: Let's get to Triste Tropiques: illustrations hors texte.*

*For me, this is one of your most fascinating books. It comprises two notebooks: the first is a facsimile of the photos taken in Brazil by Claude Lévi-Strauss and reproduced in a separate folio in the first edition of Tristes Tropiques; the second is a re-enactment, 80 years later, of the scenes presented in this separate section, which you asked people in northern Holland to reinterpret.*

LA: In a small village.

*RC: In a small village indeed. Again, the question of time and space arises. But also working in public, collaborating with people who are not necessarily artists, which is another strong aspect in your work, from 180° to Photographic Treatment©. What was your aim in making Dutch people replay situations perceived by Lévi-Strauss as part of an ethos?*

LA: I didn't have a clearly defined or sole purpose. Rather, I felt it was obvious to do it. But today, I would say that it was rather several aims. My first and major question was, "Is this possible?" With the help of my friend Ronald van Tienhoven, who collaborated with me for this work, I had put myself

in the position of being "exotic" to them. I had landed in this very wild "Far North" that is Friesland with my typically familiar behaviour: coming from the south, Marseilles,

I can sometimes be quite warm in the way I relate with people, something that does not always agree with their ways ...

*RC: Even if you don't look so much like you are from Marseilles when we look at or listen to you. But I can understand that for Dutch people ... [Laughs]*

LA: In any case, not that they are stiff people at all, but I thought we would have some cultural differences to overcome, which I was going to experience again. I already knew the Netherlands for a long time, but I thought I'd reach a higher level of knowledge. [Laughs] Because I was going up north,

and furthermore, it's commonplace to say that they have a wild side and are not very accommodating.

So I thought, "Well, we'll see." In fact, it was a challenge; was it possible to reconstitute these photos? It was also a challenge

in terms of my integration in the Netherlands, because although I'm fluent in Dutch, my accent and my errors are such that

I'm clearly not "one of them". And it was a huge challenge because a lot of the photos were nudes. Can you imagine?

The main question was how close one can approach the other with very different cultural identities, how human ...

*RC: Different, you mean between Lévi-Strauss and Brazil or the Netherlands and you?*

LA: Both, in parallel. This raises the issue of intimacy, in fact. And how one can share the intimate and the trust without always having the operating codes of a group. How much trust can you gain? Can the integrity of the process be enough

to spark the generosity of strangers? How far can we understand each other, and freely exchange? In Lévi-Strauss's book,

the folio is titled "Illustration insert". It is placed at the end of the book. This is important because in fact, he didn't use

any of the 63 photos to illustrate his theories; they were a pleasure for him.

I opted to work with the very first edition because in later editions, the photos were scattered throughout the book.

In this first edition, it's a separate folio and it's clear to me that it's personal. That he thinks it's important, but that he also enjoys sharing with the rest of the world his view of the relationship, the intimacy that was established with the dwellers of the three villages in which he stayed.

These are extremely intimate pictures where you see couples tickling each other, rolling on the floor, laughing. Happy girlfriends, others, more or less so. There is a child with a monkey on his head, a pregnant woman asleep on the ground ... In short, their everyday life.

I've never considered Lévi-Strauss as a voyeur, because I feel too much interest, too much humanity in his photos. In any case, this is my interpretation of his work; I feel the love told

for a human community rather than any form of voyeurism.

It's my approach and my personal conviction anyway.

I wanted to propose to the villagers from Beetserszwaag

to repeat the experience. It's a very small village, there are one or two main streets and two perpendicular others. I also wanted to see if it was possible to recreate the photos within

a perimeter of 3 kilometres around the small village, both

in terms of landscapes and of human interactions. I thought about the concept before I even set foot there. It was quite

a challenge. [Laughs] Thank God, with Ronald's combined work, the miracle was total and the experience wonderful and amazing. So much so that, at times, the villagers involved took hold of the project. They interpreted it in ways that no longer suited me.

[Laughs] But somehow, it was also good because

I didn't want us to get stuck in a hermetically strict protocol. Seeing what is liberated, confident in what is human,

what works and what doesn't, is an important aspect of this counter-exploration, a process by which I don't seek at all

to do the same as Lévi-Strauss. It's quite different. It's even

the opposite of what he's done, since he's studied people

in their daily lives, when I suggested to other people to get completely out of their own daily life.

*RC: Yes, you have them replay existing images by taking them out of their daily lives.*

LA: Indeed, since I created the images made with the village dwellers from

Lévi-Strauss's images. But I understand as being at once distressing and interesting, both ethnologically

or sociologically, that some of his images could still correspond to their own lives and others, not anymore. For example,

a dreamy teenage girl with her head tilted is timeless. While

a naked pregnant woman lying in the middle of the landscape probably still exists, but not frequently, in the Netherlands

at least. In fact, more than a purpose, it was an experience that I was looking for. You're asking me, "What was your goal?" My answer: it was an open experience. The point was to see whether it could work out, what was going to happen and what it could mean. It was a proposal.

