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4 June 2019

## PRESS RELEASE

Jakopič Gallery

### LUCIEN HERVÉ: GEOMETRY OF LIGHT

Photographic exhibition

11 June – 29 September 2019

(Opening: 11 June at 7 p.m.)



**This exhibition of one of the great photographers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was originally presented at the Jeu de Paume, Paris' foremost photographic gallery. In the spirit of Lucien Hervé's reflection that "at best, one can hope to beget a vague idea of the whole by defining an intimate detail", the Jakopič Gallery exhibition aims to contribute towards the appreciation of the rich legacy collectively created by authors working in this medium both locally and internationally.**

*High Court, Chandigarh, India  
(architect: Le Corbusier), 1955 ©  
Lucien Hervé, FLC – ADAGP / J.  
Paul Getty Trust, The Getty  
Research Institute, Los Angeles*

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**Janja Buzečan** | Odnosi z javnostmi | Public Relations

M 041 644 409 | T 01 2412 538 | F 01 2412 540

E [janja.buzecan@mgml.si](mailto:janja.buzecan@mgml.si)



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Born in Hungary, Lucien Hervé (1910–2007) emigrated to France in 1929 with the intention of becoming a painter. It was his 1949 encounter with Le Corbusier that led him to dedicate himself entirely to photography. The vast majority of his pictures were taken over the course of two decades, which included a close collaboration with the renowned architect lasting fifteen years (1950–1965). He went on to work with other architectural greats of his time, such as Alvar Aalto, Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Oscar Niemeyer. For Hervé this was a time of back-to-back commissions and the discovery of locations all over the world.

After 1965 he had to forgo extensive travelling due to a disability, but took care to maintain lines of communication with the public through a number of publications and exhibitions juxtaposing the ancient and the modern, the traditional and the new, the abstract and the human, always driven by his desire to intrigue his contemporaries and hone their gaze. From the 1990s on, he received a number of awards and distinctions such as the Legion of Honour, the Paris Photography Prize, and an award from the Széchenyi Academy of Arts and Letters in Budapest.

Lucien Hervé is especially known for his architectural images. His geometric compositions based on the tension between light and shadow suggest rather than describe their subjects. This exhibition introduces the visitor to the key themes of this immensely rich oeuvre: his early years and the emergence of his photographic language, his crucial encounters, the importance of Le Corbusier and of architecture, the photographer's apartment, the interest in architectural contrasts that he developed during his travels, and finally, abstraction. At the same time, the display echoes exhibitions organised by the artist himself between 1950 and 2000. Selected quotations from the photographer's personal archives are displayed throughout the exhibition, allowing the photographs to enter into dialogue with the thoughts of both Lucien Hervé himself and of various literary authors.

Hervé's early works, from 1930 to approximately 1950, are characterised by their painterly composition based on a precarious balance of sharply contrasted surfaces and masses. From his photographs of the Eiffel Tower, marking the beginnings of his fascination with architecture, to those taken from the window of his studio, Hervé constructed his images with the greatest rigour in order to capture their essence. While it is rare for his photographs to make individuals their subject matter, Lucien Hervé was consistently driven by a deep faith in humanity.

His encounter with the works of Le Corbusier was a critical moment for Hervé. Fascinated by the architect's designs, he sought to capture both their materiality and their intangible aspects. As the clean lines and masses of reinforced concrete take shape, multiply and metamorphose in the sun, the constructed space is transformed into two-dimensional compositions on the verge of abstraction.

Hervé's travels further reinforced his idea that the language of architecture had a universal dimension. Through photography he expressed his wonder at the power of the buildings of the ancient world, at the same time highlighting their modernity. His travels all over the world gave him the opportunity to marvel at, and play with, the complexity of line and mass found in a wide range of buildings, including Le Thoronet Abbey, the Escorial, and Spanish vernacular architecture.

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For Lucien Hervé, abstraction was a universal language. He used it throughout his work, revealing it not only in architecture but also in scenes from everyday life. Geometry could render even the most insignificant street detail abstract, giving it a painterly quality and infusing it with beauty.

