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## BEIRUT by Serge Najjar

Texts: Ferrante Ferranti, Jean-Luc Monterosso, Serge Najjar

Serge Najjar writes with lines and plays with shadows. When I discovered his photography, I was immediately moved by the purity of his eye and the rigour of his compositions. There should be utmost control over framing. The "right" image is the one that translates the inner vision, and that fully resounds in the gaze of the unknown viewer.

For me, some images evoke the utopia of the architects of the Enlightenment era, who had dreamt of them but never achieved them. Had they been photographers, they would have been compelled to compose with reality.

Receptive to the variations of Time, Serge has not drawn on a memory of Beirut, – no pictures of "old stones" – but homed in on the realities of a changing city.

Serge depicts a maiden route. There was the Beirut of childhood

dreams inside bomb shelters, then the city he fled due to the fighting, then finally the building sites of reconstruction. The discovery of his city would go on to establish his need to write with the light and to triumph over darkness.

In his animated images, a fraction of a second signifies timelessness, and the image can no longer be conceived of without its author, a fleeting shadow or incarnate presence. Serge calls on us to follow him in these architectures of light, and to pass through the mirror of appearances.

The history of Beirut calls for constant resurrection. The Beirut of Serge Najjar is the book of time dreamt, reinvented and then accomplished, the book of a captured time.

— Ferrante Ferranti



Serge Najjar

Photo: Ferrante Ferranti

Serge Najjar is a Lebanese photographer born in Beyrouth Lebanon in 1973. He is a self-taught photographer and his work examines the interrelationship between modern and contemporary painting and photography. Serge Najjar proceeds like a goldsmith of cities as he shows their manifold geometric potential. He casts his photographer's eye on our interaction with materials and their correlation with the history of modern art and geometric abstraction. His approach may be instinctive, but his views allow us to reconsider our contemporary surroundings on a human scale. People's presence makes utopian, at times overwhelming architectural structures appear more human.

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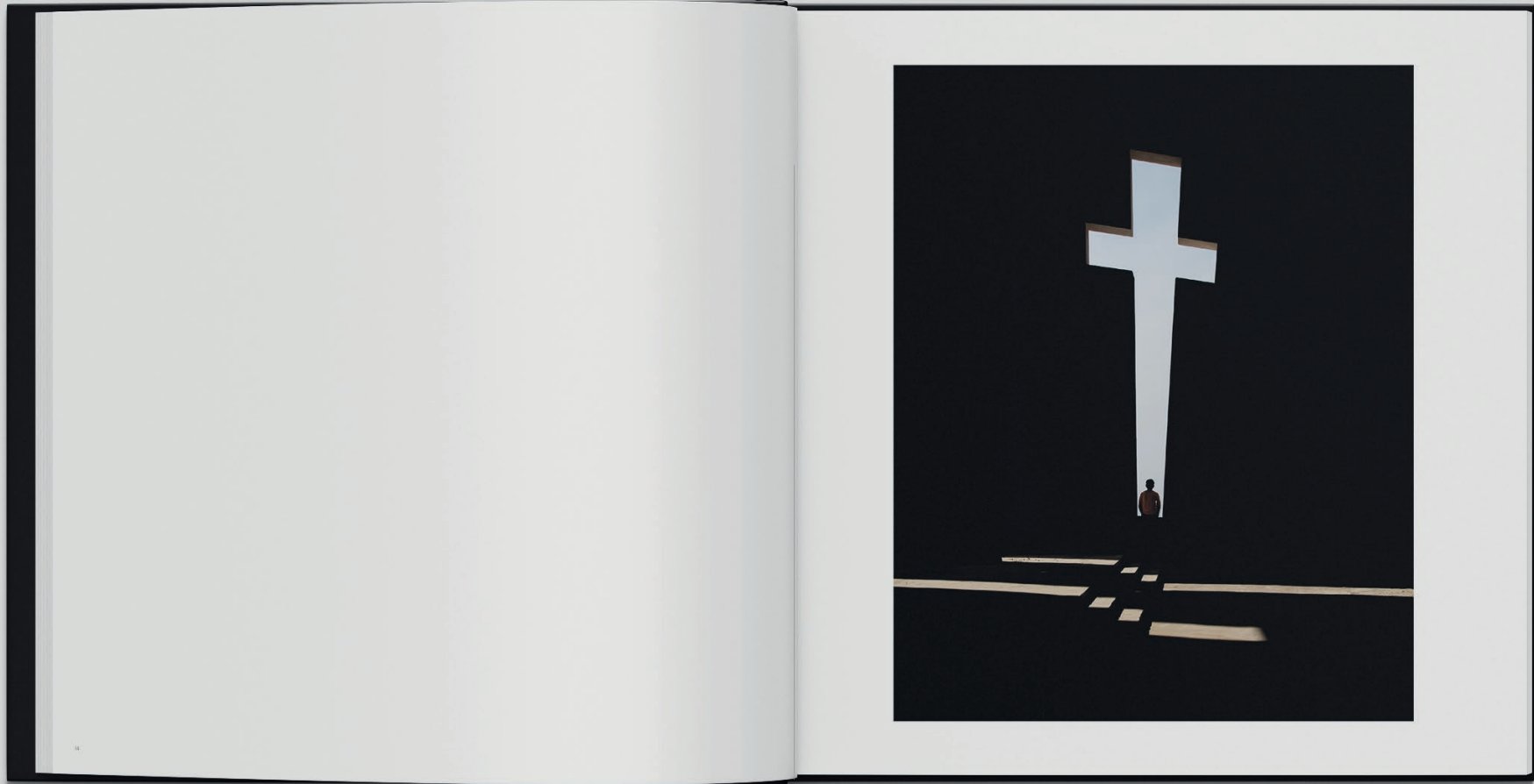
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# BEIRUT

