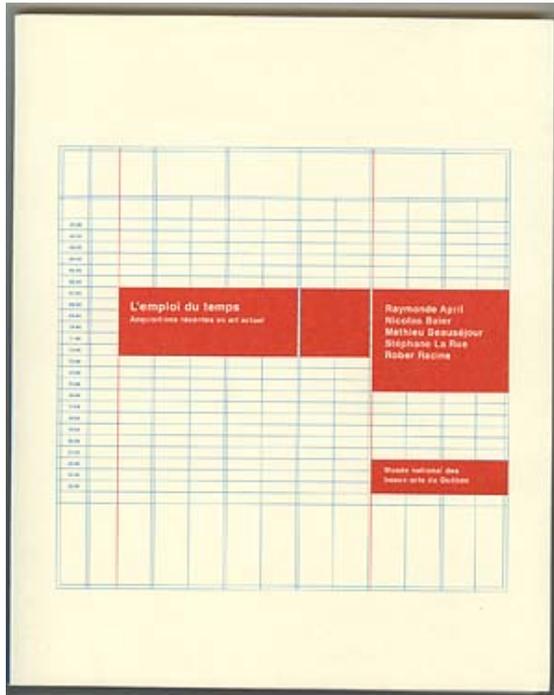


Ninacs, Anne-Marie — «Pour un peu d'éternité» — «L'emploi du temps : acquisitions récentes en art actuel» — Québec : Musée national des Beaux-arts du Québec, 2003 — Also in English : «For a Piece of Eternity», p.55-69.— P. 37-51

FOR A PIECE OF ETERNITY

ANNE-MARIE NINACS



If, in all that you would do, you began by asking yourself, “is it certain that I want to do this an infinite number of times?”, that would provide you with the solidest centre of gravity ... My doctrine teaches, “Live in such a way that you should desire to relive — that is the task — for you will live again in any event. Let him whose supreme joy lies in effort exert himself! He that loves repose above all else, let him rest! He that loves above all else to submit, obey and follow, let him obey. But let him clearly know his preference and not shrink from any means! He is in it for eternity!” This doctrine is kind toward those who do not have faith in it. It has neither a hell nor threats. Anyone who does not have faith in it will feel within himself only a fleeting life.

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*¹

(...)

Capture

Taken in the day-to-day world over a twenty-five-year period (the oldest image dates from 1973, when the artist had just finished her first year at university), the photographs in *Embracing All* (*Tout embrasser*) are a veritable time piece made from the faces of friends, beloved landscapes and those ordinary but priceless scenes Raymonde April is so skilled at capturing. After sorting through all the images she had made prior to 1998, the artist picked 517 that had never been published and made them into a film just as apparently simple as her photographs themselves: a hand removes the photographs from a pile one at a time, as if the family were grouped around to look at them, holds each image still for a few seconds, then takes the next one. A first pile, then another and another — nineteen in all, arranged nonchronologically, each with twenty-five to forty-five images — are shown this way in four simultaneous but unsynchronized projections, which shatters the reassuring illusion that life is a thread that unspools, like a movie, with a beginning, middle and end. And yet, a story takes shape in them. We seem to zoom slowly in on a landscape, a backyard, then a kitchen, where little by little we come to recognize the characters. The sound makes us imagine that the long-past action is taking place here, before our eyes, and mingles in our thoughts and our past to fill up the space and time that separate one image from the next, linking these detached instants that present themselves to view like faint pavement markings, like repeated attempts to delimit, millimetre by millimetre, the vast horizon “that never ceases moving, never ends,”² the vast horizon of a woman and an artist who revisits her adult life — her history and work — literally unreeling it before our eyes in its own logic, arcane yet every bit as implacable as the strictest chronology.

