

Utopian Debris: A Conversation between Bas Princen and Marc Pimlott

Mark Pimlott: I thought we might begin with some questions about your pictures, and how they come into being. You seem to go to places that are at the margins of our imaginations, at the edges of the world: but when you get there, you find that they are centres of all kinds of human invention. I suppose the first pictures I saw of yours were of places that people found to pursue special forms of recreation. Those activities seem to charge or focus places that did not really seem to be places at all. Now, I see that you make pictures of environments and objects that are in the midst of the developing city, all over the world: but their strangeness makes them seem as if they have somehow fallen out of what is known. There continue to be pictures of places that are isolated but bear the marks of large-scale human intervention. What is it that you are looking for? Or what is it that you discover?

Bas Princen: While being a student in design for public space, I learned that space could be constructed and use could be affected through minor alterations of the existing reality. This could mean placing normal objects like, for example, a park bench in a more specific relation to other objects or scenes; you could put one temporarily near the edge of a construction pit, just to suggest that one might look at this city scene. I liked to design these kinds of things, to adapt the contexts of objects. But these designs were so minor or discreet that they were hardly visible when executed.

While photographing I have a similar goal: I want to make a specific, singled-out place; here I mainly use the ability of the camera to exclude details of the surroundings or the existing context. I focus on the element I am interested in and 'construct' its relation to the surrounding objects; I make a new context by excluding its real context.

The content, or thematic of my photographs comes from recurring themes in architecture and urban design. The first series of photographs you referred to (*Artificial Arcadias*) was a search for landscapes that were specific without our understanding of them as specific. It started with the ever-present discussion among urban designers and politicians that the landscape everywhere starts to look alike; in Dutch, we say *het verrommelt*. Somehow, I did not believe this claim that the landscape had lost its specificity, and as a reaction I started to meticulously scan two landscapes, each for two years: the timber-production forests in Brabant, with their landfills, gravel excavations and former military test sites – all set in between the village structures – and the Maasvlakte, a newly reclaimed, sandy peninsula, soon to become the Rotterdam harbour. I looked at these landscape as a designer and saw nothing specific or interesting. I looked in a more general way and saw groups of people wandering around confidently. I soon understood that this confidence was supported by the objects they carried around with them; their leisure gear, their fishing rods, mountain bikes and binoculars. This gear provided them with new tools to understand their surroundings; they would look for instance at the moistness, structure and density of sand and mud to do their 4x4 trail driving, and they would use their mobile phones to be alerted to 'rare' birds, by getting automated GPS coordinates from the person who first spotted them and where. To say it in the simplest way: these groups of people guided me to landscapes that were specific, but which were not revealed to me earlier because I lacked the reason to see them.



Reservoir (concrete rundown) 2005

I began to photograph these ‘landscapes’ in a way that the landscape and the people who are staying in it are becoming one; that they are of equal importance. In this way, it becomes impossible to decide which is more important, the humans or the landscape. I photographed them as if these places were made specifically for them.

MP: Regarding the new contexts that you make by selection: is there no pre-determined notion of what may be there in the landscape, in the picture? Do you instead concentrate on presenting a new reality?

BP: I think I am at my best as a maker, and not as someone who documents. I am looking for certain images, I have them more or less preconceived. They are stored in an imaginary list of photographs to do, or to be more precise, ideas about landscape and architecture to cover.

A series, like the one I am working on now (shown with this article), with the working title *Utopian Debris*, starts as a small set of loose individual pictures, which I have collected over time and which may seem to have nothing to do with each other at first glance. (for instance *Reservoir*, *Palech*, *Superior Court* and *HSL Breda* are part of this first set). From there, I start to imagine what kind of images, objects and landscapes could or should make a link between two of these existing pictures, either aesthetically or thematically. I try to make every new photo converge with two or more photos that already exist. After a while, a series starts to appear in which one



Superior Court 2005

feels the connections, rather than a rational understanding of them.

This is how a series grows: I endlessly try to fill in the gaps, I search for the missing links, and the existing photos tell me what I should look for in a new image. I know approximately what kind of image it should be, but until I see it, the image can take many forms. Occasionally I make an unconnected photograph that creates new openings, new gaps to be filled.

