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To tell the truth, very little is known about how images exert influence. And all of our exegeses and theories are of very little use in this nevertheless quite familiar confrontation. These probes delving into the dark sometimes bring in the unexpected and, on rare occasions, even miracle - objects. Are they windows or screens? The images at any rate possess a fragility and unreality that sometimes has the surface of very calm water. They may or may not be windows or screens, but each of them is like a stage, the geometric space used for a variety of events and conflicts, a place almost without depth or substance but where great tension prevails.

This is true of painting, yet all of its various prodigies used to confer depth and volume only end up reinforcing this magnificent paradox. And it is many times more true of photography, as its substance (the granulation, a fine scattering of grains) is even less perceptible. This occurs despite recurring efforts to have it rematerialize by anchoring it down with the weight of the Real by means of either the support, the selected printing method or the undeniable reality of the subject.

All of these efforts are useful, and it would be futile to claim that we can completely do away with them: they are linkages in meaning, relays for the intelligibility of images thus laid out, hand-rails protecting against hallucination and the fantasy of the immediate. Perhaps art is a game of hide-the-slipper with its continuous pursuits and misses. Something is constantly slipping through the net and getting away. Not something just awaiting revelation, but something invisible at the edges; being displaced, its very nature rests in this invisibility and eccentricity.



I am thinking of Raymonde April's photographs; I mean, what I have just stated isn't some vague theoretical prelude, it concerns them directly. I am thinking of them and they make me think of the following: the photographic experience (more than that of painting) is ensnared and summoned to serve (a usage, a cause or a meaning). Saturated and striated with codes, it seems to go along with all of these influences: like the "ragged edges" of the real truth with all sorts of strands incorporated into it. This is why we wanted it, and still do, in turn to represent a commemoration, a real-life experience, a celebration, the nostalgia of the having-been-there, a proximity or distancing, a temporal chiasma, an Epiphany on earth, a "last vista" of the end of things, etc. This, as an illustration, is a recent version of the innumerable proposals for the photograph. The following comes from a much older time (that of the dogma of the Incarnation) and also a more recent one (our own, where people view reality as nothing more than images left behind): "What makes some forms more captivating than others is probably the ease (which might be quite deceptive) with which they slip into our habitual modes of perception; they aren't erected like rare monuments, but take their place and diffuse among objects. This is the way it is,

for example, with still life paintings and it is also this way with photographs¹”.

The evolution of photographs, their natural leaning, would therefore be to get lost among the things that we say they resemble, and give up any pretence of becoming a “monument” — taking the modern artwork’s renunciation to its extreme. Looked at from this point of view, photography could indeed be the modern art work *par excellence* through its abandonment of the heroic gesture of wanting to construct another world, a “counterworld”. “Diffusing among things”, photography would be a modern form of the still life, yet without the euphoria or the sensuality of older painting — a depressed and restrained version of the “abundance of the world”.

This melancholic diffusion, steeped in a sort of morose delectation in a (small) end-of-the-world style (an eschatology for delicate aesthetes), isn’t without its charm. We are given the real pleasure of rediscovering aspects of the world which the rigours of 20th-century art have distanced us from; and then there is the awareness of time which has been described often enough as what gives the photographic experience its worth. Barthes wanted to react against this photography emanation, this restrained and slightly melancholic diffusion, by contrasting it with the violence of the photographic act, the way it has of exorbiting the thing, of imposing it on the gaze rather than letting it get lost in it. This passage from the *Camera Lucida* comes to mind: “Surrounded by these photographs, I could no longer console myself with Rilke’s line: “Sweet as memory, the mimosas steep the bedroom”: the Photograph does not steep the bedroom: no odour, no music, nothing but the exorbitant thing. The Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed²”.

