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RAYMONDE APRIL : A PHOTOGRAPHIC SUITE

LOUISE LETOCHA

We have accepted, as though we could no longer marvel at photography, that it was a tool which allowed us to fix a few fragments of reality onto the surface of a piece of paper. This idea of photography persisted in our minds for a long time considering the physical and chemical principles pertaining to the little black box that caught images and exerted such a fascination over us. More faithful than painting (or so it seemed) to reality, photography relegated the subjectivity of the hand, releasing the mechanism that recorded the image to a place behind the camera. Or so we thought. Continuing to foster the illusion of a reality exposed by the combined alchemical solutions of the film and the acid bath we had placed, on the side of reality, figurations that were outlined or intersected by our own vision of the world.

We could hardly revert to that approach today. It has, however, dominated the history of photography and has emphasized an established relationship to reality through the medium of the “camera oscura”. Wasn’t the mechanism of the little black box imitative of the anatomy of the human eye? Didn’t it reproduce an automatism found in nature? Like an extension of the body, our eye was equipped with a double that was supposed to allow us to see better. But was seeing truly our objective? Or rather, weren’t we obsessed, as Benjamin suggests, with capturing pieces of our surroundings which would suffice to confirm our presence in the world.¹

Today, the many uses of photography, and in particular its use by artists, do not bring us back to that strategic position where the camera is located between the scene of reality and the viewer. The schism that occurs in space and time is now understood, in light of the cinematographical experience, as an operation that combines subjectivity with a physiognomy of our environment.

Some thinkers (Benjamin, Barthes) have led us beyond this postulate of the camera as a recording instrument, to catch sight of what still lingers of reality and what appears of it

¹ W. Benjamin, A short history of photography in “Screen”, The Journal of the Society for Education in Film and Television, Spring 1972, Volume 13, Number 1, p. 5.

between the four borders of the paper. To continue a distinction established by Greimas between the two levels of the composition of a figure in verbal language: does the revelation of images from film sensitized to light stem from a process of figuration or one of iconization?

Photography's referentiality to nature has been so widely accepted that we can advance, without too much hesitation, that the image within the photographic negative is in fact iconic. It reproduces an illusionistic reference to the world.²

However photographers like L. Friedlander or artists like J. Kosuth have used the photographic image by juxtaposing it to reality and yielding a more de-materialized aspect of an object, one that did not deceive us about photography's proclivity to translate things of the world other than what it shows. In *La Chambre claire*, Barthes also examines the altered fragmentation in the photograph of what has been fixed to or carved out of reality. He dwells more specifically on the strength of the photograph to recall the subject, underlining what the subject has forgotten or would want to ignore about what surrounds him/her. The relationship with things in photography is not only established through what is seen but also according to what might have existed within a time frame, between the moment of shooting and the viewer's second look at the grisaille of the motif. And so, through *La Chambre claire*, Barthes resumes Blanchot's poetic phenomenology which draws a path between the visible and the unreal and which equates the beginning of the action with death. This oneness inherent to photography (first underlined by Benjamin and later developed by Barthes), within the negative's specular space where Blanchot recognized in its shadows a "fulfillment of the visible" that would be the "task of dying".³ Encompassing time or enfranchizing it would be achieved through the infinite, through the determination, even momentary, of the contours of a form. The gap between the real and the unreal would then be bridged by a shadow that traces the essential outside of temporal boundaries.

Raymonde April juggles with photography's capacity to question reality. She starts with an inverted reproduction of reality and, by setting herself in the photograph as the main subject, she breaks the barrier separating her, her body, from representation. In fact, the use of the camera in her work is not made through the subject's privileged gaze focusing on a panoramic view. No, rather the camera is a tool, witness to the different stages in the construction of a

² J. Courtès and A.J. Greimas, *Sémiotique, Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, Ed. Hachette, Paris, 1979, p. 148-149 and 177-178.

³ M. Blanchot, *The Space of literature*, translated, with an introduction by Arm Smock, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, London, 1982, p. 124.

world that we will label here as poetic. With respect to a photographic tradition in which the theatrical view is a dominant one, Raymonde April's angle of shooting is almost cynic, it is developed from photographic sequences of two, three, four and even more negatives relating to one or more realities but without making direct reference to them. There doesn't seem to be any ambiguity for her between the real and the represented. The entire photographic universe encompassed by her photographic suites is the product of a composition of a fiction for which we even find a dramatic temporality. The space is unspecified and if we do find a reference, it is through a realism which the components of this fiction have preserved. Raymonde April works on the edge of this confusion between the real and the unreal, the shadows mask and soften the reliefs.

