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THE IMPOSSIBLE SELF

Preamble to Artists' Texts and Interviews

We developed ten questions to serve for interviews with each of the artists. The questions were intended to generate responses which focused on the subjects raised specifically by this exhibition. Some of the interviews were conducted by letter, others orally and some not at all. Some of the artists chose to ignore the questions and to answer with a more direct articulation of their concerns, others reordered some of the questions as well as not answering others. Some others chose to be represented by words from other speakers about their work rather than speaking for themselves. Some of the interviews were answered in languages other than English and then translated. All were edited. So, not surprisingly, then, a wide variety of responses was elicited which convey some of what these artists are thinking today. The questions included below are meant then as a reminder of some of the original curatorial concerns but are not an explicit guide to the responses except in a loose and parallel manner.

Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne

1. When you start a new work, do you know what you are after? Do the materials suggest anything to you or do you have ideas and then come to the materials to try them out?
2. Does the work develop as part of a series or a group of works and concerns? Does a new work always follow on from another or are there periods of hiatus? Are there rhythms to your work that you can identify?
3. What is the motivation for a new work or series? Is the particular trigger or stimulus influenced by exterior forces or is it strictly private?
4. In what sense do you think of your work as representing you or standing in for you?
5. Do your works seem to you to convey particular ideas or emotions that you can identify or do they

seem to you to convey a more general sensibility?

6. In what sense do you think that your works 'express' you or your personality? If they have an autobiographical quality in any way, is this important for the public in their understanding of the work?

7. Do you think of yourself as a discrete entity in the world? To what degree do you see yourself as a conduit of information and changes around you? In other words, to what degree do you see yourself as a unity or whole person and to what degree do you see yourself as a fragmented being combined from many parts?

8. There are consistent written warnings, which began with the introduction of industrial states and continue to today's technocratic states, that suggest that the individual is being devalued by forces which seem to demand increasingly mechanistic and automatic responses. Do you feel that your work is in contrast to that history? Do you feel that art or the artist in general has a role in relation to such forces?

9. The art world traditionally fetishizes the mark of the artist, the particular material touch or style of the individual. Are you sympathetic to this process, this specialisation and its set of values? How does it fit in with your own values?

10. Personal identity, a sense of self, is difficult to separate from one's cultural, gender and social identity. In what senses do these 'larger' identities matter to you and to your work?

RAYMONDE APRIL : ARTIST TEXT

The autobiographical coloring of my work is a given from the outset. That this is plainly evident and unavoidable is in large part due to the use of a certain type of photographic image: modest and quotidian, disorganized, sometimes out of focus, crammed with details and full of faces. One discovered image that recurs constantly is a woman's face. The words "I" or "me" often appear in the titles or the texts.

I want to construct fictions based on authentic elements. I only work with what I know well, in an infinite microcosm that I multiply to infinity to furnish a galactic space ... with an exacting precision

with regard to details that are not assembled in the studio. My work's documentary aspect derives from my being completely implicated as material, without censure, in a free and, at times, irresponsible way. I do not want to appropriate what I know nothing about.

Nevertheless I do not want to fabricate a personal history; neither do I want to produce a photo album like the ones found at auctions.

I avoid the nostalgic and linear aspect by conducting a shattered, disjointed narrative, a mixture of rhythms and registers. I combine images relying on their archetypal associations rather than their experiential connotations; I excise any logical links, constructing something else entirely, photographic tableaux or phrases.

I find it important that others apprehend these work processes from one extreme or the other, either in an autobiographical detail or in the fictive entirety. What is even more important is that they apprehend the work in the continual tension between these two extremes.

My work is to a certain extent a dramatization of the exercise of extension that I perform in order to hold together and balance the various parts of me: my origins, influences, identities and aspirations. I want my work to be transparent in terms of my life, that it be as complex and that, in a certain way, it assist me in living.

I am a woman, Francophone and an artist and I have produced a quantity of images of isolation.

My childhood was spent quietly and studiously in Rivière-du-Loup, a small town overlooking the St. Lawrence river, in an essentially francophone and above all rural landscape. My adolescence and university years were awash in the hot mythologies of the seventies: the struggle for Quebec independence, the counterculture, the return to the land and the lure of travel. It is in this cultural context that I began to work as an artist.

In a series such as *Les chansons formidables*, I would like to at once acknowledge these roots and to reactualize them in the daily life of a city such as Montreal. I would like these images to travel as I do between the large city and the small town, nature and urban activities, anonymous daily routine and legendary festivals, the tribe of friends and the original family. I recognize that the landscapes and people throughout *Les chansons* and in other series, are an endangered species. I find it is

important to look at them, desirable and likeable as they are in their obstinate will to be what they are.

I embrace more ideas and desires in terms of long term work than I do in work accomplished during a daily regimen. Ideas sometimes persist over a course of several years. They have the time to disappear from my voluntary consciousness before they re-emerge in an art object.

