

Robert Shore
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Foreword to the book «Equivalences», 2018
RVB BOOKS

A Dialogue with Images

'I use physical displacement and our relationship to nature as a way of talking about the evolution of society and technologies,' says photographer-artist Douglas Mandry.

Half a decade ago, Mandry travelled through Turkey, doing what photographers often do, taking pictures – in this case a series of landscapes – without quite knowing why he was taking them or to what end he might put them in the future. It was almost a year after his return to Switzerland before he began seriously to contemplate the negatives and the possibilities they offered.

The images could have been treated as straight 'memory traces', exploiting the medium's vaunted capacity to bear witness to what the person holding the camera has personally witnessed or experienced. Offered in the popular 'diaristic' mode, they would offer a reliable record of the photographer's travels; 'evidence' of a more traditional photographic sort.

But photography's documentary or autobiographical possibilities hold little fascination for Mandry. Rather the opposite. 'The possibility (or rather impossibility) of photography to record reality is what interests me the most,' he says. 'The way I work is in a way made to remind us that a photograph is not what it depicts.'

This might be a riposte to Roland Barthes's well-known observation: 'Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.' That is, what we see is the photograph's content, and hence the idea that photography is immaterial, a self-effacing window onto the world primarily concerned with recording reality. That is not what Mandy provided in *Unseen Sights*, the series that resulted from his Turkish sojourn. Taking inspiration from nineteenth- and

early twentieth-century picture postcards showing Oriental landscapes, the artist collaged and hand-coloured his analogue images: shades of Photo-Secessionist experiments – say, Edward Steichen’s blue-tinted image of the Flatiron Building or Robert Demachy’s orange-toned images resembling chalk sketches –but endowed with a fresh playfulness and intellectual gravity by a keen exploitation of the potencies of seriality. As Mirjam Kooiman of Amsterdam’s Foam Museum wrote, ‘Douglas Mandry does not so much as add reality to his landscape photographs by coloring them, but rather deconstructs it by emphasizing the process of creation. Mandry colors his landscapes and adds new layers to the picture plane on the basis of his memory, like a painter who deliberately turns his sketch of a place into a painting in his studio.’

By such interventions the photographs become a means to explore the gap between reality and representation, an exercise extended in this book, where, with the assistance of graphic designer Nicolas Polli, he deconstructs those ‘memory traces’ using the process of CMYK offset printing. There is a high level of abstraction about the sequences, something that Mandy underlines with the title of the book, *Equivalences*, which echoes the name given by Alfred Stieglitz to his 1920s *Equivalents* series, commonly considered the earliest set of abstract photographs. In *Equivalences*, we see the original photographs, and then see them again in altered states, with their layers of cyan, magenta, yellow and black variously exposed to view, like geological heatmaps.

Mandry likes the physicality of analogue photography. ‘It has some randomness, a sort of loss of control,’ he says. ‘It is chemistry, and almost magic in a way.’ He likes mechanical techniques too, slowly and carefully exploring their value to

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the photographer. (Perhaps future generations will look back on such experiments and see in them the beginnings of a new movement: slow photography.) If the original pictures are the artist's interpretations of geographical reality, the variants that result from the examination of offset printing's potentialities could be classified as machine-driven reinterpretations of the artist's work. Playfully, the printer's operations allow new shapes and, in a Stieglitzian manner, equivalences to appear, with the book finally documenting a journey – but not a physical one taken through a real, human landscape, but rather a colourful shuttling through more alien, uninhabited climes – there are no humans here – moving between technological exploration and surreal fantasy.