**Interview with Never Lopez (Fall 2011):
Lite Sweat Crude. Montreal: J'ai Vu, 2008.**

The book is a fable, a synthesis, so there's a lot of stuff going on between the lines. Anyway, I hope that they will be useful, and forgive my prolixity (and my english).

Q. How did you select the photos for the book? Why these photos?

The interesting thing is that I didn't make the images thinking in publishing them. The book came later in the process. I did an installation at VU Centre in Quebec (normally they only show photography-based work) in 2006 called "Crime Scenes". Some of the pictures were presented in that show. Then they accepted my proposal of a book based on these images, taken during my road trips (during the show I realized that the best support for them wasn't a gallery, but a book).

I had roughly 800 photographs; I selected some that I really liked because of the visual content or the awkwardness. Others were selected when I started to write the text, to mirror the narrative. The text doesn't have a temporal linearity, a clear chronology, but the images have, or at least I tried to create a more straight continuity with the images. I tried to match them in the layout, so every block of four pictures works like a brief narrative. Text and images are intertwined, but at the same time they are telling two stories in parallel.

Q. How would you summarize the text in no more than 10 sentences?

Writing it was nuts, and funny. Lots of country and blues music from 1930's in the background. Some autobiographical moments. A road-movie on paper, I reckon. Frames of "Paris, Texas" flashing on my mind. It's a couple in the narrative because my darling companion is a hot driver. Decay is obvious, in the landscape, the characters, the situations. A zest of surrealism worked as a charm. Blending the languages was a challenge, a good one. That's ten.

Q. How did you proceed when you put text and photos together?

As I said I had lots of photographs to choose. So the text ran free and when it was done, I tried to balance or contrast the two contents, to create a dialog between words and visual. I did a layout, sent it to the publisher, he gave me some suggestions, I changed some pages, but it was very straightforward. I really think that the best images are in the book.

Q. Would you say that some of the photos are “replicas” of paintings? Are there references to other art or texts (Andy Warhol, Bruce Nauman and others)? Do you have sources of inspiration?

"Replicas" of paintings, no, I don't think so. Maybe the lights or the themes of an Edward Hooper. I was never a fan of painting, it's not a language that I'm interested as an artist, so it's not in my visual vocabulary. But I presume that someone could find links between these images and works of North American painters (for example if one of your students

remarks similarities, I'd be glad to know, It can be inspiring). Replicas of cinema shots, for sure, but I couldn't pinpoint which movies or scenes. Ok, let's say "Fargo" or "Gummo".

My sources came mainly from photography, Robert Frank's work, Stephen Shore's images from the 70's (an Andy Warhol acquaintance by the way), Lee Friedlander, and Natacha Merritt's Digital Diaries (not because of the content, her autopromotional hypersexualized lifestyle didn't interest me), her instinctive, obsessive and provoking camera language and how she used it as a tool for depict her narrative and fantasies made me rethink my own photographic language. There are certainly other influences that I can't remember right now, but you got the idea.

For the text one can think about a mixed breed between 1920's blues lyrics, caribbean creole, Jamaican raggamuffin' and Finnegans Wake - yes, I'm dead serious about this mix. You know, I'm fluent in four languages, and sometimes it's just natural to blend everything, to create new sounds and semantics.

Q. Where were the photos taken? Not in detail but generally. Quebec? Would there be any photo from close to Niagara Falls?

It's a good game to play. It can be lots of places, Arkansas, the outskirts of Detroit... But you're right, most of the pictures were taken in rural areas, close to highways in Quebec and Ontario (Oshawa for example), Niagara, hidden places close to Rochester and the lovely cities of Mexico, Paris and Egypt in upstate NY. One picture in Chicago, two in Buenos Aires, one in Brazil.

When the book was published people always asked me about the south of the United States and I replied: "No this place is just aside Quebec City, etc.". They were surprised to found that the "Belle Province" has it share of "hillbillyness".

Q. In many ways, one may say that the book is about blurring (many blurred photos + a text in a multi-language idiom that may be challenging to understand). Your thoughts?

That's an interesting comment, thanks, I'll add this to my steampot of concepts. I never thought about the blurriness - probably because the book is clearer for me than it is for the readers - but I assume that there's a "foggish" ambience in it. It's on purpose.

I like uncertainty as a concept. Well before the book, during my M.A., I researched thoroughly about fuzzy logic, and how to use it as a creative concept. At that time I needed a theoretical and aesthetical justification to mash-up into my artistic projects the Wittgenstein's Tractatus and Jimi Hendrix's guitar language. So, a controlled system of uncertainty, a fuzzy system, was a good answer. "Fuzz" has a semantics that can be understood by guitar players and analytical philosophers alike.

The book is a game between seeing and hiding, communication and noise, and fuzziness plays its part.

Q. America as a ruined landscape: do you have a philosophy of the ruin? Could you comment on this? Are these the ruins of a “culture” that exists but that is maybe not really a “culture” in some of the meanings that we give to the word?

That's a tough one.

Philosophy of the ruin, not yet. It's coming though; I'm certainly interested in decay. Philosophy is a bold word, and I can't put my inaccurate efforts to understand my american environment in the same level of a rigorous theoretical research based on arguments, hypotheses and analysis. They aren't either the result of a profound understanding of personal experiences and afterthoughts. Let's face it, I'm not William T. Volmann or Wittgenstein ;D

The worst thing is that maybe this is not the ruins of an unaccepted "culture", maybe this fringe will become mainstream America. But then we won't call it mainstream, we'll just say "How come in the world did we become this utter failure?". In a formal sense, it's not a "Culture", but it's closer to "Civilization" - the question is: Are we ready to accept that? Is America ready to live as a marginal?

