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“The Truth in Photography: 17 Photographs by Hervé Guibert”

A few words about HG’s photographic work, by Anne-Cécile Guilbard

Taking pictures is a way of leaving vision aside, of relinquishing an all controlling vision: most of the time, a photographer will see the camera as blindfolding his eyes, the body is left free to move or stand in the full presence of space, next to other bodies and objects.

Hervé Guibert’s photographic work took place at the moment where, in France, photography became a theoretical object. His *Ghost image* (1981) is now frequently studied as a complement to *Camera lucida* (1980); even if he did not pretend to propose a theory of photography in it, but to offer a collection of stories with pictures, in the manner of an album. However, their conceptions are completely different, and show a radically opposite conception of Photography. In short, Barthes and Guibert are often at opposite ends.

Unlike Barthes who had theorized photography as “the flat death”, HG emphasizes the materiality of the pictures by insisting on all the technical problems that can happen with photos: from the picture you have never been able to take to the one you can use to put a spell on someone... Pictures are not only representations, they are singular objects.

Photography is considered as a proof: its specificity will remain as evidence, a faithful imprint of the real (like Pierce’s index); Guibert uses it to stage scenes with his friends, undoing any certainty about what really “has been”.

Just when photography was being institutionalised, Guibert assumed an obvious amateur status in photography by taking pictures of his his friends¹. Moreover, instead of working on geometrical compositions, he blows his framings in a way that no viewer can forget that there has been a photographer in front of the scene. The spectator is led to wonder about the circumstances of the pictures; he is thus led to look at the pictures as clues for fiction.

In fact, as a photographer as well as a writer, Guibert uses photography to experience stories much more than to keep traces of them; that entails of course a dynamic conception of auto-fiction in the books, which translates into a particular sense of space in his pictures.

The materiality of the pictures (radiator, manuscripts, painting, television, palm tree in fire)

According to Nadar, Balzac believed that each time a photo was taken, a spectre was taken off from the sitter’s body. HG should be considered as against Balzac’s spectral theory

Technically, the frames within a frame constitute a well known exercise for photographers who are attached to the art of composition. The simplicity of the composition here could evoke Kertész’s work. But here the work on lines within the images goes beyond; the frames ask to be considered as less than geometrical lines than objects taken in their own materiality. HG is not interested in lines over a flat rectangle; his composition is in three dimensions: the family pictures accumulate over a radiator in the grand-aunts’ corridor.

Among the lines formed by piles of manuscripts, a postcard representing a self-portrait by the young Rembrandt exposes his truculent face, and serves to exhibit the artifice of other

¹ Bernard Faucon was staging scenes with his wax children at the same time, and elaborating stories. (Duane Michals, too); but Guibert does it with real people, the ones he loves, and he designates “photography as an adventure” (*Camera Lucida*).

texts, of a writing which is not less than painting an art of covering blank paper drawn with figures from the mind.

What must be noticed here is again the materiality preserved with the image: the image is not simply given as lines gathering over a plan, it is embodied by the position it occupies in the space.

The angle Guibert chooses to take the painting of the begging little boy is calculated to confer to the representation the material of the paint that it necessarily implies. The experiences of portraying that Guibert narrates in *The man in the red hat* with the painter Barcelo, or in his article about Balthus and the legend Guibert forges about the children painted by Balthus conveys the importance of the body that is involved in painting: the painter's one as well as the model's.

The box in the box photo looks like a sign of loneliness, we may think, with two feet near the screen showing a porn movie. But, here, again, the point of view, and the way furniture and legs are displayed, lead to another sense: the photographer must have stood up to take a picture of this moment that he was sharing with the man who is laying on the couch, watching the porn.

Guibert suggests another dimension of the image, the dimension of its material reality. It is no longer a simple surface where spaces and bodies are flattened under a composition of lines: the image is an object that you can seize in your fingers, press against your chest, put into your pocket.

Palm tree in fire. This heavy and monstrous trunk is lying, smoke rises, and it thus avoids the obvious symbol of a victorious phallus, offering yet again a way out the dimension of representation. This trunk evokes flesh and blood but more erotically than symbolically, not yet totally significant, testifying to a moment when things are there to be touched and not seen, that is to say not to think yet.