*RC: Cathédrales, published in 2014, is an intimate meditation and, once again, a book appropriation. You chose*

*to re-photograph in your studio a double-page spread of*

*a 1950s book featuring the Bourges Cathedral, with the light moving on the spread as the hours go by. Of course, we think of Claude Monet. As with him, it is a reflection about*

*light; but I also see, again, a reflection about time and*

*its representation through photography. The time that photography is supposed to freeze. The famous "it has been". Is there a desire in this work to reach beyond that point of view that has become a form of dogma?*

LA: I'm not sure I understand what you mean ...

*RC: I'm referring to Roland Barthes, who, in Camera Lucida, basically stated – simplifying it to the extreme – that the only thing you can say with certainty about a photo is that “it has been”. So when you made Cathédrales, I wonder if there*

*isn't in the work a desire to reach beyond that notion, which has become a bit cliché for me, somewhat dated, that a photograph boils down to “it has been” – it belongs to the past, necessarily to the past.*

LA: Right. In this book, it is indeed quite the opposite. I think the work stems from the idea that everything has always been. And that everything will always be. The cycle of time

is the most important. And I would add that if it's not really an end in itself, there's still a little narrative side to the book. *Cathédrales* is perhaps a metaphor through the image, where one could tell time like with a rosary. You always return to the beginning. Even if basically there is no beginning or end. You're going around in circles. These are stratifications of time. It's a sandwich of several eras: you have a medieval cathedral, you have a book from the 1950s, you have a shadow that was that of a few years ago in my studio but that can perhaps be considered timeless. So, this work is mostly about movement, perpetual movement. More than about the end of anything. And also about the desire for a time perpetually on the move, of an image perpetually in motion. Because I didn't want the cathedral to disappear completely at the end. I was especially happy that it was always present, even in the last pictures. Even when it is completely absorbed by the shadow.

*RC: In 2015 you published Healing Plants for Hurt Landscapes. With local people from Leeuwarden in the Netherlands. You took part in the reconstruction of the medicinal garden of the Abbey of St Gall. And at the same time, you searched the internet for images of disasters, either natural or man-induced, and you invited the residents or the inhabitants to “cure” the images with medicinal plants ...*

LA: That's right. That's exactly right. [Laughs]

*RC: Thank you! An approach that is obviously as symbolic as it is aesthetic. First, what does the participation of the inhabitants bring to this second phase, where it is a matter of curing images? And what is your discourse about the past, the present, the possibility of rebuilding, the destruction of the environment, and of images?*

LA: Sorry, the first question again please?

*RC: What does the participation of the inhabitants bring?*

LA: Why wouldn't I do it on my own? Because what I wanted was to share the experience. And also because the project had

a social vocation. Artistic and social. The city of Leeuwarden commissioned me to carry out an artistic project that would help bring more cohesion to a disadvantaged neighbourhood with high unemployment, a lot of loneliness, etc. That was really my starting point. And I feel that in order to feel better, what can greatly contribute to this is to help others. It's a simple starting point. Voltaire writes in *Candide*, "We must cultivate our garden." But we could turn the proposal around and say, "Our garden must cultivate us."

The project works both ways. It's a back-and-forth between taking care of oneself, taking care of others, taking care of a garden, of objects ... To be caring is a way of looking at things. It's a completely symbolic act. That also deals with the pleasure of tinkering with the material. For example, plants smell extremely good when grounded in the mortar: this relates to genuine physical enjoyment. Then comes the fragrance, the touch and the visual in this small kitchen of benevolence. But there is also, clearly, an absurd aspect, in the sense that, of course, no one is going to retrospectively cure anyone or anything by placing a cataplasm on the image of a tsunami. And that's when the process becomes very complex. [Laughs] Indeed, anything symbolic is tricky to express. I sincerely believe that it is possible to set in motion profound transformations in people, perhaps to arouse their empathy or very profound but dormant processes. I didn't do it by playing the psychologist or the therapist. I didn't mean it that way at all. But looking back at it with hindsight, I think to myself, "Here, you still tried to encourage empathy, contact with others, self-awareness." The very material and very sensory aspect of the work is super-important to participate in this process. Most of all, it was about expressing an intention.

That of repair, of well-being delivered to someone else, to a distant, inaccessible other. By that, I mean that we worked on landscapes from all over the world, but also on images far back in time since there were also images of the Second World War, for example, landscapes that have changed a lot since then. I think I was suggesting them to express a positive intention. It seems to me that this is a pretty nice step to take together. My role was to propose it, then to realize it with them. I did some of these landscapes myself, with great joy.

