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**REFLECTING UPON THIS LANDSCAPE : THE IMAGERY OF RAYMONDE APRIL  
RICHARD BAILLARGEON**

*This water of rivers you touch  
the last of waters that were  
the first of waters to come —  
time present*

— *Leonardo da Vinci*<sup>1</sup>

To hold life on the surface of photographic paper. To wager that this piece of paper will contain a truth, one that is relative, partial and existential, but a truth nonetheless. A truth in and for itself, one lacking any authoritative value, and not intended to convince or to serve as proof. Photographs that are not photographs, although they do assume photographic traits. Photographs that have the fluidity of things, time, perception, that are extremely fragile, at the mercy of the winds. Such are the photographs of Raymonde April. From one work to another, they form a complex chain that, like an echo, tirelessly comes back upon the perimeter and periphery of these individual and inevitably partial truths. And these are truths which remain at far remove from moralist velleities and from the great politicizing and militant imperatives. Her work would ultimately be a mechanics of vision, speech and language, of the entanglements of meaning.

**THE REPOSITORIES**

*Parade*, dated 1986, contains four images: a typewriter partially concealed under a dust cover, a snow-clearing vehicle at night, a figure (the artist) in the middle of a blurry landscape, a leaf table against a wall. Each thing is unique, remarkably individualized, centralized in fact — if this can be predicated of a thing placed in a middle position — as if it were a matter of monopolizing the attention of something eminently important, sacred almost. A ritual perhaps. A device that

conjures up yet another, summons up something distant, buried in memory. The repositories, altars of repose. We had them when I was a child. They were part of Catholicism, were used to house God in another location, outside the church. They were usually associated with displays of splendour. Someplace late in the spring. In Québec and Rivière-du-Loup, we looked on them admiringly, almost dumbfounded. Here, however, the repositories are pagan, secular.

Raymonde April's repositories have nothing luxurious or ostentatious about them. They seem, instead, to affirm only the facticity of what lies at the centre, the reality of what is available to the gaze there, prominent, in the middle. They are images not of power or the untouchable, but rather of the vulnerable and fragile. Within the black outline of a large frame, in the dark room (like the one that serves to capture light on photographic film) we encounter — captured, there — things and a figure. Images, tableaux that relate to the fact of being medial, to what is only, beyond all other considerations, a centre at its centre — this position in the middle, fragile and otherwise mule. Raymonde April has made us accustomed to such things. By this I mean that, until now, April's art has made no place for what is literally an obvious meaning, for anything that might be taken at face value. It is an art of the unspoken, of things barely touched upon, that would dissolve upon stronger contact, because they are fragile, as are the things of this life.

Words, images, have accidentally slipped their moorings, drifted off to ultimately flounder in unknown regions. They have plunged, in the full sense of the term, into the depths of a sea whose surface is deceptively calm. For words and images take curious detours, ones that take them far beneath the surface.

Careful, warning - it could also be called a parade. For a *défilement*<sup>2</sup> (progression) or *défilé* (procession) is also a parade. A curious reversal. I watch images slipping, slipping by, I see drawers opening. Opening and closing. In go old postcards, out come white rabbits. Time is pushed in, small framed fragments slide out. It makes (or could make) no difference, since entering or leaving is merely a function of one's point of view.

WAR

One would almost have to speak of images. Better still, of *the image*. Because images are, in the end, what Raymonde April does.

One watched parades from the balcony. One day, a long time ago, there were soldiers. I remember the leaden sun, the helmets, all the khaki. The helmets stretched back as far as the eye could see. Their movement created waves, a green muddied ocean. They came down the hill. It was hot, too hot. The Korean War. Image of images. She sees the snow-clearing vehicle from the balcony. A spectacle. Evening. One day she spoke of Musil. Of *The Man without Qualities*. Not really about him, about Musil, but about what he wrote. She actually used a few passages. Like this one:

Agatha believed that all true still lifes could arouse this inexhaustible and joyful sadness. The longer you looked at them, the more it seemed that the objects depicted therein were standing on the florid shore of life, the eyes filled up with immensity and the tongue paralyzed.<sup>3</sup>

To suggest what she sees in these images, in their components. Their material which, paradoxically, is impalpable. Never present, it never ceases to haunt us. *Time* could be another name for it. The impalpable, the almost unnamable. You would really like to believe in images, see them as true and just. Yet you know full well that most of the time they fall apart. For a time it seemed that photography, in its beginnings at least, might have provided the means to halt slippage once and for all. Yet later it turned out that it did no such thing. Slippage continued, it was inevitable. Go with the flow or, rather, admit that this is the way it is, that there's nothing you can do about it, you have to go on.

The snow plough in the night. It had snowed earlier. It may have snowed all day Sunday. Snow everywhere. Not a storm or a blizzard, just banks of snow everywhere, for hours on end, all day long. Night fell and it was still snowing. You told yourself that if it kept up, by tomorrow everything would be closed, checked by snow. But late that evening, before going to bed, you looked out the window. There were only a few flakes falling. It was over, then. Piles and piles of snow. White, immaculate, lending the night a strange luminescence. Then you heard the noise of the plough. People resurfaced. It was a pity, because for a moment there you believed that humans and machines had disappeared for good.