SERGE NAJJAR

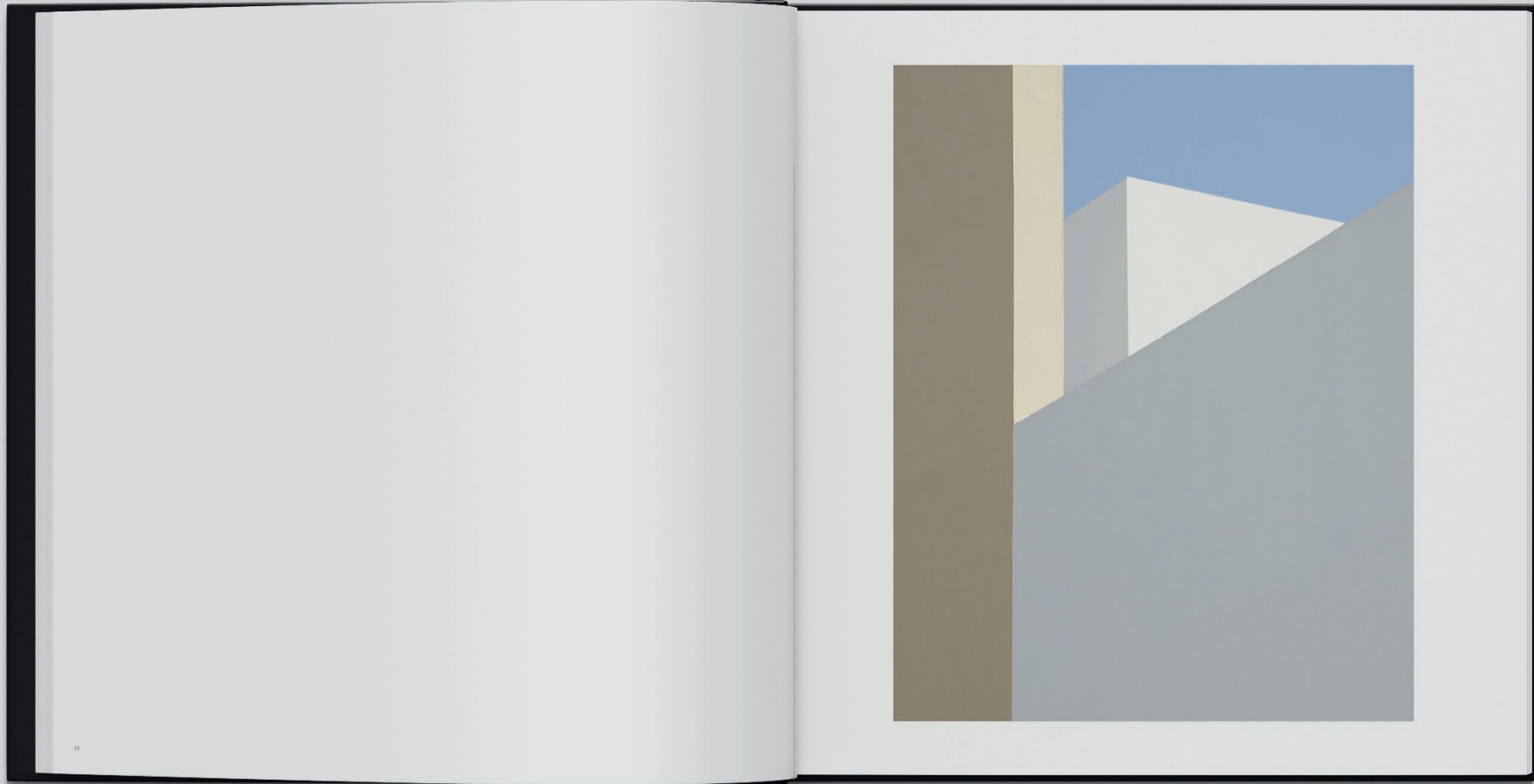






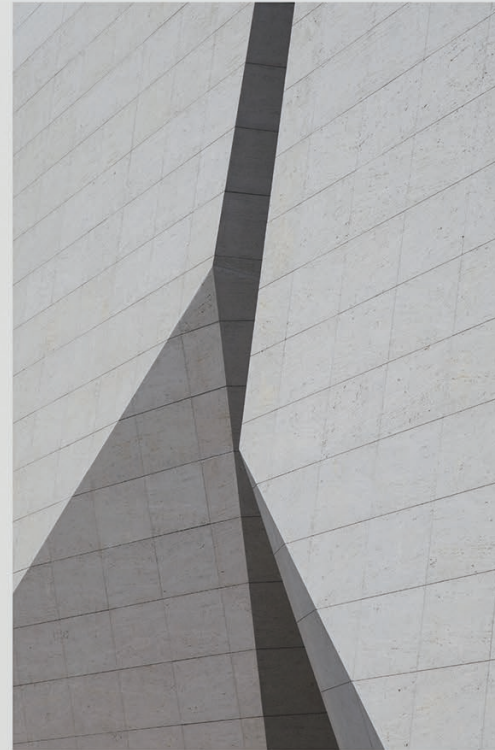
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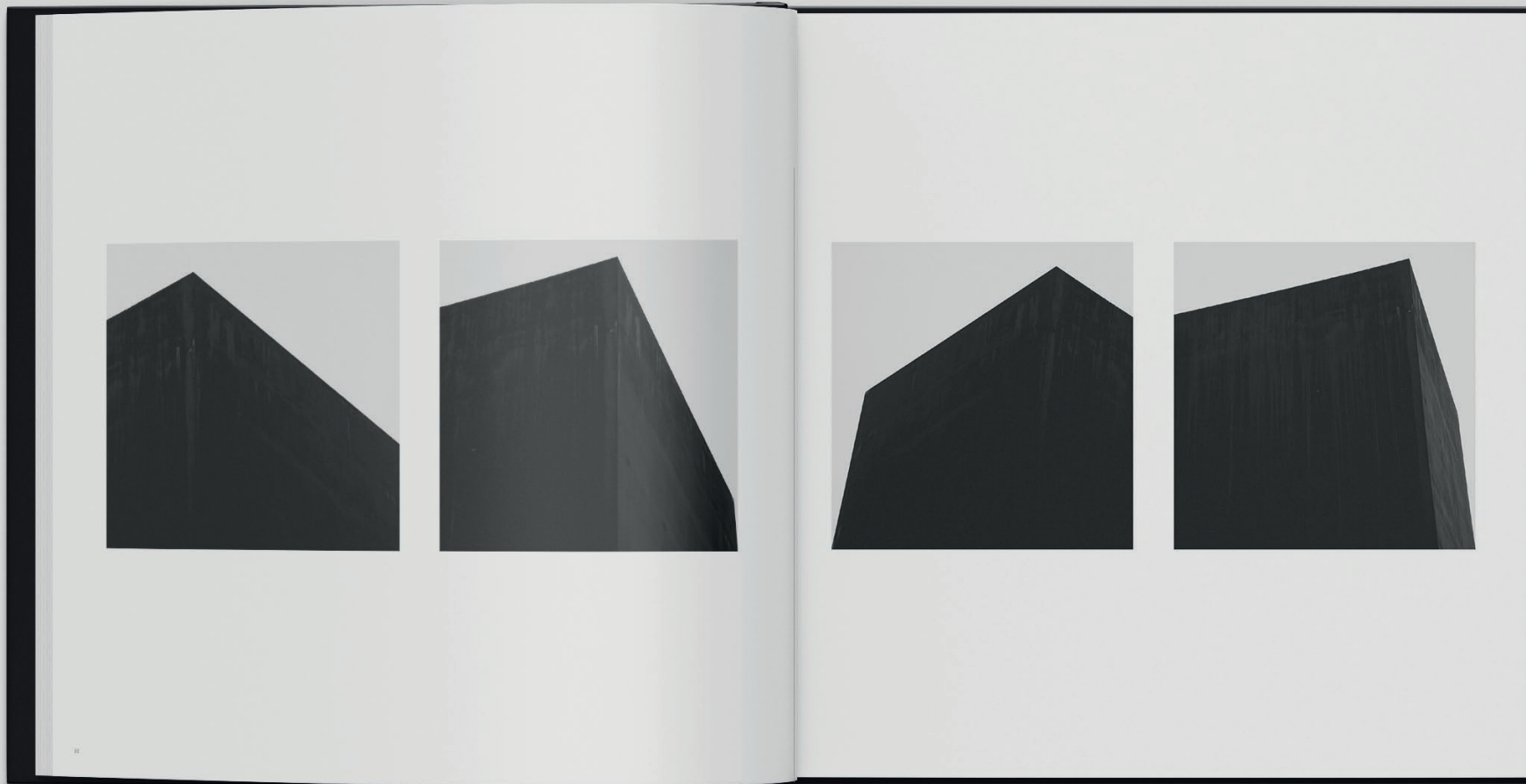




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UNE CONVERSATION ENTRE SERGE NAJJAR,  
FERRANTE FERRANTI ET JEAN-LUC MONTEROSSO, PARIS, 2020

Jean-Luc Monterosso : fondateur de la Maison Européenne de la Photographie ("MEP", Paris, France) et directeur du Chengdu Contemporary Image Museum (Sichuan, Chine)  
Ferrante Ferranti : architecte, photographe, auteur et enseignant.

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN SERGE NAJJAR,  
FERRANTE FERRANTI AND JEAN-LUC MONTEROSSO, PARIS, 2020

Jean-Luc Monterosso: founder of the Maison Européenne de la Photographie ("MEP", Paris, France) and director of the Chengdu Contemporary Image Museum (Sichuan, China)  
Ferrante Ferranti: architect, photographer, author and teacher.

## I. DE LA NAISSANCE À L'ÉVOLUTION D'UN STYLE PHOTOGRAPHIQUE

JEAN-LUC MONTEROSSO

Serge, tu as réuni un photographe et un directeur de musée pour parler de ton travail. Pourquoi le choix de Ferrante Ferranti ?