## CURATOR

**Imola Gebauer**, art historian and independent curator of Hungarian origin, was collaborator of Lucien Hervé in the 2000s, and since 2009 works in the photographer's archives. Thanks to her experience in the classification of the built heritage of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, she rediscovered the architecture with the artist. She also took care of the digitization and cataloging of the written documents kept in his archives. In 2010, she was one of the curators of the exhibition *Lucien Hervé 100*, celebrating the centenary of the photographer at the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest, and in 2015, curator of the exhibition *Lucien Hervé: l'âme architecte*, dedicated to the sacred architecture seen through its lens, at the Abbey of Clairvaux.

## EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

The exhibition follows the artist's career from the start, focusing on important themes:

### ***The early years (1938–1949)***

*"I've always tried to say a maximum with a minimum of means."* (Lucien Hervé)

It was in Paris that Hervé first picked up a camera. He took photos of a complex building, the Eiffel Tower, and the banks of the Seine, as well as the view from the window of his studio (the series called *Paris Sans Quitter ma Fenêtre*). His highly varied pictures and surprising compositions were inspired more by Russian and German movies than by the photography of his day. Later he felt some of these photos were too anecdotal, because they seemed to tell a story whereas he was more interested in humanity than in individuals. Thus the architectural environment and humankind became the increasing focus of his lens, which sought harmony through geometry.

### ***Encounters***

*"Whether I take a picture of a man or a building, my viewpoint remains the same."* (Lucien Hervé)

Faithfully shunning the anecdotal, Hervé did not try to record life's little moments. Yet often a human figure would add life to the rigor of his architectural photos. The few pictures that place a person at their center – often a child or old person whose faces were hidden – testify to a quest for universality: Hervé wanted to record the human condition. The faces we see are those of friends or individuals with whom Hervé had encounters he felt were crucial. But he was also playful, so movements of hands or legs could play a key role, even in portraits. He assembled the body's curves and angles into compositions with a strict, graphic geometry that was nevertheless very human.

### ***Le Corbusier (1949–1965)***

*"You have the soul of an architect."* (Le Corbusier)

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Lucien Hervé played a major role in international recognition of Le Corbusier's architecture. Rejecting descriptive illustrations, he sought to grasp the soul of architecture. The overall feel of a building could be conveyed through various details underscored by strong contrasts, by light and shadow handled as concrete materials. His photos thereby approached abstraction. Seduced by Le Corbusier's utopianism, Hervé extolled the architect's vision and desire to offer mankind new living conditions. But human elements only occupied the building timidly, and their presence was only fleeting or implied.

### **Modern architecture**

"The role of architectural photography is to be what musical performance is to the score. The best performance is the one that reveals the work while remaining humbly faithful to the spirit of the creator of that work." (Lucien Hervé)

Many architects loved the originality of Hervé's photographs, and thus sought his services. Such collaborations were not always easy, however, because he systematically refused to take documentary-type pictures. His eye always sought to understand a building. He agreed to photograph the construction of UNESCO headquarters in Paris, to immortalize the new capital of Brasilia, and to travel the world—the architectural accomplishments of Marcel Breuer, Alvar Aalto, Oscar Niemeyer, Jean Prouvé, and others were extraordinarily enhanced by Hervé's photos.

### **The apartment**

"All you need are two fingers, curved in a circle like a basic camera lens, to perceive harmonious relationships of shapes and colors. That way, anyone's eye can become artistic." (Lucien Hervé)

Stricken with multiple sclerosis, Hervé moved around less from the 1970s onward. The apartment he shared with his wife and son became a major theme of his photography. The pictures he took there constitute an integral part of his oeuvre even as they underscore the growing importance of color. Colors lent greater coherence to this personal space, which became a kind of manifesto of Hervé's commitment to the modernist movement embodied by Mondrian and Le Corbusier. The perpetual interplay of colors allowed Hervé to recompose his environment without leaving his armchair.