Q. We imagine that there is social engagement/criticism in your book. Would you agree and how?

(Most of all, the book is just a brief fictional narrative. But it conceals a very personal moral lecture, as a fable for oneself.)

Despite my last answer, I must say no. I'm not criticizing society and its margins, I'm not criticizing our society to create and nurture the fringe. And no, I'm not socially engaged as an artist. I'm quite an ethical, generous and aware person, but I'm individualist as 90% of the people that I know. And I'm totally skeptical. Our democratic institutions are just plainly weak, that's a fact, and it looks like that nobody is really bothered about it (some of us are, but it changes nothing). We are unlucky souls living in an age of despair, intolerance and bigotry, and I don't see a bright future ahead.

The title "Lite Sweat Crude" is a sexy wordplay with "Light Sweet Crude", which is how the market calls a barrel of oil, so it's quite a poetic expression to name a commodity, actually the mother of all commodities. For me it expresses also a dead-end, the moment when a ruined and dependent America hunts its own soul, with lust, anger and numbness. It's our 21st century hangover.

Q. Very often, there are words/texts in the photos. What is for you the importance of words in the photos you chose?

Yeah, I love letters, signs, typography, aphorisms, emoticons and I think that photography has the ability to put these messages out of context, or create new interactions between space and message. I use also words and icons in my installation projects. When I was 20 and something I was deeply interested about haiku, and how image and writing could be embedded to create multiple levels of understanding. So I keep trying to use letters and words as visual icons. And I'm always amazed by the way

that people use, shape, and diffuse information with them. (By the way, perhaps a contradiction, but I dislike graffiti.)

Q. The photos evoke death and appear haunted / haunting. How would you comment?

There's a floating tension in the images, like "something is going to happen" or something weird happened here". Death is rich on symbolism, and symbols that most of us understand, despite the context. Images evoking death are easily readable, and in a certain way I used them to simplify the narrative - because, in a reader's point of view, the text was already tough enough to deal with. I understand when you say "haunting", but it was not voluntary. I would rather say "stressful", "eery" or "angst".

Q. What about ruins and hauntedness in the text?

The text is a crazy love story of two fiends on the run. And it's also about nostalgia, radio, road trips, 10 cents a gallon, etc. The couple is completely unaware of the storm in front of them, they are having fun, living at the edge of another love story, the one between America and oil production - this is the "social" background of the narrative. It's like Mad Max meets Zabriskie Point meets Thelma and Louise. I wrote it like a movie script. Let's say that the ruins and hauntedness are visible in the photographs, but less present in the text, because the characters conducting the narrative do not perceive them.

Q. Why the choice of a multi-language in the story? What were you trying to achieve?

At the beginning I wrote everything in a sort of phonetic english, we can find it in the text. The publisher didn't want a text only in english, even if it was a bastard one... I just thought that I would be an impostor writing in french, nothing against it, I love to speak french, but it doesn't sound right... So I proposed to create a mix of french, english, creole, quebécois, hints of spanish and portuguese. Frankly, it was all about the sound. I didn't mean to achieve anything more than having fun with the words and the sounds and tell a good story. I didn't want to create new vocabularies or etymologies. And I like wordplay, there are some intended puns that make sense only if you can speak these languages for real.

Q. How can we read the text? Is the reader meant to be lost in translation? Is there a code? A crucial question: is it important to understand everything in your text?

One should read the text loud, as an actor. I have recordings of the texts performed by two actors (male, female), they're pretty good, the text was meant for that.

And yes, we must lose - or loose - ourselves in the text, and forget our intellectual relationship with language as something that must be understandable. There's no code and it's not important to understand everything, actually, it's impossible. I can translate the whole text quite easily to plain english, but it doesn't matter, sound and phonetics are the driving force behind it.

Q. The road-trip story that ends in tragedy. Your comments? Were you thinking of the myth of the “frontier” in North America as you worked on this project?

My book finishes with a heck of a party! Well, kind of. Final scene is an entertaining affair with our main characters, a morgue, an stack of lubricated corpses, a lesbian sheriff with fellinian proportions and dancing, come on, that's fun ;P

But "Vanishing Point" finishes with total desolation, and it's probably the best road-movie ever, IMHO. If you tell me a good story, I won't care about the end being positive or negative.

The frontier, yes, I think so, I'm very much interested about borders, but I would not develop an argument on that based on this book. In some future projects maybe I will be able to go deep in this scenario.

Q. Would you argue that your vision of America is the vision of an outsider, a visitor, a foreigner?

No not at all. When I talk about America, I'm thinking about the whole continent, and despite some regional idiosyncrasies, America is essentially one thing from north to south if you look at it in the MACROscope - but we have a tendency to scrutinize everything, that's dull. I prefer to work in the similarities. I only lived here. And I lived it full frame, high-end, low-end, still doing it, travelling. So trust me, I'm the ultimate insider. Haha, that sounds cheap haha.

Q. Are the photographic scenes set up, as in a theatrical performance?

There are three staged photographs, your new game is finding them.

Q. How would you react to the (theoretical) expressions “junk spaces” and “detritus culture” in relation to the book? Would they apply to the project?

That's genius: "Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course, or more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in progress, its fallout (...) Junkspace is its apotheosis, or meltdown...". Junkspace is Koolhaas at his best, and I love his writings, so if you want to integrate his expression to my humble efforts I will be delighted.

If you're thinking about cultural detritus as a form of recycled nostalgia, turning culture upside down and reworking the threshold between sophisticated and ordinary art, yes, someone could apply this idea to the book. But I'd not do that, because these frontiers are totally blurred in my mind. Extraordinary out of the ordinary, that's always my goal.

Merci !

Merci à toi!