I do not have a project in mind as I work. I forbid myself any thinking. I refuse to make plans. I would rather allow an invasion, a sort of contamination of my daily life by a state of anticipation. I make note of unrelated stories in notebooks, I listen with particular attention to those people I love and I contemplate cracks in the ceiling. I keep my distance, observing life. I proceed to make preserves of my materials, those that at some future point will indicate what I should do. Having accumulated them for a long time, I study them, organizing and grouping them into image families. I form photographic narratives to which I sometimes append brief texts.

(My materials are vivid images captured with a camera loaded with black and white film.)

I work slowly and methodically. My annual image production averages 20 to 30 photos, divided among two or three large series. The time taken actually shooting always seems short compared to the work of grouping the images, their organization into series, enlarging and production ...

I take photos regularly, but the most intense shooting period is between April and September. Around the beginning of September, I eliminate, select, and affix about 30 small proofs onto the studio wall; I then examine them and establish intuitive connections between them. Later in the autumn, I arrange two or three groups in a more definitive fashion. I place the images into an order, sometimes writing brief texts, giving them titles and deciding upon dimensions. In January, in midwinter, I produce the final prints in the darkroom. Should I take new photographs during this final stage, I keep them in reserve for later. It often happens that photos from the preceding year that did not fit into the work at the time, are reinserted into a new series.

I work according to the regular rhythm of the academic year. I should mention that I teach through autumn and winter and that during the summer I travel. I work in a more erratic and anxious fashion while travelling than when I'm in Montreal. While I sometimes work night and day, with a sense of urgency, it also happens that all activity is suspended when my mind is elsewhere.

All around me, artists are communicating their processes, related research and their activity through their works. I am always searching for whatever can be of assistance in living and working. I appreciate the example of others. I find it more important to refer to the artist, to align myself with the production system of artworks, while those works remain open, potential, still in the future. The comparative appreciation of completed artworks is of lesser interest to me.

The art world is too often occupied with the consumption of objects based on notions of the elect and of separation. It values the persistence of recognizable signs in an artist's development, all the while insisting on a refurbished, never faltering performance.

I am apprehensive about the prison-fetishism, a reductive and alienating fetishism. Above all, I want to avoid developing a fetishism regarding my earlier work. However normal it is that art objects have their own existence and solidity, I want to remain free to constantly elaborate new work.

I believe that there is a common sensibility throughout my work, a temporal continuity that I hope extends beyond and between the images and the texts.

Before they become part of differentiated series, my images exist as neighbors on negatives and contact sheets. They pile up in mounds of small prints in boxes. They retain this kinship of inspiration, related through the materials and the same faces invariably recur. This disjointed, vertical and elliptical mode of association leaves the work open to interpretation, to identification. Any attempt to deal with something particular and more specific would be to control interpretation in order to produce an intended effect. This doesn't particularly interest me. I prefer to create an atmospheric space than to be misunderstood.

My work is at once object and subject, both the producer and the materials. It is not so much a portrait of me as it is a portrait of my activity. It represents a continual traffic before and behind the camera.

When a spectator mentally assimilates the person depicted in my work with me, she/he experiences the work as being either intimist or narcissistic, taking pleasure or not in feeling like a voyeur. If the spectator is looking for a rational intention, she/he interprets the work as a vast film script, underestimating the personal, more nebulous documentary aspect.

When I compare myself to the person portrayed in the photos, I notice that this woman is constantly on the move, that she names things, observes everything and wants to assume all the roles. The person I am is much less indefatigable, less organized and less responsible. Once she feels comfortable somewhere, she doesn't budge ...

Those forces that influence me are above all private. They are circumscribed by family, friends and daily life. I work at my own rhythm. If I am asked to participate in a creative or exhibition project, I do or don't comply according to whether it corresponds with what I'm doing. Exhibitions are an occasion to bring work to completion; they do not provoke work. I am at work on a large, continuing project. Current global events affect me as they do everyone else but I do not work in terms of them.

As a person and as an artist, I cannot but feel like an antiquated romantic, or to see my existence as being scorned or denied in this technocratic climate. I am after all addressing myself to individuals, to subjective beings who recognize me as such; in this isolated context, life becomes possible. I do not know how my artistic activity can reconcile these two realities.

I am a fragmented being. I am attempting to keep track of the disparate parts of me even if I can't keep them together. I am either endlessly on the run or paralyzed at the kitchen table. I try to resolve my dissatisfaction through works that exalt multiplicity and fragmentation. I am not a discrete individual because I leave tracks. My works seem to me to be more solid than I am.

Were I given the right to be incoherent and scattered, it would not make me any happier. So I accept my responsibilities. I either under- or overestimate my influence on others. Some days I would like to assume the form of a benevolent mist.

Each of my works is comprised of several parts. Were I to achieve an equilibrium, I would no doubt be recreating the same object over and over again ... even if I feel that my works are more resolved than my person, I feel the need to produce new ones. None of my works represents me. None has the multiplicity; each becomes outdated as soon as it is completed.

And this seems to me to be quite a banal situation.

Translated by Robert McGee