## THE ORDINARY

The work of Raymonde April takes place in the gaps of time. It ceaselessly surveys and charts the highly contemporary notion of presence/absence. It is continually overflowing the sensible, too

narrow frames of photographs. Something in it is always pointing to an elsewhere beyond the frame. Difficult to say where exactly. It is an indefinable *hors-champ*<sup>4</sup> that I, as a viewer, can choose to fill — as long as I pay attention to it, as long as I stop to ponder. Then, I hear noises, sounds not audible on the surface of the paper. Or music, vaguely sad. Cupping my ear and looking beyond the texture of the paper, I may also hear the murmur of the wind and the streets. Ordinary things, the sounds of life. Things that are simple, though never banal.

I can, however, fill this *hors-champ* with other things. With ideas, thoughts. Already a more complex architecture would begin to take shape. The image within, the image without. Ultimately, the image may be of no importance. Perhaps that is why it must be dissolved inside a large black frame. Because that is the way things work: the centrality apparent at the heart of the black points to a sort of interchangeable quality in the elements. This is, perhaps, the root of what we call metaphor, the image of the image, this break in the black covering an object, like the gaze that slides off and gets lost. A gaze that collides with the surface of an object only to bounce back onto another.

In a recent text, Raymonde April wrote: “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.”<sup>5</sup> Working the ordinary, it could be called. Working on things you know well, on things you are close to. The gaze directed on the gaze. And further on the artist adds: “I do not want to appropriate what I know nothing about. Nevertheless, I do not want to fabricate a personal history.”<sup>6</sup> It is not a matter of the personal, only of the intimate. And it could be said that only through such intimacy is it possible to connect with the work and break through its *hors-champ*.

## THE TABLES

A folding table against a wall, the fourth and last image of *Parade*, seems to be a reversal of the first image, the partially covered typewriter that one could, without too great a risk of error, imagine as resting on a table. But a table that cannot be seen, that can only be imagined. One that is absent but replete with meaning. Opposed to, in the final image, one that is empty but eminently present. Between the two, a game of mirrors in the negative.

The typewriter, a writing tool. In the other image, a tabula rasa, a possible space for writing. But a place for fiction as well. *Hors-champ*. The table: a singular, recurring motif. One sometimes has the feeling that this is one of the most remarkable recurrences in visual art today. The table as domestic site, as a territory shared in turn by the individual, the social and the sacred. Here, it is inevitably the territory of the intimate. The site of all (or nearly all) our investments in existence, the place where all things return, the airy support for all quills and typewriters.

## THE LANDSCAPE

Elsewhere she wrote: “I always work with my own image, photographing myself alone Then I photograph everything around me, everything that means something, all that happens. And I have my friends pose for me. Some of them take pictures of me, which I keep with the others.”<sup>7</sup> She is there, in the landscape. She is the one looking far into the distance at something we cannot see. She has been photographed this way. Looking at this image, I think of another. She wrote: “I am profoundly moved by the differences of scale, by the boundless perspectives, and I feel that I am living in a romantic painting, with an ocean of mist at my feet.”<sup>8</sup> The painting by Caspar David Friedrich should be familiar to most. Painted in 1818, it is almost a photograph in the age before photography. It shows a standing man from behind. From a high peak, he overlooks mountain tops emerging from mist. The time could be morning, just after sunrise. It is clear from his posture that the man is looking far into the distance. The landscape stretches away before him. His gaze is lost among the mountains. As in Raymonde April’s picture, where she occupies a similar position. It is a curious, indeed a strange device, that has me observe a figure that, in turn, is observing. My gaze wants to follow a gaze that I do not see, but that I can envision and imagine. It is a device that almost enables me to put myself in the other’s place, become that other, slip into another’s skin, use my imagination, let the fiction take off, inhabit the hors-champ. The landscape exists no longer; it has become lost in the paper, in time. A two-way mirror, a lure or a knowing subterfuge aimed at thrusting me literally into the arms of another illusion.

## THE FALLS

The landscape has disappeared. Or it is no longer possible unless you think about the one who saw it, who would have been struck by it, who will see it. Only another site of the gaze, another of its avatars. The photograph yields, retreats. It embarks, take us with it as long as we are willing to lend credence to its fiction. Another parade, another procession.

She wrote, “I prefer to think of them as expressing a photographic present, a neverending now that lives on in my favourite images, within a space that is theirs alone.”<sup>9</sup> Cascading waters.

*Translated from French by Don McGrath*

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, *OMBRE LOINTAINE*, trans. and with intro. by Franc Ducros (Aix-en-provence: Alinea, 1983), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Translator’s note: The author is playing on the polysemy of the verb *défiler*. In addition to the action of parading (recalling the title of the work in question), the verb can indicate the streaming by of images or memories in consciousness or (in its reflexive form) echoing the immediately preceding trope of words and images that have slipped their moorings, the breaking, the unthreading of a necklace or string of pearls.

<sup>3</sup> Raymonde April, *VOYAGE DANS LE MONDE DES CHOSES* (Montreal: Musée d’art contemporain de Montreal, 1986), 43. Translator’s note: The translation here from the French is from Robert Musil, *L’HOMME SANS QUALITÉ*, vol. 2 (Paris: Editions du Seuil, coll. Points, 1982), 531.

<sup>4</sup> Translator’s note: The hors-champ is the off-screen space, in the mind of the viewer, of what is available to the gaze.

<sup>5</sup> April, *NEW BORDERS, NEW BOUNDARIES/NOUVELLES FRONTIÈRES, NOUVELLES DÉMARCATIONS*, trans. Jeanluc Svoboda (Toronto: Gallery 44, 1991). Not paginated.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> April, *VOYAGE*, 44.

<sup>8</sup> April, “A Fly in Paradise,” in *THIRTEEN ESSAYS ON PHOTOGRAPHY* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1990), 197.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 196.