For this new series *Utopian Debris*, I go out to find photographs that relate to my archive of reference images, in which the artificial and the natural take each other's forms and in which one is unable to see if things are being constructed or destroyed. I think that is the most interesting thing that can be said right now about the cities in which we live, and the landscapes in which we dwell (and vice versa). In a recent review by Xandra de Jongh on the exhibition ‘Unstable elements and particles’, she writes about my photos as being images from or of a world in which Man is slowly but surely losing his grip on the very matter that he has created.

MP: In your description of the landscapes of your *Artificial Arcadias* series, you suggest that the landscapes were not visible to you until you had knowledge of the equipment people used to understand and exploit the space around them. It reminds me of the strangeness of arriving at some sort of frontier, where one does not know how to proceed. Ultimately, one has to confront the unknown by coming to understand its characteristics, and then try

to make a home there. I am thinking of the photographs of Timothy O'Sullivan made in the American West in the 1860s, which I think you are familiar with.

BP: Looking at O'Sullivan's and his colleagues' photographs of the American West from around the nineteenth century, there is still a question for me of how much they were documents, or if the photographers were consciously part of the making of the myth of the frontier. I like to think it was the latter, since that would make their work even more interesting. There is a work that I relate to these pictures called *Park City* by another American, Lewis Baltz, which seems to be a document of the construction of a suburban neighbourhood, but when looked at more closely is a meticulously orchestrated fiction, in which the construction site looks like a war zone, photographed in black-and-white, with smoking piles of rubble and buildings which one is not sure is being built or demolished. If I look at that work, it is about the construction and myth of the frontier, but the dark side of that myth, while O'Sullivan's photographs are optimistic.

It was after seeing *Park City*, which is a book, that I understood how to proceed with my recent works. The similarities between construction and destruction and the man-made and the artificial already existed in my photographs, but after seeing his book I understood that I could use that ambiguity as the central idea. Although Baltz made this work 28 years ago, in one specific situation and in black-and-white, I have taken the point he tried to make and have started anew from where he left it. His ideas are shared, 'travelling ideas' that have established an important theme in photography, and it is comforting and challenging at the same time to contribute new work to these 'travelling ideas'; which for me started with seeing *Park City*, but which I know for Baltz could only begin after having seen Werner Herzog's *Fata Morgana*.

MP: How necessary is a kind of strangeness (difference, otherness, whatever one might call it) to your photographs? What is its importance to you? I suspect that these states or conditions you come across and picture are states that a viewer of your pictures must experience, too. Does that affect the making of your work? And how?

BP: I always start with the understanding, that what is in the frame is the only thing that the viewer will see. This sounds logical, but you have to keep telling this to yourself all the time, because when you are there making the photograph, you are affected by the context and other things that do not matter or transfer to the viewer. All that the viewer is able to relate to is what is in the picture, and what he imagines could be outside the picture.

I think the strangeness or otherness you refer to has to do with the inability to place the objects and scenes in a context one knows. It is normally not the object that is strange but how and where and why it stands in a particular relation to its surroundings. Samuel van Hoogstraete, a seventeenth-century painter wrote: 'A finished picture is like a mirror of nature, in which one sees things that are not there at all, and which deceives in a reliable, amusing, and praiseworthy way.' He also wrote that in order to make a good composition, one must to add an element that seems to be in the wrong place, or does not comply with the nature of the scene portrayed: that was the only way he thought it was possible to make a believable painting.



Palech 2003

MP: I am going to ask you some more questions about your pictures directly, and I hope you can tell me about your thinking, not only on a formal level as you approached the subjects, but how you came to see those subjects; how they revealed themselves to you; what you did to frame or contain them; and what they said to you, as pictures and as presences, when you had brought them back to your studio. I am aware that these pictures are a long time in the making. There is not only the travelling, looking, setting up and making of the photograph; but another long process following this in the studio, through which the photograph is examined, and then carefully altered to become a picture. I understand that each picture can take many weeks coming into being in a form that satisfies you. I also know that this satisfying form is the picture's necessary form, so that it can be situated in the space where it is to be seen, whether this is the gallery or the pages of a book. There is always a viewer that approaches the picture, and looks at it. I also hope you can tell me something about the relation between the moment of 'finding' the photograph as it is made, and the ideal relation that you wish to exist between the viewer and the picture.