At first sight Raymonde April’s photographs are presented as a way of eluding the option that I have just mentioned. They draw out a different strategy, without being either diffuse or violent, sometimes borrowing the medium of autobiography, at other times that of fiction or a cinematographic simulacrum. This is of little of importance, however, as genre is not an issue. Raymonde April prefers to speak “of the beauty of events experienced through fiction”, which adequately expresses that reality is neither the end point nor the ultimate refuge of her images. I feel that there exists more of an awareness of or simply a desire for flux in her work. “Present tense images”, they are vast, open photographs, (as opposed to “photographs in the past tense whose death force burns the eyes” as Raymonde April so nicely puts it). A reading is made between the images, creating in this way a time-space continuum. No doubt this (and not the

inverse) explains the recourse to series and groups in her earlier works: less a narrative will in itself than a desire to cast the images into open flux. For some time now her images have frequently been more individual and autonomous, and yet this feeling of flux still exists. It now originates in the internal construction of each of them rather than the articulation of images between them (just as, according to Eisenstein, film editing is not just a question of syntax but also, or alternatively, includes the interior rhythm of each one, the tension between the top and the bottom, the different levels of the image and the different values). If something cinematographic exists in Raymonde April's recent images, it lies more in their notion of internal editing than in the image format, its grain or its subject.

Internal editing doesn't necessarily imply a conscious staging. Perhaps this is the case in the calculated geometry of *Les chefs miroirs* — The Mirrored Heads (1991). Yet even here there is more concern with the internal cut-out and the dynamic created between the zones of different consistencies within the frame. In *L'Île G rald* — Gerald Island (1990), the death mask-like effect of the face is taken in the turbulence of the mottled water and the cut-out bath tub. In *Visitation* — Visitation (1990), a cut-out at the top of the image makes reference to an old retable fragment and the trivial street scene is suddenly read as an advent with the small, black shape with its slightly blurred edges bearing the promise of mystery. *Les feuilles mortes* — Autumn Leaves (1990) plays on the peculiarity of an almost ghost-like shape. This time the architecture of the river banks and the city are redefined, reenergized with an intensity that has nothing to do with the picturesque or nostalgia. Architecture is the true hero, it allows a form to emerge that bears a variety of associations. The decor can either be everything or nothing at all: once again there is no dogma or submission to a genre. Certain objects emerge without there ever being any question of "still life". We are only aware that something in their design, their stubborn and hirsute autonomy, requires this close presence. This applies to *Homme  coutant battre son coeur* — Man Listening to His Heartbeat (1990) and *Cuill re* — Spoon (1990).

Everything that happens to the self; everything that emanates from the self. The self, like all other objects in the world, is not an end in itself. It is a home, a receptive and expansive zone, a place where things and events search for an identity, intersect and reenergize. In the work of the last few years, the textual and narrative elements which so strongly structured the earlier works seem to have diminished, removing virtually any pretext for a discourse on autobiography or narcissism. The self represented in more recent works is neither the object of observation nor analysis; it is a construction principle, a way of determining accentuations and scansions. There is

no doubt that it works towards the composition of the subject, but this subject isn't identified with any specific person. It is a palimpsest of "narrative persons", *personae* who serve as generators of ideas and forms.

The apparent great diversity of generated images in no way interferes with their shared origins in a same common principle. A gesture, scene or form appears like the provisional stasis of an emotional or imaginary state. Stopping on the image: this doesn't mean a stop in the continuous succession of images; it is the image that summons us to stop (on it) for a while if it is appropriate to the idea or the sensation of the moment. The filmic element should not be sought in either the format or the sequence effect. It is in the presence of the "screen" as a break (spatial and temporal). It is useless to ask which came first: the sharp break of the frame which organizes everything instantaneously or the composition of the scene which sets its own limits (the edges). These two determinations reinforce each other and are constantly linked together. The artist's margin of invention resides at this confluence (rather than in adherence to a specific principle). Sometimes the black frame bordering the image reinforces the screen effect. At other times it is in the very content of the image: for different reasons *Fête* — Celebration (1991) and *La tasse blanche* — The White Cup (1991) appear to have been taken from a film. Any *quelconque* (the acceptance given to this adjective by Gilles Deleuze³), film in the sense that it doesn't conjure up anything exceptional other than that which once took place in a continuum of gestures and time. The familiarity of some of the scenes photographed by Raymonde April can indeed be deceptive; one need only look at images in which anecdotal content is either absent or kept at a distance to be convinced of this. In *Paysage d'hiver* — Winter Landscape (1991) for example, nothing detains us at first glance, not even the familiar genre of the landscape photograph. The absence of any distinctive structure and the fact that the original black and white image has undergone different manipulations (reproduction on large-grain colour film and printing on colour paper) results in its *deproduction*, which gives it a floating nature (similar to some television images). In *Journée de chutes* — A Day at the Falls (1990) there is, on the contrary, a scene (rocks bordering a river bed and nude bathers), yet no narrative or icon takes shape. Similarly the street shots in *Sphinx* — Sphinx (1989) actually transmit the idea of a "photographic present (...), an indefinite time which is extremely durable in the images I like (...), in a space which is uniquely their own", as Raymonde April writes.