“For purposes of identification, each pile is named after its subject, its location, or the photo on top,” April explains before running through the list: “raspberries, couple, winter, tripod, hands, Quebec City, portraits, two heads, chimera, Rivière-du-Loup, three friends, Paris, bow tie, shorts, streets, Mama, trip, country house, columns.”³ Unlike the details designating these stacks of images — these little words that we sense to be heavy-laden with intimacy — the monumental project’s title *Embracing All* conjures up an all-encompassing perspective, an overview. In fact, it attests to the ideal — profoundly human, perhaps even dearer to a photographer — of grasping in a single gaze the whole of the phenomenon of life, from inaccessible summits to the most fleeting impressions. Yet, the ambitious title (which recalls Professor Bartleboom’s equally utopian

Encyclopedia of the Limits to be found in Nature) also betrays through the very limitations of photography, which gives the project form, and the fragmentary, sporadic gaze by which photography functions — the mourning we must forever observe in the name of such an ideal.

As if to compensate for the impossibility of achieving this omniscient gaze, this ultimate image, the photographic gesture is repeated to excess: 517 times in this case, *five hundred seventeen* snapshots that give but an inkling of the thousands of photographs the artist has taken in thirty years; that are but an infinitesimal part of all the moments caught by the eye but not by the camera; that take the measure of an attentively lived life. Yet, however many of these images there indeed are, they are just barely enough to show the importance of all the scattered, disjointed bits, all these people and places that “vacillate between presence and disappearance, persistence and fragility,”⁴ and then to reshape an existence from their elliptical coexistence; just barely enough to remind us that life is made primarily not of years but of instants, that significant people are all around us; just barely enough to urge us to harvest this manna before it vanishes forever. For it is paradoxically in seeking, in digging and in attaching herself with unremitting determination to what is most fleeting in this life, obstinately fixing her gaze upon it again and again, that Raymonde April escapes the “fleeting life” Nietzsche proclaims in a tone that makes you shudder, a life that seems even more punitive than hell and all threats combined. In addition, not content to live her life and relive her practice of photography every day, April lives “in such a way that she should desire to relive,” in the strictest sense of the term, since she constantly revisits her own life through her photographs. For anyone who at times might prefer to skip over the present, not to sift through the past too often, or even forget certain shreds of it, that already spells an unbearable commitment.

But Raymonde April’s autobiographical adventure is not egocentric for all that. Skimming what is most particular — which does not mean extraordinary — in her own trajectory, caressing her life with her gaze, she makes it into a universal. The people one likes and knows oneself to be liked by or spurned by, places where one is at ease, objects so familiar that one must disturb them to see them anew, the irresistible face of a dog, the dry fall of a footstep on the walk, the comforting winter afternoon sun caught in the curtains, the movement of a body that remains emblazoned in memory for life — nothing of the stuff we are really made of is so visible in others’ eyes, nothing, at least, that can easily be seen in a photograph. However, in an image so remarkable that it penetrates our essential vulnerability, it may all be felt, known, exchanged.

Throughout eternity. And it is surely Raymonde April's strong point that she can manage, with all the tenderness in the world, to embrace all these fragilities.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *La volonté de puissance*, trans. Genevieve Bianquis, IV 2442—244, quoted in Luc Ferry, *Qu'est-ce qu'une vie réussie ?* (Paris: Grasset, 2002), p. 160. [Translator's note: The translation of Nietzsche's *Der Wille zur Macht* / quoted in French is based on the German edition by Friedrich Würzbach: *Das Vermächtnis Friedrich Nietzsches* (Anton Pustet: Salzburg, 1940), which incorporates material not included in either the standard German or English editions (see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale [New York: Vintage, 1968], especially pp. xviii and xv). The English translation provided here has therefore been made from the French.]

² “When I open my eyes to the world, objects always appear against a background, and as I penetrate the universe that surrounds me, this background never ceases moving, just as for a navigator, the horizon never ends, so as to constitute a final foundation that one cannot go beyond” (*ibid.*, pp. 451—452, in regard to the philosophy of Edmund Husserl).

³ Raymonde April, 2002, curatorial files, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City.

⁴ *Ibid.*