For the photographic series titled *Sans Titre* from 1979, Raymonde April chose to arrange the images as she would a narrative⁴ with, in the sequence of three distinct panels, the suggestion of a progression. The order put forward for the reading of the series is from left to right and one can distinguish a progression in the movement of the character also from left to right. While slowly turning around the figure reveals her face. In an otherwise vague setting, two vertical axes that evoke moldings (which are better lit than the rest of the space) suggest a doorway which situates the character. A transverse oblique line, also brighter, starting in the lower right hand corner meets the doorframe at the right; this conveys an illusion of space and gives a certain stoutness to the character. Laid out in this way, the space functions as a corner, a niche in which to put this character swathed in a draped damask cloth with oriental designs. What is surprising however, and this has been one of the dominant traits of April's early photographic work, is that this photographic suite includes inscriptions which read like captions under the images. The care given by the artist to the legibility of the inscriptions, to the clarity of the photographic printing, is indicative of their importance. The text makes us realize the presence of an articulation in the relationship between the figural suite of images and the verbal suite of inscriptions. The artist herself uses the expression "roman photographique" when she comments on the works of that period, suggesting a link between figure and text.

We find then, in the image, a unity of space, an action that develops in three stages and a text which confirms or contradicts the figural connotation. April's proposition in this suite is mixed, it relies on a story comprised of a double hypothesis, one that stems from the action

⁴ O. Ducrot and T. Todorov, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of the Language*, Translated by Catherine Porter, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1979, cf. The case of the narrative, p. 297.

represented in the figural text and one that is legible in the written text at the bottom of the image. There could be instances then, of two descriptions of the same story.

The logic of the action is sustained as much by the progression of the figure's movement turning and slowly revealing her face, as it is by a speech in turgid style that becomes a little more personal by the second paragraph through the introduction of the pronoun "I" in the sentence. Although, this "I" remains enigmatic and does not automatically set an identity for the character — for only those who know Raymonde April and have seen her can recognize her. The "I" becomes for everyone else a "we", an element of transference, of possible substitution for the spectator. The narrator has indicated her presence and then withdrawn to the background. This presence and this absence perceived both in the face of the character as well as in the syntax of the speech, are symbolized by the revelation of the character's face which corresponds to the result of this action. We understand that the author is placing herself *in situ* and by looking for a stronger sense of identification with the character, her presence within the image is implied. The more direct interrogative tone of the sentence is lost again in a climate of exoticism where the cloth together with the allusion that there is another character, a captain, echoes the setting of the opera *Madame Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini. The very dramatic pose of the figure, head thrown back, is not without reference to the *bel canto*, a technique considered to be conducive to voice projection. This production becomes an intrigue; a double narration intersects and refers us, metonymically, to the point of juncture between the two levels of discourse within the same character, who is here both an actant within the iconic narrative as well as the author. Actant and author confront each other, merging subject with fiction, fiction with creation.⁵

The system, based on this double narrative structure, sends the figures back and forth (figures of verbal language as well as the figure of the image) and seems to confirm the illusionism of photography. It reverses a mimetic illusion in order to assert a single reality, a reality that comes out of a dynamic of the conjunction with discourse and figure. "Mon travail interroge la démarcation très fine entre réalité et fiction" (my work examines the very fine line that exists between reality and fiction) says Raymonde April. The figurality is not simply the place where an eloquent manifestation of the subject reveals itself but much more, a space of poetic objectification posited as a single reality within this system.

The photography of Raymonde April does not then record a reality, but rather the building space of a personalized world as though it were trying to illustrate a prophetic phrase of

⁵ I. Courtès, and A.J. Greimas, *Op. cit.* p. 3.

Benjamin's: "Since, however, the true face of this photographic creativity is the advertisement or the association, its legitimate counterpart is exposure or construction."⁶ Photography would be a non-mimetic structuring device that delineates a field within the photographic paper's borders in which the interfigural would witness the subjective course of a relationship with a universe through multiple indicia.