BP: Let me start by talking about your last question, which is important to think about. The viewer is the one who has to interpret the picture, as I have said before. There are limited number of ways in which the viewer can see the works: in a book, or hung on the



Future Highway (Xiamen)

wall, next to other works, on the web, or in magazines. To see the works at their 'real size' (often large prints) is always impressive: your eye can wander around in the print, and that is usually what happens. In a book, however, this experience is absent, but you get something more interesting in return; you start to see the works more as images that try to tell you something. I mean this in a more abstract sense: you can see the ideas behind the picture more easily, at least in my case. I like that there is this kind of difference. A big picture on the wall can be easily seen as a 'window' to some distant reality, and has therefore a more documentary character, while in a book you have that much less, and so will refer each image to the one you saw before. The wall is about the single image and the book is about the series. For a book, you need many more works, and they need to tell you something in their relations to each other, and I like to work with this.

MP: Reservoir (concrete rundown) 2005

It looks as though in the midst of a harsh, but natural scene, some man-made construction – a sluice of some sort – has broken through, destroying what is around it and itself at the same time (it looks broken or incomplete), and in the process of collapsing or spilling, loses its sense and merges into its surroundings, almost becoming natural itself. I can't tell what I am looking at: nature or man-made environment; construction or destruction; nature, artifice or something else; something being made, something falling apart or something in between.



Grid II 2008

BP: While being in Los Angeles in 2005 as an artist in residence at the MAK Schindler programme, I looked at this city – which is the prime model for the unspecific, endless city – and I had several ideas in mind, and they were all clichés. One of these clichés involved working with the surreal relation of LA to water. I started with looking at the LA River: this river, which is a concrete gutter built by the military, is pushed down, under the city; you don't even notice you are crossing it, there are no bridges, or to say it better, the bridges are pushed down, together with the river, the relation with the city is one of denial. The river is a big storm drain, for the once or twice a year that it rains in the city. Still without proper rainfall, LA uses tons of water, which comes from the north via three aqueducts. In the end, I made four photographs with this water system as a starting point, not to document it, but because I understood it might be a good territory to find what I was looking for. *River Overpass 2005* is one of them, and one of the others is *Reservoir (concrete rundown) 2005*. I followed the water backwards, from the city to outlying areas, trying to find evidence. I understood that since the city's relation to water is one of denial, the infrastructure providing it must be 'hidden' somewhere. I travelled and saw a couple of water reservoirs in use, and travelled in the St Gabriel mountains and found one that was dried out. While passing, I photographed the emptied reservoir, where people were motor-crossing. It looked like a kind of apocalyptic site. Then crossing the mountain there was something which reminded me of an image that I had recently studied: it was Robert Smithson's work in Rome, *Asphalt Rundown (1969)*, and even his later work *Glue Pour (1970)* in Canada. I photographed the reservoir keeping in mind that the poured concrete should be the most important element in the image: it should disappear in the landscape and at the same time look like a harsh act which over time has become more and more invisible. I could see this because I had stored the image of Smithson's work in my mind, which I in turn liked a lot because I had been photographing all these artificial, man-made landscapes in Holland. So in fact what you get is the story of a 'travelling image' that can appear again and again in many different dialects and contexts. As another example, *Section II (Xiamen)* is a continuation or culmination of *HSL Breda* and *Reservoir (concrete rundown)*.

MP: *Superior Court 2005*: When I first saw this, it thought it so strange, familiar and peaceful, and I realised that I was affected by it on a number of levels: as a viewer of a paradisaal scene, as a viewer of an abstraction (the sky as a grid), as the viewer of a visual paradox, as the viewer of architecture and its historical developments (from Le Corbusier's *Ville contemporaine* to Superstudio's *Monumento continuo (1969)*, and so as the viewer of some sort of Utopia. It is a picture that, despite its anomalies and strangeness, is full of hope.

BP: This is an important image for me, since it has all these different ways of being interpreted, and yet the image is nearly invisible and can be easily overlooked. I passed this site nearly every day by car driving down Wilshire Boulevard on the way to downtown LA, and it looked different every time I passed it. I tried to photograph it several times from different angles and it did not really work, but I kept on thinking there was something there, even though I could not figure it out what it was. At one point while setting up the camera, I cropped off the top of the building and suddenly the building disappeared, and at that moment I understood how I had to



HSL Breda 2002

photograph it. It should be a park-like space with this architectural object disappearing behind it. I wanted it to resemble Superstudio's *Continuous monument*, to present it as if one small piece of this huge structure was actually built in a more or less pristine piece of landscape. I made some tests and while fiddling around in the computer with the first scans, I knew how it had to be done. I waited two months for the grass to get a bit brown and the sun to sink low enough to get the red glow in the building that makes it disappear even more. There were many decisions made at the last moment: did I want the people in it? Yes! Where should the tree that separates the building from the sky end? And so on. The photograph *Ring Road Houston* was made a few weeks later and is an inversion of *Superior Court*. I like it since it deals with one of the recurring enigmas within architecture: the building that is not there. It took me hours to find the precise angle and height in which all the reflections of white buildings seemed to flow perfectly into the highway and that extended the parking lot through the building. Of course, it has to be a golden building that is disappearing: it has to be as present as possible in order for it to disappear right before one's eyes, as they become fixed on the horizon.