SERGE NAJJAR

J'admire Ferrante. Il le sait. Il m'a beaucoup appris et il continue de m'apprendre. Il me permet de sortir de cette bulle dans laquelle j'ai tendance à me figer. Quand j'ai commencé à photographier, je me suis dit que je ne m'enfermerai jamais dans un style. Chaque fois que Ferrante et moi prenons des photos ensemble, il me permet de m'échapper de cet excès de moi-même. Il a un œil poétique, cherche les reflets, associe les ombres et la lumière, mais aussi l'humain. Même si je photographie l'ouvrier, j'ai souvent peur de ne pas lui donner suffisamment de place dans mes photos.

J'apprécie aussi la modestie de Ferrante. Je me retrouve dans beaucoup de ses photos. Cet esprit nous unit.

Je crains sans cesse que ma raison prenne le dessus sur le cri du cœur qui guide mes photographies. Il y a quelques mois, à Beyrouth, lorsque nous sommes allés ensemble prendre des photos, Ferrante m'a de nouveau libéré. C'est une sorte de thérapie qui me pousse à m'envoler. Il me donne le courage de me réinventer. Je conçois ainsi la photographie : si l'on s'emprisonne dans un style figé, on meurt. Il est presque vital pour un photographe de préserver une perméabilité au monde qui l'entoure.

Ce livre est l'occasion pour moi de fermer un volet dans ma vie ; il me permettra peut-être de m'attaquer à d'autres écritures de lumière... En tout cas de faire le point.

FERRANTE FERRANTI

Je voudrais mettre l'accent sur cette relation établie autour de la photographie. Aussi, si je peux me permettre, j'aimerais préciser pourquoi, Jean-Luc, tu es le troisième protagoniste de cette conversation. Parce que, à la suite des propos de Serge, je peux dire : « ce que Serge me dit, je le dois Jean-Luc ! ». Peut-être ne sais-tu pas à quel point, mais moi je le sais !

À ce stade de notre conversation, je pense que deux idées se dégagent d'emblée : la singularité d'un artiste et ce qui lui permet de platement se libérer. En ce qui concerne l'expression personnelle, il y a dans le monde intérieur de chacun des notions acquises presque par instinct et d'autres appelées à se développer, à se révéler. Le langage n'est jamais figé, comme dit Serge.

Un jour, Myriam, la belle-mère de Serge me dit : « Je crois que mon gendre a un œil. Voudrais-tu regarder son travail ? ». Je me souviendrai toujours de ma rencontre avec Serge, et des moments où il m'a montré ses premières images ; à la troisième, j'ai dit : « J'ai un photographe en face de moi, un vrai ! ». Comme un éditeur qui découvre un manuscrit et qui très vite dit : « J'ai un écrivain entre les mains, je ne sais pas ce qu'il produira, mais il est écrivain ! ». C'est exactement ce que j'ai ressenti face au travail de Serge. C'est un photographe, il est capable d'écrire avec la lumière.

Serge, je suis touché que tu fasses allusion à la poésie dans mon travail. Si on le définit comme tel, il faut revenir à la source : l'étymologie de ce mot grec, « poësis », c'est la création. Aujourd'hui, cette notion a été déplacée. Lorsqu'on pense au poète, on imagine un être qui se réfugie dans les mots, dans son monde imaginaire et dans ses visions, loin de la réalité ; et qui nous semble plus libre qu'un écrivain. Mais, de fait, à partir du moment où l'on crée, on est poète.

Ce qui me fascine chez toi, c'est cet équilibre permanent entre la contrainte et la liberté. Des termes que tu as utilisés, beaucoup ont évolués dans ton travail. Parce que tu avais déjà ton propre langage, qui ne s'enferme pas dans un style mais qui, je crois, s'est rapidement développé. Tu es établi très tôt des règles rigoureuses, tu t'es fixé des contraintes. Je suis ému d'entendre que ce livre pourra t'aider à assumer ces termes-là. Je les connais bien parce nous en avons beaucoup parlé. Mais formulés comme tu viens de le faire, on pressent que la liberté viendra de la maîtrise de ton écriture. Une liberté qui apparaît déjà dans tes regards plus récents.

Avec l'expérience, l'écriture se libère et révèle nos mondes intérieurs. Le poète qui se croit libre se découvre d'autant plus libre. Je prends l'exemple de mon recueil de poésie préféré, Les Illuminations de Arthur Rimbaud, dont la structure visionnaire traduit les préoccupations intimes du poète ; et je pense que ton œuvre, Serge, peut y faire écho.

Quand je regarde les rétrospectives de photographes que je considère comme des guides, tel Herbert List ou Lucien Hervé, je vois des maîtres qui ont avant tout mis en valeur le sens de la construction. Selon moi, cela nourrit notre aspiration à nous libérer. Comme disait Oscar Wilde : « L'art nait de contraintes ». Notre époque invite à tout dire, à tout montrer sans prendre de distance. Ce que j'admire plus que tout dans ton travail, Serge, c'est cette exigence envers toi-même.

Le décadrème élément fondamental, c'est la rencontre avec la personne qui nous permet de nous libérer. Je ne dis pas cela parce que tu es présent, Jean-Luc, mais tu es cette personne pour moi. Lorsque j'étais à la chapelle du Majean d'Arles en 2008 mes regards sur l'œuvre du plasticien Rachid Koralichi que j'ai accompagné dans différents projets, on m'a annoncé : « Jean-Luc Monterosso arrive ! ». J'étais si impressionné. Tu venais voir le travail de Rachid, et tu allais aussi voir le mien ! J'étais très timide, c'était il n'y a pas si longtemps pourtant, il y a treize ans.

