The photograph was taken on a cold winter’s day in Ménilmontant, Paris, in 2013. It is from a series called *Halfway to White*, on which Joséphine Michel has worked for the last three years. A selection of the photos formed the practice component of an MPhil entitled *The Sonic Photograph*: *Indexicality, Reverberation, Tonality*, completed in the department of Visual Communication at the Royal College of Art in 2012.

All the photos in the series are Jpegs, shot on a Panasonic camcorder in still-photo mode. Michel uses this device partly because: ‘the sense of a momentary conjunction of elements suggests a ‘frame grab’ from the ephemeral conjunctions that I am interested in. This way of working also provides me with the sensation that I freeze motion and sound into a single image that crystallises a visual noise…I do not use an analogue photographic process, because working digitally allows me to make explicit the images’ coded underwriting, to focus the tension between the abstract binary 0’s and 1’s and the concrete material of the world’ (Michel, 2012, p8).

The tension between binary data and concrete material to which Michel refers is evident in the textural micro-structure of the images, which is clearly visible when, as they often are, the photographs are printed large, and this detail seems to vibrate, linking it to the ideas of the sonic indicated in the MPhil essay’s title and discussed further below.

Once the subject to be photographed is chosen, the image is precisely overexposed. Although this technique is employed repeatedly in the series, the results vary considerably depending on the subject matter. In some of the images formal blocks emerge and different elements in the scene seem to align on the picture plane, so that apparent depth is reduced and graphic relationships emphasised. In this instance this process can be seen-through, literally since the two key layers in the image are made up of lattice-like structures, one literal, the other apparent: one is seeing ‘through’ a physical lattice to a solid structure that is lattice-like in form. However, as much as we may have a sense of seeing-through, based on certain clues in the scene, that through which we are seeing mingles with what is behind. Effectively the picture confounds such terms as ‘through’ and ‘behind’, even though we can understand that they are operating in one of the ways we may decide to see the photo. As with the *Necker* cube, the viewer can consciously flip between at least two perceptual modes. The resulting duality, or tension between what one understands to have been in front of the camera and what one is actually looking at, also invokes Eisenstein’s concept of ‘Intellectual Montage’, in which the unschooled viewer comes to evaluate how cinema has transformed what was in front of the camera into its own terms, by reference to the access the same filmic image affords to the real-world objects from which it is derived.

Here we are looking at a cleared space, a gap in the continuous facade of adjoining buildings in a narrow, steeply sloping street. The gap is maintained by a network of hefty steel bars that stop the adjacent walls from falling into the void created by the demolition. Thus matter is used to keep a space a space: it is a void propped open. The image recalls *Portrait* (1969) a sculpture by the Canadian artist Michael Snow, consisting of a small adjustable frame that can be tensioned between two walls or in a doorway, for example, so as to define a view or virtual picture. In Michel’s photograph, the bars hold open a scene, clearing a kind of frame for the image she will make, but also forming an essential part of it. The temporary glimpse of an otherwise inaccessible array of windows is afforded, but only at the expense of its interruption by the device that permits it. However, it is precisely this disruptive element that gives the image its interest. The whole is composed of variably slanting diagonal elements –windows, bars, openings- yet their misalignment results in the breakdown of exact repetition into an intricate, haphazard interplay of energized lines. These lines evoke something of the sonic correspondences with which Michel is concerned. Their dynamic interpenetration suggests disrupted counterpoint: displaced harmonic intervals, clashing chords. The colour, too, is integral to this sense of tonality: the shift in hues across the picture –yellow, brown, blue, crimson- evokes *Farben* (colours) the third movement from Schoenberg’s *Five Pieces for Orchestra* (1909), in which a non-melodic continuum of notes, played by an overlapping succession of different instruments, results in continuously shifting tone colours.

Colour is reduced in area but concentrated –saturated- where it remains. It is as if there were previously large areas in the scene, but that as they shrank they gathered into dense patches that in a few places look like samples or swatches. However it is clear that for most of the image, certainly in terms of its larger forms, it plays a structural role –colour and form are isomorphic and co-extensive- such that the distinction between line and colour breaks down. This distinction (between *disegno e colore,*) arose historically in relation to painting in Italy in the C15, whereas here we are looking at a photograph. However, the latter shares some significant values with painting. One could think of it as halfway to painting, in the sense that coloured form has displaced representational detail, whereby a process of selection and simplification allows the desired formal elements to function more forcefully.

Michel, Joséphine, 2012: *The Sonic Photograph*: *Indexicality, Reverberation, Tonality*, MPhil Thesis, London: Royal College of Art, page 8.

Michel, Joséphine, 2014 (forthcoming): *Halfway to White,* photographic book with music CD by Mika Vainio, London: Touch Recordings.