MP: *Palech 2003*: The picture offers a variety of possibilities. Its subject, so clear and plain, is also so symbolic – so archetypal – that it seems to defy time or definition. It could be a ruin, or a building in the process of construction; it could be ancient or newly coming into being; it could be a



Ring Road (Houston) 2005

fragment of a monument or the most banal dwelling. It seems to be a precisely defined space, yet it seems that it could extend indefinitely, both in height and in depth. I am struck by its resemblance to the *Carceri* series of engravings by Giambattista Piranesi, but unlike their fantastic and claustrophobic artificiality, I am aware of a mythic dimension to your picture, an aura of authenticity, and even the sacred, that comes with its materiality, colour and evocations of the ancient world.

BP: I saw this building from the air. I made a small trip in Russia in a Cessna-like plane to make an aerial photograph of the city of Ivanovo for the exhibition 'Shrinking Cities' and on the way, I saw this huge, red, unfinished post-modern ruin in the middle of nowhere. Later I went there with my guide and translator and it turned out to be a kind of cultural monastery for communist artists: construction had stopped just before completion when the Iron Curtain fell. It filled me with a strange feeling, like being in the past and the future at the same time, like walking into a scene of a Tarkovsky film. In some way the photograph is extremely banal, but it is the absence of certain key elements that makes it impossible to tell if it is a construction site or a ruin. It resembles many things at once, from stone quarries to underground shelters, old drawings and scenes from sci-fi movies.



River Overpass 2005

MP: *Domino II* 2007: The flatness and emptiness of the light within the holes in the roof exaggerate the claustrophobic atmosphere of this picture. One imagines the horrors of war, of course, and sees ruins of our own time, even our humanity. It is as though this space has had its features gouged out, and so bears a mythic quality reminiscent of Goya's own *Desastres de la Guerra*, Oedipus or Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Perhaps all these wounded scenes are beautiful, and this one in particular in its suggestion of an idealised, purified modernist architecture in ruins.

BP: I am interested in what you say about the beauty of the wound and for that matter of the ruin of the modern. I would almost say that these things are only filled with beauty when they are portrayed, and looked upon by a viewer from a comfortable distance. To see the beauty you need distance; you need to exclude the actual context; you need to give it an aura of it being an unreal place. To return to the viewer, the person for whom the photograph is made, it is important to understand that what you give to the viewer is the image that you make: the viewer is not burdened by the real context, the viewer should not even want to think about that. The whole idea of photographing for me is to exclude such things more and more. Yet, we see what we seek, or in this picture, seek what is not there, but seem to be able to see.

MP: *Future Highway (Xiamen) 2007*: This theme that runs through much of your work, in subjects where one is uncertain whether one is looking at constructions or ruins, at a fragment of the future or of history. In those Lewis Baltz photographs, there was not only this ambiguity, but the sense that the future, contained in the landscape and the fantasies of the buildings, was being used up. Elsewhere, it seems as though the making of the future is now dependent on the demolition of the past, and the new state of things, in your pictures is very uncertain, as though they depicted some unnamed future of pronounced artificiality. For example, in *Future Highway (Xiamen)*, the building at the centre of the picture features a series of pairings of qualities: a new construction or something about to be torn apart; an abstract thing, coming out of some artificial, virtual world (the gridded surfaces, the soulless windows that reflect some utterly empty sky) or something made with great care by people who had limited means at their disposal, and with these means, tried to evoke a series of architectural allegories (I am thinking of the quoining of pink tiles, the courses of pink tiles across each floor). The building, among its neighbours, seems ambiguously situated in time: the wall in front of it suggests a long history of failed or discarded projects; the men with their arching hammers, as though beating some *ur*-artefact, seem engaged in a process which has gone on and will continue to go on forever.

