

Identification, pros and cons

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REFERENCES

Cindy Sherman, Paris : Ed. du Jeu de Paume : Flammarion, 2006

La Photographie mise en scène : créer l'illusion du réel, Londres : Merrell ; Ottawa : Musée des beaux-arts du Canada, 2006

- ¹ In the introduction to a publication, it is customary to emphasize the novel aspect of the issue(s) it deals with. Lori Pauli, curator of the exhibition *La Photographie mise en scène : créer l'illusion du réel*, applies herself to this task by winding up her essay "Planter le décor/Sketching the décor" with a regret: "Several historians of photography have overlooked staged photography, skipping the subject as if it had something to do with a moment of confusion, wild or otherwise, an agreeable distraction in the development of this art form." The argument is a classic one, and can be summed up as an oft read injunction which sets the pioneer's authority in a given material (it is high time to parry the mood of general disinterest, not to say scorn for a crucial issue), but, here it does not seem to be reduced to a rhetorical figure. If it is at the very least inexact in the facts (the issue is far from being unstudied), it is more simply by overlooking the area encompassed by this notion of staged photography-i.e. a good chunk of the history of this medium. A vast field of investigation which Jean-François Chevrier summed up thus in a project devoted to the self-portrait, in 1984: "Through the endless ruses of staged presentation, a technique traditionally earmarked for the recording of facts became a means of projection."¹ The river hides the ocean. Because what is involved is an envisagement of the variants of fiction, their relations with the "real", the relations between photography and painting, theatre, film and performance (sadly forgotten), as if examining which clichés of representation and cultural memory are attached thereto, it is important to come swiftly to the conclusion that a *staged photograph* is a more or less complex grid of references, and can summon great art as it can its opposites, and the most personal of

stories. This story—the Canadian catalogue sheds light on the varied range of these proposals over time—starts with Hippolyte Bayard's *L'Autoportrait en noyé*, whose undertaking has been summed up thus by Michel Poivert: "... making the image the recording of a representation"² (if it were necessary to stress as much) which forms "the perfect denial of the illusion at the very heart of imitation."³

- 2 This is where Cindy Sherman's work overlaps, the power of it being probably that it reveals all these challenges at once. Jean-Pierre Criqui gives the measure of this art "which never forgets to tell us of its artificial quality"⁴ in one of the essays accompanying the impressive monograph about this artist, published by Flammarion. With relish, the author conjures up this liking for admixture, a component of the genre, which is especially perceptible in the *History portraits*, which he describes as "not very appetizing minestrone, with bits and pieces of Fouquet, Raphael, Rubens, Fragonard and Ingres floating about in it."⁵ Photography is the "Cinderella of the Fine Arts [...], a fake peasant girl jumping into a princess's bed"⁶, painting, which she subjects to all the outrages of mismatch. Far from being a psychologically-oriented or merely feminist interpretation of the work of the American artist, Jean-Pierre Criqui takes a good look at a possible variant of the *staged photograph* sidestepped by the Canadian catalogue, when he traces Cindy Sherman's career, like the itinerary of a disappearance. Initially, the artist takes her leave as an identity behind the representation, then totally, thus demonstrating (*inter alia*) that the projection remains. The body, spirited away and replaced by reflections and effigies in the *Disasters* and the *Sex Pictures*, still carries on "in a disconcerting way"⁷ notes Régis Durand, referring us to our own bodies. Added to the onlooker's malaise is the difficulty of interpreting, and almost digesting this kind of statement, when it is a question of squaring up to a power that submerges and introduces a mysterious link to the image. The overall view of Sherman's œuvre helps us to gauge the continuity of her investigation into "the call for the viewer's visual and libidinal commitment"⁸, which she here takes to extremes.
- 3 The same text by Roland Barthes is quoted in both these publications. Titled "The Third Sense", it was published in *Les Cahiers du cinéma* in 1970. The author just happens to be interested in these lines in "one sense too many", which dodges language and holds him, as viewer, captive in the photograms of Eisenstein's films. Barthes considers that this third sense, which he calls the obtuse sense, hallmarks the filmic element which, in film, "cannot be described"⁹. The photogram reveals it. "Forced to emerge outside of a civilization of what is signified", it still remains "rare", in his view.¹⁰
- 4 It would seem, once and for all, that what is involved here is not contempt with regard to these images on the part of experts, but rather mistrust, because, for the most successful among them, they do not offer their commentator the voluptuous "peace of nominations"¹¹, and reduce things to one of the qualities of the photogram—silence¹².

NOTES

1. Chevrier, Jean-François, Sagne, Jean. "L'Autoportrait comme mise en scène... Essai sur l'identité, l'exotisme et les excès photographiques", *Photographies*, n°4, April 1984, p. 47
2. Poivert, Michel. "Hippolyte Bayard en "suicidé de la société". Le point de vue du mort", *Art press*, (special issue: "Fictions d'artistes"), April 2002, p. 23
See also Sapir, Michel. "The Impossible Photograph: Hippolyte Bayard's Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man", *Modern Fiction Studies*, n°3, vol. 40, 1994, pp. 619-629.
3. *Ibid*, p. 25
4. Criqui, Jean-Pierre. "Une femme disparaît", *Cindy Sherman*, Paris : Ed. du Jeu de Paume : Flammarion, 2006, p. 274
5. *Ibid*, p. 280
6. *Ibid*, p. 281
7. Durand, Régis. "Une lecture de l'œuvre de Cindy Sherman 1975-2006", *Cindy Sherman, op.cit.*, p. 259
8. *Ibid*, p. 240
9. Barthes, Roland. "Le Troisième Sens" (1970), *L'Obvie et l'obtus. Essais critiques III*, Paris : Seuil, 1982, p. 58
10. *Ibid*
11. *Ibid*, p. 56
12. See n°28 of the magazine *Vertigo* devoted to silence, summer 2006.