### **India – Classical Antiquity**

"I don't try to take beautiful pictures, but to provide a key to finding something marvelous." (Lucien Hervé)

Increasingly expert in modern architecture, Hervé became curious about buildings from all periods and cultures. He studied French medieval and neo-classical architecture, yet also marveled at the accomplishments of India's Mughal empire, fragments of buildings erected by early Christians in Syria, the power expressed by the Escorial in Spain, and the modernism of the simple shapes of modest houses on the Balearic Islands. These photos were the main inspirations of many exhibitions and publications that sought comparison with his own day. Along the way, Hervé always retained his sense of humor as well as his sharp yet sensitive view of human conditions.

### **Sacred and Secular Architecture**

"Have you not observed when walking around the city that among the edifices that people it, some are mute; others speak; and others, the rarest of all, sing?" (Paul Valéry)

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“Light and shadow are the loud-speakers of this architecture of truth,” wrote Le Corbusier with regard to Hervé’s photographs of the Cistercian abbey of Le Thoronet. The abbey represented a veritable mystical quest for Hervé. While he was able to perceive and grasp the spiritual aspect of the building, it was its rigor that caught his attention and prompted him to photograph it. There his eye perceived the architectural values of his friend and mentor. Hervé’s world-wide wanderings enabled him to marvel at things and to play with the complexity of lines and volumes of various buildings, including those that “sing.”

### ***Black Spain – White Spain***

Between 1958 and 1968, Lucien Hervé worked on commissions for two books on Spain, although these were never published. He spent these ten years in the company of ideas that in the 16th century had given birth to the Escorial, an architectural complex whose features included a palace, a monastery and a necropolis. The grave, sombre symbolism of this “Black Spain”, dominated by King and Inquisition, contrasts with the simple geometry of the vernacular buildings of “White Spain”. Hervé’s photographs point to the conspicuous modernism of traditional houses, positively quixotic in their defiance of the arid environment.

### ***Abstraction: “Beauty Roams the Streets”***

*“I put all my ambition into rediscovering the inherent beauty in all things, the potential beauty of the insignificant.”* (Lucien Hervé)

The pure forms of modernist architecture—the sharp lines and curves of shadows—were rigorously cropped and recropped by Hervé to free his compositions of superfluous elements, to distill his subject. Alongside the transfiguration of buildings, however, Hervé was also interested in transforming and abstracting things encountered at random. There is “beauty on every street corner,” he observed, and he enlarged these found-images in order to enable them to converse with architecture as artworks in their own right.

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## PROGRAMME ACCOMPANYING THE EXHIBITION

**Guided tours in Slovenian:** Sundays at 4.30 p.m.

**Guided tours in English:** Saturdays at 4.30 p.m.

**Guided tour by the curator of the exhibition, Imola Gebauer**

12. 6. 2019 at 5 p.m.

**Guided tour at the Museum Summer Night**

15. 6. 2019 at 9 p.m.

**Guided tours by the curator, Marija Skočir**

29. 9. 2019 at 4.30 p.m.

**Close-up: Photography as a Way of Seeing, 2018–19 photographic study group**

Closing event of the study group with an overview of the new academic year

23. 9. 2019 at 6 p.m.

**The Magic Photogram**, a photographic workshop for kindergartens, primary schools and secondary schools (booking required)

**Camera Obscura**, a photographic workshop for primary schools (Years 4 to 9) and secondary schools (booking required)

## COLOPHON

**Photographer:** Lucien Hervé

**Curator:** Imola Gebauer

**Expert support:** Marija Skočir, Julija Hoda

**Graphic and exhibition design:** Bojan Lazarevič (Agora Proars)

**Exhibition production:** Technical Service MGML, O.K.vir

**The project was made possible by:** City of Ljubljana

**Media sponsor:** TAM-TAM

This exhibition is organized by **Jeu de Paume, Paris** with the participation of **Jakopič Gallery/MGML** for its resenatation in Ljubljana.

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