*RC: Healing Plants for Hurt Landscapes* is a book but it also exists in another aspect of your work: your interventions in the public space.

*LA:* Yes. I put all my heart into that garden, and it's a very accurate reconstitution of St Gall's medicinal plant garden. It continues to exist, at least for a few years still, until the city repurposes the place, probably with buildings. But it exists, it is alive, it is fully part of the daily life of the inhabitants of the surrounding area.

*RC: You mentioned it, but it was also about going back to the destruction of the images. You chose images of destruction and tried to “cure” them.*

LA: Yes. These are devastated landscapes that would be “cured” by the symbolic gesture, and this is a completely hypothetical assumption, as in a fairy tale. [Laughs] It sounds like the Dutch children’s game called *heksensoep* [witches’ brew]. You mix

a lot of ingredients and then you make this or that with it. But the greatest pleasure is in the making of it. [Laughs] We can’t go back to what happened. There will always be disasters,

but we can, in reverse, wish the best for the victims, even if they are very rarely present in the landscapes I have selected.

But the landscape that has suffered is itself very present.

And it is well understood that all the living beings who inhabited that landscape suffered with it.

*RC: It’s in part what you deal with in 10 Days, 22 Months, right?*

LA: Yes, it’s true. Because these are photos that have a public purpose. The images were used by the press for information during these disasters. But it’s a treatment ...

*RC: Different ...*

LA: Yes, it’s a very personal search applied to public images. Since each participant was able to choose their photographs of devastated landscapes and their medicinal plants, their way of applying them ...

*RC: In fact, you are a witch!*

LA: That’s it! [Laughs] Damn ...

*RC: In 2015 you published Meer Vreugde Met Kamerplanten,*

*which can be translated as “More joy with houseplants.”*

LA: Yes. [Laugh]

*RC: This book marks both your continued interest in botany and your first foray into the psychiatric world.*

*You had patients and caregivers pose indiscriminately with a flowerpot ...*

LA: With houseplants. Sometimes flowery, sometimes not.

*RC: What was the purpose of this work?*

LA: Let me think ... again, the goal was not unique. To begin with, what I wanted with the work, in a rather humorous way, was to stretch a mirror in the context of a closed psychiatric environment ... I worked on isolation cells. In this given context, I transformed an isolation cell of 9 square metres into a nursery for one day.

This work is part of a larger project called “Leviathan”.

This book is therefore only part of this larger project that now exists in the form of a video installation at the Museum

of Psychiatry in Haarlem, which commissioned the project. Going back to that week spent in this institution, every day

I would transform an isolation cell. One day, it was a museum of Orientalism, with a guide who organized tours; another,

it was a terrarium with five giant pythons that stretched out

on branches and we observed them from a distance; another day, it was a re-enactment of a Kabakov piece, *Punishment*

*of Household Objects*: behind a large black curtain, I suggested that patients punish a domestic object that bothered them

for one reason or another. And if they didn't have the object they had in mind, they could make it out of clay. On another day,

it was a meditation centre with directed group mediation. Finally on Sunday, the room was transformed into a concert hall

with a grand piano on which Simeon ten Holt's *Canto Ostinato* was played, a music that makes you lose the sense of time;

it is now included in the soundtrack of the video installation. Every day, it was like a distorting mirror of the reality

on the spot. And one day, it was indoor plants. It's very difficult to look after indoor plants and everyone ... well, not everyone, but I at least, feel horribly guilty when I kill a plant. [Laughs] I'm not always able to take good care of them. So I don't have any, because I don't have green fingers.

RC: *Oh, is that why you brought me one? [Laughs] Thank you for that.*

LA: That's it, I thought, “I'm going to shift the problem.” But with heathers, everything will be fine. That's what's wonderful about this plant. You'll see, you won't have any complications.

Back to our topic: the purpose of a day dedicated to plants

was related to this problem. An indoor plant is totally dependent on the care it is given. And each one needs very specific attention, because they are all unique, just like a human being

is not another. In the hospital setting, everyone needs very specific care, both in terms of chemical and psychological support. The dosage must be absolutely accurate. It's complex because it's always evolving, and the consequences and responsibilities are heavy. When an indoor plant dies,

it's annoying, but it's of little importance. There, we're talking about people, and their situation is tragic for themselves and for their loved ones. There is also hope for recovery, of course. So, the stakes are high for every patient. And for the caregivers as



well, who suffer from possible failures in the healthcare programme for each patient and other painful experiences they can face at work. I thus suggested to the patients and

to the caregivers to choose a plant in my one-day plant nursery. Posing with the plant they had chosen was a bit like posing with themselves on their knees. They could then take it with them if they wanted to. And in fact, the book is again a very accurate facsimile of ...