Cinema? Photography and undecidable (Suzanne, Gina, the friends)

Remembering the 19th century photographic tradition of *post mortem* portraits, Guibert photographs his great-aunt Suzanne. One could see there a sort of fascination for death, perfectly approved by numerous well known theories of the photographic medium, but Guibert plays with these codes. He diverts from the representational codes (whose inventory would list: a close up, a profile, and of course the uncluttered death bed), so as to expose a perfectly fake memento, or to be more precise, an icon faking pleasant memories. If we really want to know everything, eighty years old Suzanne present here is staging her own death for the picture. It is a fake. Her nephew made like this a whole book of games of this type with her and her younger ex-nun sister Louise². This says the narrator's desire to take pictures with his grand-aunts whom he visits on Sundays, with a game that they play together, which is an adventure to share between the 20 years old man and the old ladies.

At the same time, Duane Michals was working on similar themes; but HG's project finally concerns photography as well as life itself, that is to say his way of caring for his great-aunts; his ordinary life is affected, even motivated by his photographs.

Gina Lollobrigida in Roma is taken in the manner of a photogram extracted from a film, in a large view, in a crepuscular exterior in the Villa Medici's gardens. Gina embodies cinema, in Guibert's work, more than anyone. Other texts of his display her among shields and aquariums, like various forms of screens that separate the movie idol – a woman turned into image – from the spectator who Guibert is. Very interestingly indeed, in his texts like in the pictures he takes, HG refuses any intimacy with the Italian star, and he frames her just like the picture she truly, unresistingly is.

"The friends" leads to the crucial point with a feeling of incredulity or even suspicion that it commands. This is a true hospital room, but how far can we believe that the handsome Christ-like young man lying in the bed is a real patient? The man who assists him on the left

² Louise's reaction after the exhibition: « all great! The one where you're dead, Suzanne, it is real good! »

affects the careful attitude which would remind of an ancient painting of women at the foot of the cross, in crucifixion scenes. The light above the bed, its centrality and the strong contrast it brings to the naked arms on the white sheets, the suffering man's long hair and his nudity, even the regularity of his features bring about an impression of "Deja-vu" by reference to some cultural image. The image of suffering seems paradoxically too referenced (and maybe too well-composed) to be true, and the feeling of suspicion, suspicion of a fake (fake pain, fake patient) is precisely what has contaminated Guibert's entire work since his first book, *La Mort-Propagande*.

A fake death, a real movie star, these are undecidable scenes that HG creates with his camera, deconstructing the evidence, against the so-called objectivity of the image. (He meets here what Gisele Freund describes in "*Photography and Society*": "the objectivity of the picture is nothing but an illusion. The captions that comment on it can completely change its meaning".) But moreover the confusing strength of his pictures has partly to do with the way Guibert stages scenes that may happen: Suzanne's death for instance. He seems to be rehearsing the future so as to get prepared to it, as if he wanted to avoid its fate, by acting before having to live the same scenes, in real. This is quite the same trick that he will use in the video *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*: there he's acting his own death (I am thinking of the suicide scene), making a fiction of what will really happen.

Portraits by the amateur (Eugène, Thierry, Zouzou, Michel)

Guibert's friends are his models. Whether they are famous or not, they join in the same way the guibertian novel and find themselves in the photographic album as well. Thierry's and Eugène's beauty of course inspires the search of the beautiful picture that agrees with their absolute physical perfection. Eugène has the delicateness of the small bunch of roses he holds in his hand. He stands, chest naked, and his body shares the background between light and shade; he looks like Orpheus, bringing back from Hell the only memory that he could keep from Eurydice. When he has his son Marin, Eugène will write about these small beautiful things that a child can see, hear and taste.

Thierry is Hervé's everlasting love, the one who had access to the writer's diary from the beginning to the end. They were 17 when they met; Thierry died seven months after Hervé. The picture strikes by its academism, the pose is classical, and he faces the photographer in the regular distance for a full length portrait. He occupies the middle of the picture; the light is equilibrated, and comes from a slight opening of a curtain on the right. The full length portrait is a heritage of classical painting whose purpose was to immortalise the model's image. Benjamin's "Little history of photography" refers to this heritage as a symbol of the increasing bourgeoisie in the beginning of the 19th century. Here Guibert uses the codes of this kind of photography for an intimate deviation.