## I. FROM THE BIRTH TO THE EVOLUTION OF A PHOTOGRAPHIC STYLE

JEAN-LUC MONTEROSSO

Serge, you brought together a photographer and a museum director to talk about your work. Why choose Ferrante Ferranti?

SERGE NAJJAR

I admire Ferrante. He is aware of it. He has taught me a lot and continues to teach me. He lets me escape the little bubble I tend to get stuck in. When I started taking photographs, I told myself I would never confine myself to a given style. Every time Ferrante and I take pictures together, he lets me escape that excess of myself. He has a poetic eye, searching for reflections, combining shadows and light, but also people. While I photograph workers, I am often afraid I am not giving them enough space in my photos.

I also appreciate Ferrante's modesty and I recognise myself in many of his pictures. That attitude unites us.

I constantly worry that reason will get in the way of my heart's call that guides my photographs. A few months ago, in Beirut, when we went together to take pictures, Ferrante once again released me. It is a kind of therapy, one that pushes me to fly high. He gives me the courage to reinvent myself.

This is how I look at photography: if you lock yourself in a style, then you're dead. It is vitally important for a photographer to retain their permeability to the world around them.

This book is the opportunity for me to close a chapter my life. It might allow me to tackle other kinds of writing with light, or in any case, to take stock.

FERRANTE FERRANTI

I would like to highlight this relationship established around photography. If I may, I would like to point out why, Jean-Luc, you are the third protagonist in this conversation. After what Serge just said, I can say that "What Serge owes me, I owe to Jean-Luc!" You are maybe unaware to what extent, but not me! At this stage of the conversation, I believe that two ideas emerge straightaway: the individuality of an artist and what allows them to fully express themselves.

As far as personal expression is concerned, in our inner worlds we find some notions are acquired almost instinctively while others need to be developed and revealed. The language is never set in stone, as Serge says.

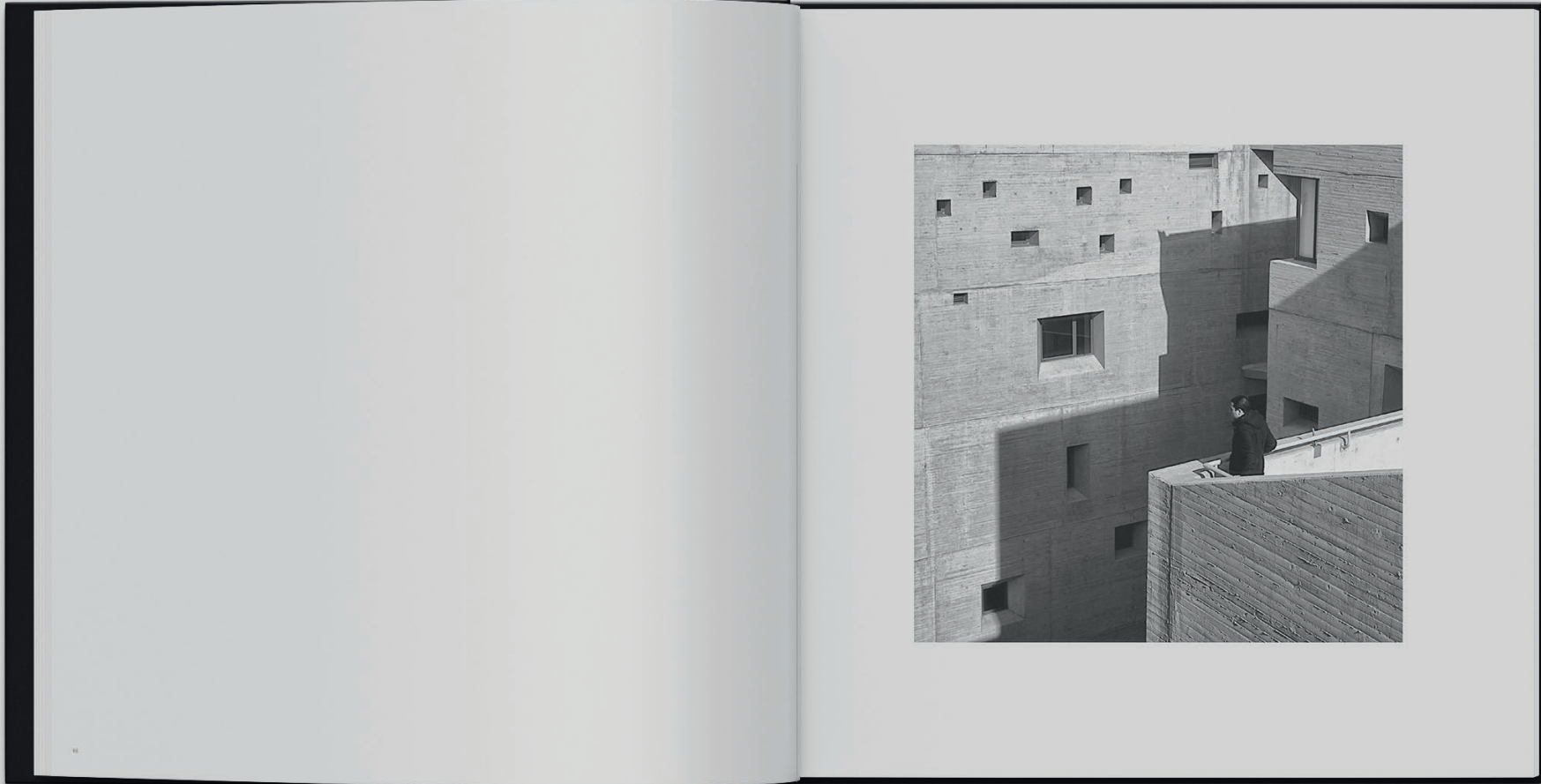
One day, Myriam, Serge's mother-in-law said to me: "I think that my son-in-law has an eye. Would you like to see his work?". I will always remember my encounter with Serge, and those moments when he showed me his first pictures. By the third, I said: "I have a true photographer in front of me!" I was like a publisher who discovers a manuscript and who immediately says: "I have a writer on my hands, I do not know what they will produce, but I know they can write!". That is exactly what I felt when confronted with Serge's work. He is a photographer and he writes with the light. Serge, I am touched that you would allude to the poetry in my work. If we define it as such, we must return to the source: the etymology of this Greek word, "poësis", is creation. Today, the notion has shifted. When we think about a poet, we imagine a being who takes refuge in their words, in their imaginary world and vision, far from reality; and who appears to have more freedom than a writer. But, in fact, as soon as we create, we become poets.