Parallels can be drawn between this work and that of other artists, such as Béat Streuli, who have resorted to this kind of "cinematographic" image. Streuli however almost always uses close-ups

of faces. They may be anonymous and inexpressive faces, but they seem to have been caught in the flux of passersby, dealt with in such a way that they become icons of anonymity or monuments to inexpressiveness — similar to Günther Förg's or Axel Hütte's immense architectural shots (the descriptive intent here is also extremely durable, or in any case there exists a concern with presentation that seems absent in Streuli's work).

Raymonde April is in a completely different realm if only because distance is an essential concern for her — a distance which cannot be reduced to a fascination with the close-up or giant-size image. In this way her work could be compared with the strict discipline in Walker Evans' subway scenes or (more rarely) to some of Robert Frank's street scenes. It must be understood that whereas in these two cases (Evans and Frank) we are confronted with experimental and marginal options, with Raymonde April we have the impression that something essential is being progressively affirmed. The light poetry of the earlier works, the ambivalence between fact and fiction, supporting text (which, despite what is sometimes said, never functions well with photography, except when it enters into a very strong dialectical relationship with it): all of this slowly gives way to single images which, despite their obvious calm, have great intensity.

(A few weeks later). Seen at the end of a presentation, an exhibition sometimes has that slightly worn nature of things about to end (as if the summer's visitors had left behind the dull veil of their fatigue and boredom on the works as they do on the walls). On this late summer day at the Musée Arthur Rimbaud in Charleville-Mézières, Raymonde April's works have kept their freshness. They seem to float on the background of foliage and the green water in which each work bathes, and which is never completely out of vision. The signs contained in these photographs are there, still the same, like those transmitted in reproductions. No reproduction however can transmit the same feeling of slight levitation, as if this object or that body had become imperceptibly detached from itself and its support. Does this have anything other than a trivial importance that will affect this visitor to this place, on this day, who has come some distance with an especially sharp and avid gaze? This feeling which I call levitation means, for me, that the photograph cannot be one thing among others, and that it definitely does not aspire to blend in with them. The green of the water, the foliage and the pale daylight reach the work through small, leaden window panes. I see this as an allegory of the incalculable distance which separates the work from the world of things. In the universe of the work, the world (or what remains of it) becomes refracted and framed by all sorts of grids, masks and screens. What is visible in the work is not what emerges from the other side of the grid. It is a complete and

reconstituted image which seems to float slightly in front of the plane which defines it as if its very justification and affirmation were in this detachment.

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Translated from the French by Michael Bailey

NOTES

¹ Carraud, Christophe, “Esthétique et réalité: l’utopie et l’image”, *Po&sie* 60, 1992, pg. 114

² Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida*, Hill and Wang: New York, 1981, pg. 91.

³ Gilles Deleuze, in *Image-mouvement*, defines the notion of *espace quelconque* in this way: “It is a perfectly remarkable space which has only lost its homogeneity, i.e. the principle of its metrical relations or the connections of its different parts, so well that links can be made in a variety of ways. It is a space of virtual union, a place of pure possibility. Instability, heterogeneity and the absence of a connection with such a space effectively indicate wealth of potential and singularity which are the preliminary conditions for any actualization and any determination.” (Editions de Minuit, 1983, pg. 155).