Hence April revives the debate on photographic practice which deals with the referentiality of its own image. Within the photographic image, P. Dubois has singled out a relationship with reality that differs from the one addressed by the iconic image by relying on Peirce's theory on the sign. He has distinguished "a relationship of true connections" within photographic representation from a "relationship of similarities" which appear in the icon. "Dès lors, par extension métonymique selon la logique de la contiguïté, ce trait d'unicité référentielle va caractériser aussi la relation physique qui s'établit entre le signe et son objet."⁷

According to this understanding of the relationship between the photographic image and reality, it is perhaps because of photography's principle of necessity that Raymonde April does not escape from the referential given of this practice. Her photography remains based, however, on this relationship with reality and fiction. The double development of the image contributes to the examination of the subject in more depth. Although this photographic suite does not have a title the artist has twice placed herself in the image: once through the conditions of photographic practice, once through the medium itself and once through the narrative in the captions. The image contains the trace of refracted light on the body of Raymonde April, it attests undeniably to her proximity, her presence. This draped human figure designates the subject. Despite the distance that fiction would impose, both the character and the pronominal syntagm of the second and third caption make the subject conspicuous. The aim of this photographic suite's particular syntagmatic would not be to achieve likeness as the images would suggest. Raymonde April's face and the pronoun "I" of the verbal narrative reflect and identify the author. From then on, this figurative structuring stages the "I" by referring to portions of the subject's reality through her immediate environment. Thus it allows for an idealization of the self to be expressed through the character borrowed from opera. Hence the denoted object would be the object configured by

⁶ W. Benjamin, op. cit. p. 24.

⁷ P. Dubois, L'acte photographique (connexion et coupure) dans *Pour la Photographie*, Germs, Paris, 1983, p. 55. From then on, by metonymic extension according to the logic of contiguity this trait of referential oneness will also characterize the physical relationship established between the sign and its object." (a liberal translation)

the shadow traced on the photographic film indicating both the presence and the absence of the subject.

We could consider this as a projection of a self-portrait's "nuclear figures", the plausibility of which is emphasized by the specular grain of the photographic paper. In psychoanalytical terms, this procedure could be perceived as the creation of the self from the "I" which would correspond for the subject to the "prägnanz" of an identity of the self. But this narrative on the subject's unveiling gives to the fiction as essential function, one of activation of consciousness.

"The essence of consciousness is to provide itself with one or several worlds, to bring into being its own thoughts *before* itself, as if they were things, and it demonstrates its vitality indivisibly by outlining these landscapes for itself and then by abandoning them."⁸

The last sentence of the third caption evokes this state of consciousness and the discomfort brought about by the manifestness of the photographic mirror. "Je me sentis coupable tout a coup" (all of a sudden, I felt guilty). The goddess thus disappears in the shadow of the subject and the artist who has inscribed the word mirror to echo the speculum of the photographic image, goes back to being our observer with respect to the narcissistic activity of the photographic gesture. The dialogue of the self with the self is possible through the reflexivity of the negative's indicial image. But without fiction this narcissistic activity would be deprived of an intervention of edification of the self whereas the subject has the use of a space in which she develops another that she will restore to her own mental world.

The photographic text contrasts an imaginary distance with an illusion of identification with reality by sending back iconic as well as indicial characters to the signifier and all this at a double narrative level: in the figurative statement as well as in the verbal statement. At times, the verbal signifier has a symbolic referent and confirms the staging of the indicial figurative signifier and vice versa: the goddess morpheme in response to the draped figure and the mirror morpheme which refers to the figurative text of the photographic suite by indicating a reflexivity of the photograph as gesture. "On me tendit un miroir et j'y vis tout cela" (I was given a mirror in which I saw all this). The subject would find herself at the turning point of an interfigurality, that transverses the syntagmatic narrative (in double sentences and at double levels) which in turn institutes the paradigmatic. A paradigmatic that has the characteristic of

⁸ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, New York, Humanities Press, p. 130.

emanating from between the figures. This structure plays with stages representation and, it combines the indicial sign of photography and the iconic sign of a descriptive literality of one or more realities with the illusion of a referentiality to reality, underlying verisimilitude. The analogy is drawn between two languages, a figurative and a verbal language, in order to define the traits of a self-portrait and maintain the duality of the real and the imaginary in a duplicity of representation. Raymonde April has reminded us that we need to re-examine the role of absence in photography from her discourse, the distance of a temporal abyss can be filled by an imaginary intention.⁹

Translated by Francine Dagenais

⁹ From 1980 on, the captions are integrated to April's photographic image, later they disappear altogether. It should be noted as well that one photographic suite of 1981 is titled *Autoportrait* and another from 1982 is titled *Moi-Même*. The study of the selfportrait in April's photographs should be complemented by a reading of these two suites.