How you fascinate me, to with the constant balance between constraint and freedom. Of the terms you have used, many have evolved in your work. You already had your own language, which was not locked into a style but which, I believe, is evolving. You established rigorous rules early on, setting your own constraints. I am moved to hear that this book will help you come to terms with these. I know them well because we have discussed them thoroughly. Expressed in the way you just did, we get the feeling that your freedom will come with the command of your writing. A freedom that already appears in your more recent work.

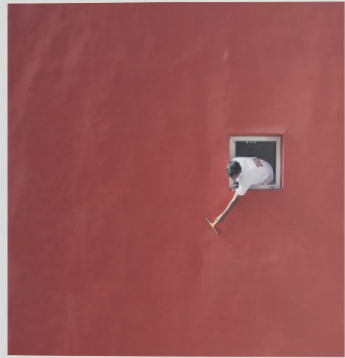
With experience, writing becomes freeing and reveals our inner worlds. A poet who believes themselves to be free becomes even more so. I will take the example of my favourite volume of poetry, Illuminations by Arthur Rimbaud, of which the visionary structure conveys the intimate preoccupations of the poet ; and I believe that your work, Serge, may echo it. When I look at retrospectives of photographers that I see as guides, like Herbert List or Lucien Hervé, I see masters who above all showcased a feeling of construction. For me, this nourishes our yearning for freedom. As Oscar Wilde once said: "Art is born out of limitations." We live in a time that pushes us to express everything, to show everything without taking distance from it. What I admire most in your work, Serge, is that you demand a lot of yourself. The second basic element is meeting the person that allows us to free ourselves. I am not just saying that because you are here, Jean-Luc, but you are that person for me. When I was exhibiting my take on visual artist Rachid Koralichi's works at the Majean chapel in Arles in 2008, an artist that I supported on different projects, I was told: "Jean-Luc Monterosso is coming!" I was so in awe. You would come to see Rachid's work, and you would also see mine! I was very shy, yet it was not so long ago, thirteen years in fact.

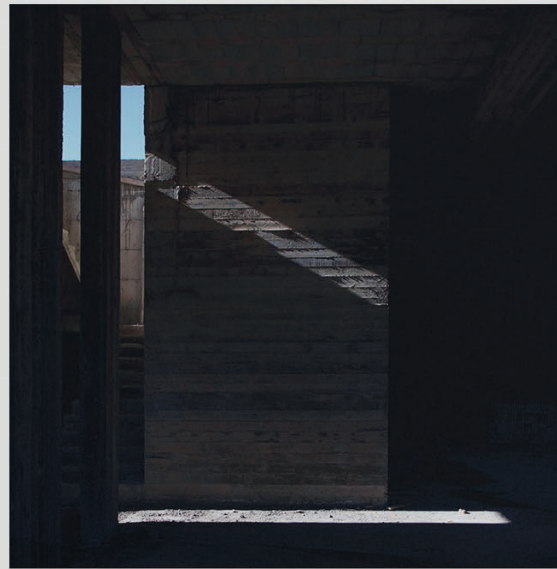
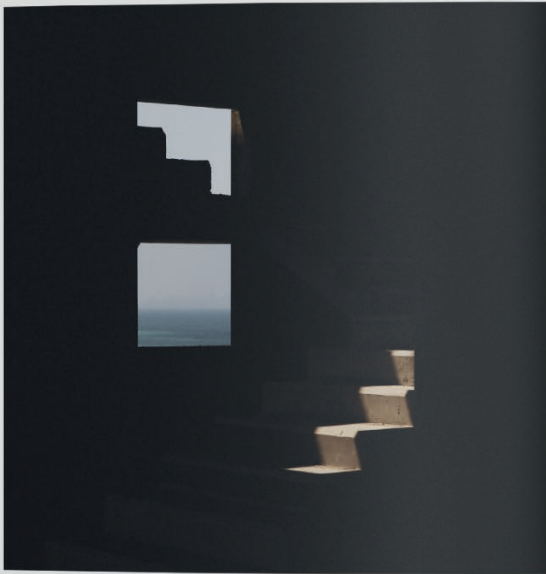
JEAN-LUC MONTEROSSO