*RC: Yes, there is an orange sidebar in the photo, and text under the images, but I don't understand a word of Dutch ...*

LA: That's how the plant has to be taken care of. It's nothing more than that. The text says precisely how to deal with it. And the small orange sidebar indicates the flowering period. You see, there are indications that could also relate to people. [Laughs] For example, from October to December, do this

or that. It's a kind of metaphor. The aim was to suggest, with lightness but in all seriousness, an awareness of their own state.

*RC: You pursued the psychiatric vein in a geriatric centre with your latest book, Photographic Treatment©. It includes five volumes, and the project was designed under scientific supervision, but the process is totally different than in Meer Vreugde Met Kamerplanten.*

LA: Yes, it is. For *Photographic Treatment*©, I really clearly gave myself a goal for once – you're always asking "What was your goal?" And for each of these questions, I have to think about what my goal was – but here, my goal is very clear. The aim

was to develop a therapeutic tool from photographs, to help bring a positive element in the management of an extremely agonizing and destructive disease: senile dementia.

*RC: Well, I know you have another appointment and you must soon leave. So, I'll drop the details, but here, you're returning to appropriation, by pairing photos. Can you explain to me shortly what was the work about and for what result (apart from winning this year's Book Award in Arles)?*

LA: What were the results? Well, there are currently about 15, maybe 20 institutions that work therapeutically with my boxes of photographs, the multiple, and a few hundred people who are using the books.

*RC: Yes, your idea has been validated, if I may say, by the scientific or psychiatric community in the Netherlands.*

LA: Well, it has nothing to do with a curative device, because the disease is currently irreversible. But the aim is to help curb the effects of the illness by offering a tool based on the use of photographs that provoke imagination in people with

senile dementia by stimulating their brains through the free association of images. In line with the basic “use it or lose it” principle. The second goal, just as important, is to be a tool

for interaction, fuelling discussion about the diptychs of images, or even isolated images, because they can also be appreciated one by one, especially for patients who are at advanced stages of the illness. Selecting this or that image or a combination

of images generates communication and language use that contribute to mental exercising and reduce the risk of depression suffered by about one-third of the people with senile dementia.

*RC: Tell me, you selected old images, and you showed them to patients, right?*

LA: Yes, but only after a fairly long research process in the hospital setting. The project lasted two years, and I also took part in a pilot scientific research project. There was a medical protocol. It was pretty tough. It was time-consuming and also emotionally quite exhausting, but super-important because it allowed me to understand which images were clearly readable by people with senile dementia. Indeed, the sicker you are, the more your eyesight changes and decreases.

It becomes very difficult to read images. I had to isolate certain types of images and I created a database of about 1,300

to 1,500 images that I uploaded for free use on the website Photographic Treatment<sup>3</sup>, arranged by themes – which has nothing to do with my personal work, but simplifies the search. The work swung throughout the process between its artistic side and its scientific aspect. And for me, this was an initiation: for the first time in my life, I was venturing into that field.

It was really complex obviously, but I had the chance to meet open-minded scientists, including Professor Dick Swaab, an eminent neurobiologist in the Netherlands. He has been very supportive of my research, by his open intelligence and interest in my work. You know, everyone tends to think according to the codes of their discipline. But he was able to look beyond, expand his conception of things and advise me when I needed it. It's been a wonderful adventure and I wish

<sup>3</sup> <http://photographictreatment.com>

it could grow now, but without me, because I'd like to move on. I would be so happy if someone picked this work up. We know that it works well, that it makes these people with senile dementia more present, lighter; and in some cases, it makes them very joyful, as you can see in the video *The Living Image*, visible on my website.<sup>4</sup> It shows a person with senile dementia expressing himself through the photos. You just hear the voice and you see the hand strolling over the surface of the images. This allows you to realize the effect that images can have on people with Alzheimer at a very advanced stage.

*RC: This will be my very last question: Photographic Treatment© is made up of five books. Are these pairs of images that patients associated themselves, or have you reworked them?*

LA: Oh no! That's all me. I composed all the diptychs.

But I encourage patients, and anyone else for that matter – children, autistic people or even healthy people – to make their own diptychs. I edited a multiple for this. In the form of a box. It includes the 5 books and 99 blocks of photos issued from the books and from my database, which can be spread out on a table to work with at will and combine with one's own diptychs.

*RC: A form of appropriation 3.0?*

LA: Exactly! I give back to the public what I took. [Laugh] You're right.

<sup>4</sup><http://laurenceaegerter.com/portfolio-item/the-living-image/>