BP: Again, Mark, you seem to see things which for me were the reason to make the image in the first place, but before seeing the first scans I have no clue if what I tried to do can actually be seen. As a kind of testing of the images, I send them out to some close friends when I have done scanning and when I have made the first colour corrections in the computer. The reactions I receive differ greatly but I use them to test if the images are saying what I want to say, or if they convey something completely different. After sending this one out over the mail, I got a reply back in one minute: it was just an image without a text, a Tarot card with a square tower. There was a simple sun drawn in the top of the image, out of which an arm came holding a hammer that was hammering the tower. I am still not completely sure what this card – ‘the tower’ – means, since there is more than one way to interpret it apparently, but the interpretation I like the best is that when the tower is struck, one’s (the recipient’s) understanding of reality will be altered or enter another dimension. In another interpretation, the tower is truck and falls apart when reality does not conform to expectations. Either way, it is apparently not a good sign.

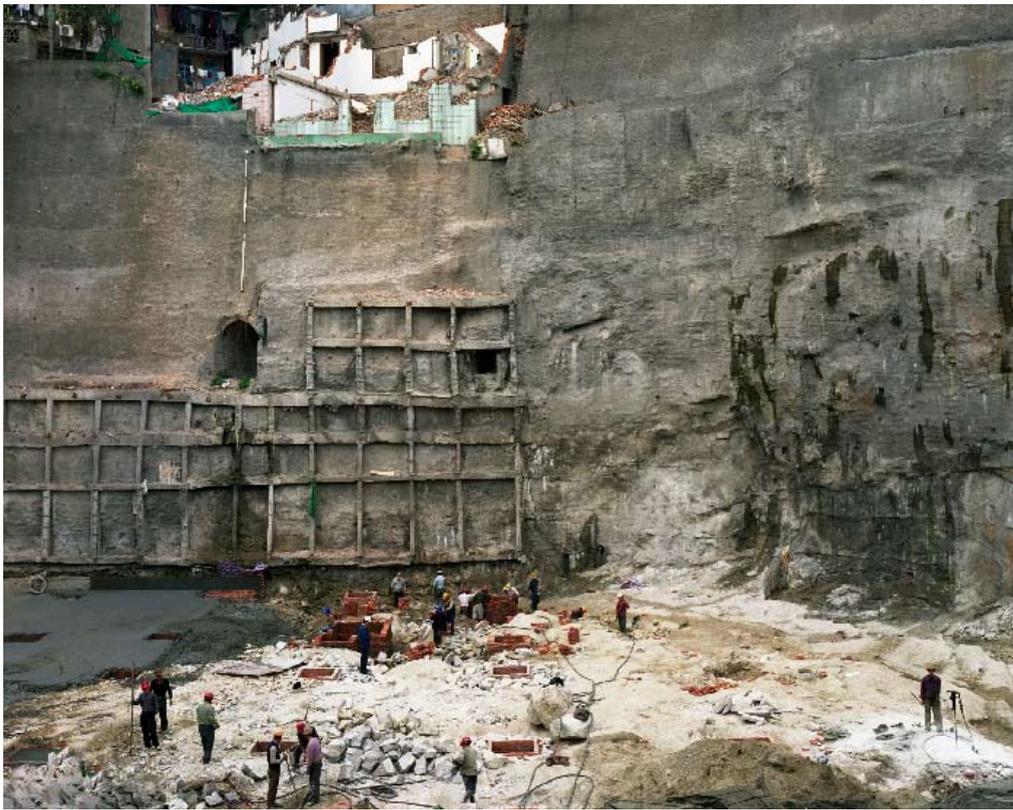
MP: There is something else about the hammerers, too, isn’t there? In a previous conversation, you also mentioned the appearance of labour. So often in the way the world is presented to us, it is as a perfect thing. Not only are the processes of construction or demolition invisible, so are the millions of people actually engaged in making it happen. Instead of some invisible force making the world, which we, I suppose, are to assume is Capital, there are real people, making the environment, and living in it. Yet so often what appears before the viewers of your pictures is a contrasting quality of artificiality, and the confusion raised by the artificial. There is



Domino II 2007

another picture, *Grid II*, which is exemplary in this way. It is impossible to know how this perfect archetypal shelter has been born in this place, in what seems to be an underground pit. But its serenity, its whiteness, its impossibility, testifies to hope. It has no function or use: its emptiness is properly monumental, transcendent. It is strange that when we build monuments now (in history, rather than pre-history), we try to ‘represent’ something. In our imagination, the archaic monument has no subject, no representation. It simply is. Yet the monument is completely artificial. It rejects specificity, and world in contrast becomes more specific: the monument enables the specific world to be.