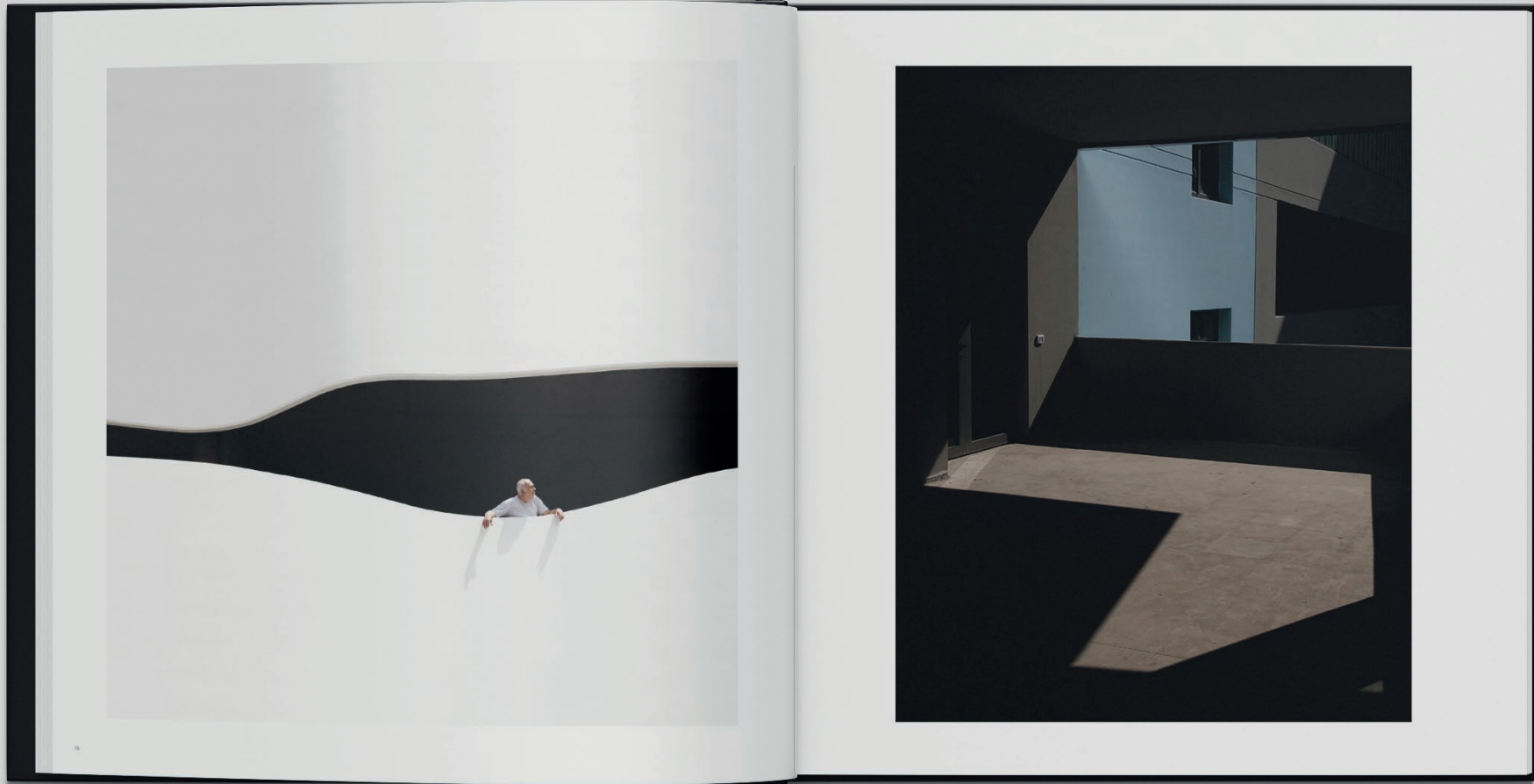
It's been thirteen years already...



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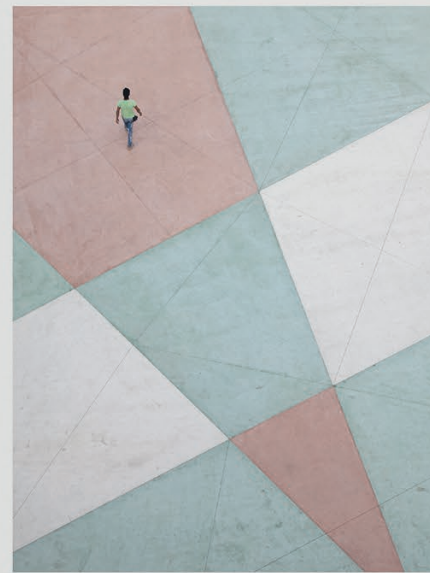