The posture is classical, as well as the composition and the light. The breach with the suggested academism comes, of course, from the model's clothes and the way he holds his head inclined; the set lightened in the background allows one to distinguish the details of an uncluttered bed. These details are like an anomaly which invalidates the stereotype that the picture was evoking: Thierry does not sit for some anonymous photographer, the expression of consent he has in his look shows enough that he poses for his lover. Thus this picture fails to be the classical eternal portrait it could have been, so as to enhance the moment that the photographer and the model shared. Thierry's look reintroduces the photographer into the photographic scene, the latter is not the anonymous witness he ought to be: his presence resists within the picture, betrayed by the model's expression of love. Instead of a portrait, this appears as a clue for a story between the photographer and the model. This story belongs to the guibertian novel.

The comedian Zouc's portrait is a very difficult picture to look at. (This paradoxical portrait recalls Andy Warhol self-portrait with the hands before the face). The white towels for the one who used to be dressed in black translates the medical gaze and evokes madness, psychological disease. She turns her back, faces the wall, expressing her refuse to be

photographed; but she does not leave the scene: this is the portrait of the shame to be seen, picturing the disgrace, the embarrassment. This is the failure of a portrait which is photographed here: she has left the white towels down, the frame reveals the white background, unmasks the stage. She chooses another pose, an insane pose for a portrait. This picture of an abandoned portrait tells more intimately than the previous one who she is.

The work on framing is very important in HG's work because it has to say amateurism when we would expect professionalism: by bungling his framing, Guibert assumes – I even think he claims – the only truth in photography which resides in the registration of the encounter between the photographer and the photographed. This is what Barthes had finally found with the *punctum* of photography “that has been”, but the theorist had eluded the photographer's question during his investigation (in fact he had got rid of it), since Barthes focused his attention on the spectator's point of view; this is precisely what Guibert manages to avoid with his framings. The “mis-framings” prevent the picture from falling into some anonymous point of view. Michel's portrait is the precise example of this: the picture could have been a wonderful icon of Foucault with the multiple reflections of his silhouette over the black-lacquered doors. Symbolically, the diffraction of the shadow would have probably made one of the greatest portraits of the philosopher's ever taken, but the slight shifting towards the top of the picture crops his feet and, once more, unmasks the décor, the set. Thus this is Michel who appears and not Foucault, the doors reveal what they are, doors leading to other rooms of a Parisian apartment; and the question that arises concerns who could have taken this picture of the philosopher at home, in his home suit. Indeed, HG was his neighbour and close friend.

Defective framings have the function of recalling the photographer within the picture; they prevent him from his necessary disappearance while he is to be replaced by the spectator.

Self-portraits (in fever, the only face, in shadow, in Roma)

We may say that there are, in the self portrait genre, two kinds of photographers: the ones who keep control over the image as a result of not leaving the camera away from their eye (let's say for instance Lee Friedlander), and all the others. Hervé Guibert belongs to these latter who partly abandon control over their image by taking the picture with the camera in the hand, directed as much as possible towards its target. He does not see what the camera will take; he thus lets *happen* the image of the self, just like one can test a chemical experience. Even if he pictures himself in the mirror, and seems to control his expression perfectly, he makes himself unable to expect the picture that will result (the framing, once more, but also his own gaze anamorphozised by the optical axis's modification.) Experimenting is always more important than leaving traces in Guibert's photographic work; that can also explain his singular mode of writing-- the result provided by the tests he makes will never match reality. Maybe this is only a question of point of view, and we should pay attention to the slight shiftings of the camera distracted from the eye to understand how a man who pictures himself so systematically comes out blind in the picture.

“The only face” finally concerns the entire work, not only by Guibert's choice to depict only what looks at him, what touches him, but also by the way he structures the picture. He tells about it in the preface of his photograph album and traces the difference between his way to photograph and Cartier-Bresson's one. The great photographer was interested in an adjustment of lines while Guibert wanted to get closer to a face. In technical terms, we could say that HCB structures his pictures vertically, like a painter does in front of a landscape whereas Guibert composes them horizontally, like a walking man who gets ready to get in.