HSL Breda 2002: I think a lot about the landscapes we are surrounded by and wonder about the division between our labour and the space we occupy. In *HSL Breda*, there is a configuration that occurs in your pictures occasionally, like that *Half-pipe* picture you showed me recently. It is impossible to understand the scale of the image: so many of its elements resemble familiar forms from nature, but they could be the height of a man, or the height of the Grand Canyon; the space in the foreground could be the work of a broom or earthworks made by a team of trucks. The colour of the whole could be natural: sand, coal and snow, or artificial, constructed.



Section II (Xiamen) 2007

BP: I am fascinated by the ‘making of the landscape’, or as you call it, ‘our labour and the space we occupy’ and the way we construct ideas and myths about it. I think of the Dutch landscape as a piece of architecture: its construction can be best seen in its section, in the layers of geo-textiles that let clean water slip through; on top of that special river pebbles and on top of that clay, black sand; another geo-textile that keeps toxics out, polystyrene blocks to stabilise it all and then to finish it off, a thin sheet of grass. I am impressed by this effort, by this idea of construction, and ultimately by hiding all these ‘technologies’ underneath the grass. As a form of praise, I made a whole series of photographs during the construction of the High Speed Line (as an assignment for Atelier HSL) that show a illusion of this man-made section of the land: it is made to be monumental and therefore needs to feel without scale, as though one is looking at an archaeological site from the future.

MP: *River Overpass 2005:* This space, left by disused infrastructure looks so monumental, and so benign, despite all the dangerous things one might associate such places with. It is as though it has become a ruin in that world-wide itinerary of monuments of the ancient world, like the Acropolis or Borobudur, and the subject of tourism. Looking at the tourists (or photographers) in the picture, I am reminded again of Piranesi, and the scenes in his *Vedute di Roma*, where the monuments of the past are collapsed, consumed by nature, and rambled over by the finely dressed young gentlemen and ladies of



Ring Road (Findeq/ Ceuta) 2007

the eighteenth century. I wonder how much our image of the world is affected by this type of phenomenon, and how it affects how we make the world.

Section II (Xiamen) 2007: It seems as if the world is now being constructed upon our own ruins, and characterised by acts that always reveal the layers of the past and always cover these layers again, that our acts constantly force us upon the acts of our predecessors, for whom we show no mercy. The sedimentary depth of man-made earth – ruined dwellings and those that still contain life; tunnels, retaining structures, concreted walls, pile shafts, concrete slabs and stacks of building materials waiting for use – are displayed as though viewing the section revealed through the smashing of a termite mound. There is industry, necessity, desperation, brutality, futility. And this perspective on humanity and its works is chastening.

BP: I don’t know which aspect might be interesting to talk about, but I will tell you a few things about this photograph. In terms of abstraction, the section is in general an interesting tool: normally it cannot be perceived, and exists merely as a representation, for instance as in an architect’s drawing; it is an abstract understanding of the way spaces are linked to each other. A section normally reveals the organisation of spaces and their relationships; but in this picture, the section unearths more questions than answers. Next to the fact that there is a division from the top to the bottom – a sheer

cut through the earth, from the ruin to the retaining wall with the tunnel, to the construction site in the bottom – there is also a section from left to right that extends from the artificial or man-made to the apparently natural and back again to the artificial. And all this revolves precisely around the central point of the image.

MP: *Ring Road (Findeq/ Ceuta)*: Perhaps deep history, revealed in the presence of the archaic monument, such as is suggested by *Grid II*, or in the cut through the earth in *Section II (Xiamen)* is even more important than the histories, forms and arrangements of architecture that claim to be so central to its making and reinvention. In looking at *Ring Road (Findeq/ Ceuta)*, I can't avoid being aware of a pre-historic or a-historic dimension to the making of the world, of archetypes that transcend typologies, which are destined to repeat themselves. Or perhaps, in looking at the world, we are destined to repeat them, or find them, in making photographs, and in making pictures.

BP: There are many things to say about this picture Mark, like how it is a pivotal picture for me, its smoking rubble and debris and the rational white blocks on top of it. It is our future and our history, and we are stuck somewhere in the middle. But I think you say it very well, and we should stop the interview with your remark on this photograph, this picture. It is a beautiful end.