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Scissors, Paper, Stone : Expressions of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art

Chapter 3 : LIVES OF THE ARTISTS

(excerpt)



ALBUM-WORK AS MEMOIR

Like Semchuk's *Mute/Voice*, April's *Tout embrasser* (2000-01) is drawn from the artist's photographic archives. The photographs were taken over twenty-five years (1975-98) (fig. 3.3). In April's case, however, the individual images had never been exhibited, or published, before their incorporation into *Tout embrasser*. As images, they had seen the light of day on contact sheets, and possibly work prints, which had gone no further. Year after year, these pictures came and were put away - they were the loam nourishing April's public production until she began to think about *Tout embrasser*.

Strictly speaking, there are four major works with this title. The first, completed in 2000, is a 16mm film, just under 58 minutes long, with a soundtrack. The second is an installation of 517

black and white prints; this work was premiered in Montreal on 11 September 2001. The third and fourth variations followed the transfer of the film to DVD. This allowed for its continuous projection as a single-screen gallery work (Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 2002) or as four simultaneous, unsynchronized presentations in a line of video monitors placed beside the works on paper (Musée du Québec, 2003). For the spectator, these are very different experiences - as concerns us here, they appeal to memory in different ways.



Unlike Semchuk's *Mute/Voice*, there is no matrix, or pictorial formula, to enable us to measure real time. April is a presence in *Tout embrasser*, as are her friends and family, but the rigorous portrayal that forces comparisons in Semchuk's work has never been a feature of April's work. The artist's informal photographic style - the style that she favoured, possibly exaggerated, in her selection and sequence - creates memorable, individual pictures whose organization is like a string of pearls. These, of course, belong to April. She made the photographs in a particular way that we can locate midway between autobiographical memory and personal memory : autobiographical because her systematic endeavour to picture her life on a reliable basis, possibly every day, created an archive that exceeded memory's capacity; personal because she photographed what were to her memorable moments, and could no doubt have described her day's catch in glowing terms of intimacy, spontaneity, audacity, and light. But as Anne-Marie Ninacs confirms, 517 images "give

but an inkling of the thousands of photographs that the artist has taken in thirty years ... are but an infinitesimal part of all the moments caught by the eye but not by the camera ... take the measure of an attentively lived life.”²⁴ Personal memory is overburdened by personal photographs taken and not taken; this phenomenal production is immeasurable. And still certain things have been missed: when perception and memory compete for consciousness, we attend to one by neglecting the other. So an “attentively lived life” - its eager translation into imagery - means dailiness eclipsing dailiness, the continuous streaming of the present into the past. April’s twenty-five-year effort to preserve fleeting moments has resulted in a photographic cache whose placement before the public does not so much represent her life history as recast it in photographic legend.

When we encounter April’s universe on the walls, the prints are in clusters that are sometimes thematic, sometimes episodic, and most times governed by the artist’s closely guarded logic. This is album-work, to be sure: never a straight story line when a curved line will do; never a plot, without a sub-plot, or better yet, a digression. In the gallery, we are left to our own devices, encouraged by the simplicity and familiarity of the pictures to supplement them with our own mental images of place, or fashion, or ways of being together. Sociability is a theme: there are many photographs of people at table or going for walks; there are also actors in strange, futuristic costumes. Introspection is also a current; there are images of empty rooms, studio spaces and a darkroom; there are solitary figures with eyes closed.

The viewing of the film is not lonely; I may sit alone in the dark, but I am being shown the pictures, one at a time. The film was shot by a stationary camera under whose neutral eye there is a pile of photographs; every six seconds, a hand removes a photograph to reveal the one underneath. Views of a snowy village are succeeded by portraits of a young man on a double bed are succeeded by angles on an urban garden are succeeded by views of a wintry urban street that feature a butchered branch. When the pile has been gone through, the image flares and flickers to white, and then a new pile appears, starting a new cycle of removal and revelation. There is no spoken narration. The sound I hear is that of the recording instrument; then I hear a clicking shutter; then a time release ticking. Eventually comes wind and then icy pellets, possibly on glass; later crickets prompt thoughts of a hot summer night. The pictures keep coming. In this democracy of vision, orality’s aggregative structure is fully replicated: evenly weighted phrases held together by “and this,” rather than “and so”; a life history that consigns experience to memory with mechanical precision. There is no stopping its flow; judgment is suspended and appreciation is neutralized. Régis Durand’s suggestion that a favourite image that goes by too quickly in the

cinema can be recovered on the gallery wall is just a curator's fantasy.²⁵ A sense of déjà vu is more likely, and this also occurs during the film, whether because groups of pictures are split up, characters reappear, or sites are revisited. The continuous single-screen gallery projection of *Tout embrasser* allows spectators to traffic in memory; they come and go as the images do. The four-monitor version on DVD *Tout embrasser*, installed near tile photographic installation, counterbalances its presence and authority. With no certain beginning, no certain end, this electronic version forms visual experience in overlapping waves of perception and recollection, concentration and distraction. One can entertain thoughts of the subconscious or surrealist accident, as the four monitors randomly co-produce.

In terms of autobiographical memory and personal memory, the electronic version of *Tout embrasser* is especially thought-provoking: it leads me to consider the archival basis of this work. These 517 images were chosen from April's store of negatives. They had never crossed the threshold to the public sphere. They were, in effect, surplus. In the world of digital photography, what would be their fate? Keep the best and erase the rest. The whole notion of analogue accumulation that mimics autobiographical memory and allows for the reconstruction of personal memory-works - album-works - is set on edge by the electronic revolution. *Tout embrasser* shows us a way of reconnecting with memory that is well on the way to being lost. The album-worker of the future will likely be much moved by words about lost pictures, vessels of ekphrastic desire.²⁶

²⁴ Ninacs, "For a Piece of Eternity", in Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, *L'emploi du temps*, 62.

²⁵ Durand, in Galerie d'art Leonard & Bina Ellen / Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Galley, *Raymonde April : Tout embrasser*, unpaginated.

²⁶ For guidance, see Scott, *The Sculpted Word*.