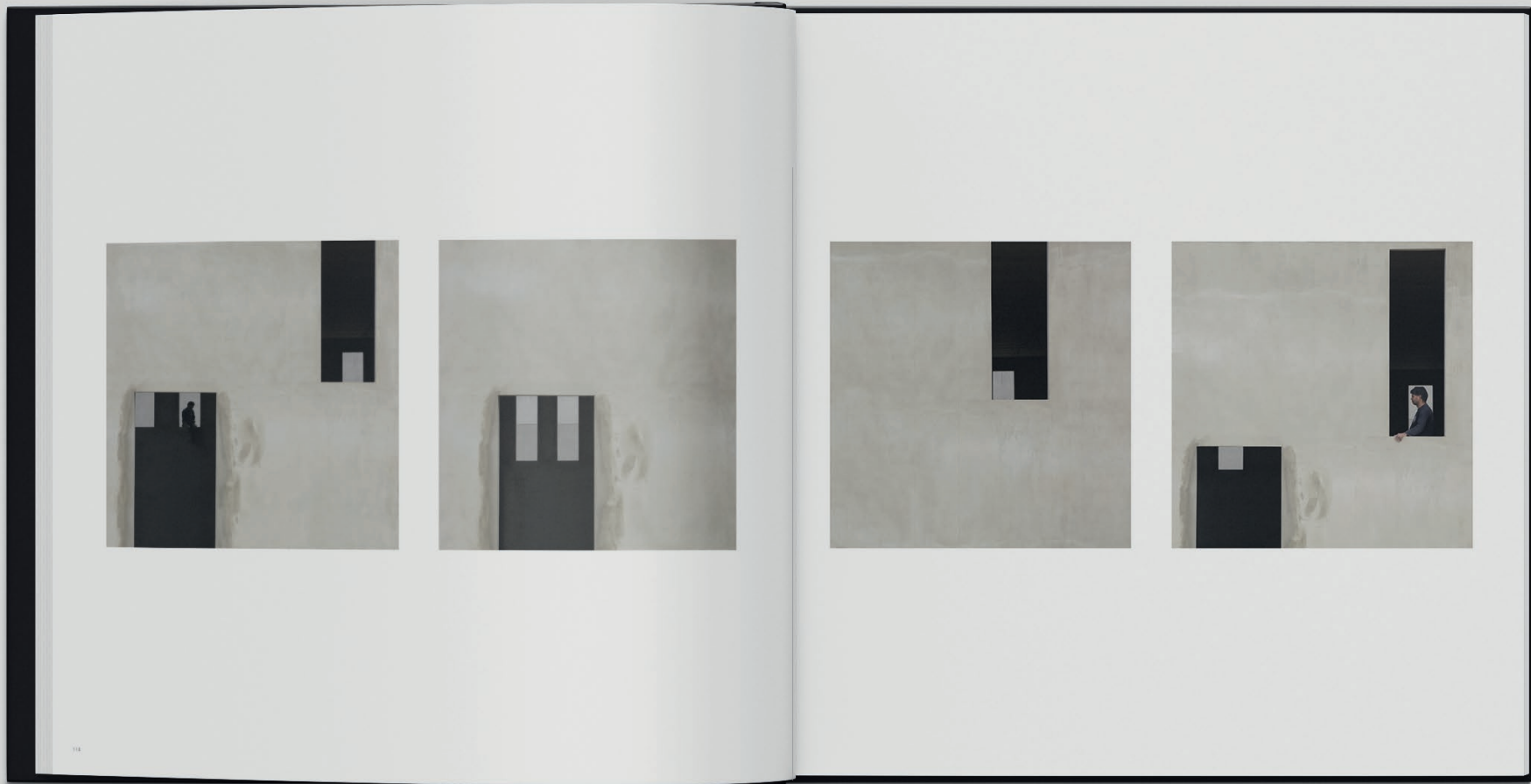


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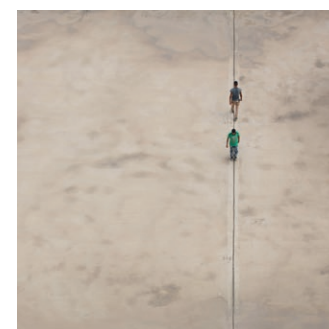
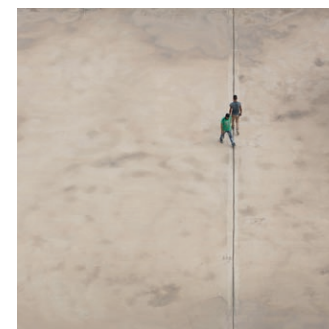
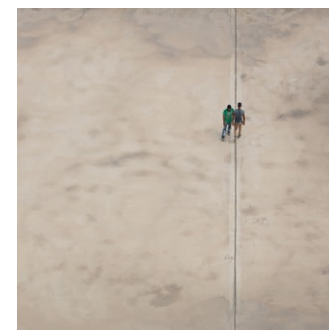
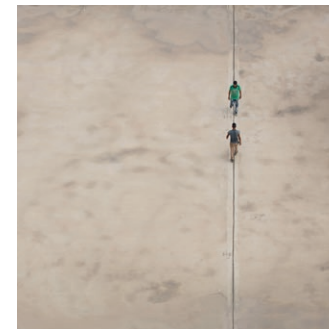
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## EVENTS

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**ART PARIS - September 2021**  
GALERIE BESSIÈRE - Booth G9  
Presentation + Book Signing  
Friday 10<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2021, 11am-5pm

**PARIS PHOTO - November 2021**  
GALERIE TANIT - Booth B20  
Book Signing - Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2021, 1pm-4pm  
  
Grand Palais Éphémère, Champs-de-Mars, Paris 7



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