

Conceptual art for families.

Pierre Leguillon, 04/2008

documentation céline duval diffuses the image in its simplest form. Digitized and cleaned, folds, marks and sepia tone removed, it is far from being a facsimile prompting socio-historical readings. If the family photograph is treated here with the same consideration as an image in a press agency, it is with the purpose of returning full meaning to the subject. And it is this that Céline Duval reveals, or perhaps invents, for the real intention behind these anonymous snapshots remains forever hidden: Aunt Renée on holiday at Saint-Raphaël, little Louis taking the bus for the first time on his fifth birthday, or the house in the Jura that was put up for sale last year...

The image is displaced, shifted from private archive to public diffusion. Its initial object disappears and is replaced by a contingent element in the image. One subject is substituted for another. The second reading resurfaces: Aunt Renée as a mermaid, little Louis swinging from the bar of the bus like an acrobat, the light falling on the house in the Jura, illuminated as if in a painting... . But used in another publication or setting it is a different element in the same image that allows these ordinary heroes to take on new roles. Nevertheless, in the course of reading these images, the initial figure becomes "recharged," a carrier of a message, of an allegory. The photographs have also been enlarged, sometimes to the size of a poster: once they are removed from the family photo album, the image, like that of "auteur" photography, engages with the notion of the grand narrative.

At the beginning of 2002 a little book, *Tous ne deviendront pas footballeurs (Not all of them will become footballers)*, appeared as part of a mobile project program entitled *Migrateurs*, organized by Hans-Ulrich Obrist at the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris. On each of the twelve pages of the book an amateur photograph is reproduced - full page in black and white - showing a child or an adult carrying a ball. The variation of the poses eclipses the repetitive and anecdotal nature of the theme. Each individual seems, in reality, to hold the world in his or her arms. These images present many different levels of reading, making unusual references to the game, from geometry to the globe. Each body represents a marker on the earth, all of them hang on to a transitional object, which at the same time simulates the world and their connection to it.

One can also read in this reduction of the world to a football a utopian project: an encyclopedia of images that has occupied *documentation céline duval* for ten years. She indexes a multitude of faces and forms appearing in amateur photographs, pages from magazines and postcards, all of them waiting for republication. Using a vertiginous system and novel criteria, she brings together thousands of photographs that archival departments and other specialist agencies have deliberately ignored.

If this utilisation of the codes of amateur photography recalls the 1970's work of Christian Boltanski or Hans-Peter Feldmann, Céline Duval operates a selection and juxtaposition that removes the anthropological dimension of the images to the service of the body in space, as if to give a consistency to these "no-bodies." And if the numerous self-publications produced by *documentation céline duval* are part of the direct heritage of Douglas Huebler, John Baldessari or Jan Dibbets, Céline Duval turns the history of conceptual art the other way around. In effect she draws up a protocol, *a posteriori*, from a heap of readymade images where the absence of the intentional is the rule: conceptual art for families.

The slideshow entitled *Horizons*, which Céline Duval has added to regularly since 2006, summons a space and time beyond the limits imposed by the gallery. Sitting on a museum bench the spectators see a parade of images in front of them, one fading into the other: dozens of amateur photographs from different periods of time in which someone poses at the edge of the sea in front of the horizon.

In 1960 the conceptual artist Stanley Broun decided that all the shoe shop windows of Amsterdam constituted his exhibition for a given time. In a similar fashion, the publications and exhibitions of Céline Duval play with notions of simplicity and disproportion. It is a monumental art form, not monumental like a sculpture on a motorway roundabout or an environment by a contemporary artist commissioned to boost the luxury goods industry, for example. No, monumental in the sense that from our position as a viewer or visitor to the museum, the sequence of common images opens up a cosmic dimension. And the monument is directly summoned by the interposing horizons, if one thinks of all the photographs of tourists posing in front of famous edifices. The family photos interfere in the gallery, replacing technologically complex and often costly productions. The haunting succession of these *Horizons* operates literarily as a leveller, a bubble of air slides into the "black box."

I think of the canvas painted by Courbet in 1854, *Le bord de mer à Pallavas*, which even if it is small, is still a celebrated work. The only figure in the foreground, perched on a rock, seems to wave in greeting at the horizon, as if it is an audience. Looking at the painting closely, it appears that his hand points precisely towards the only cloud in the uniformly blue sky. The little cloud is nothing but a rough white paint mark, as if the painter has cleaned his brush on the azure background rather than his palette. Perhaps Courbet is thumbing his nose at painting, or perhaps, on the contrary, he is giving a victory sign to its legitimate champions! Céline Duval's *Horizons*, which shy away into infinity, in turn, call out to today's photographers: Mr. and Mrs. Anybody.

Bruno Munari also traces new horizon lines by linking together the veins on the surface of pebbles that he has amassed on the beach. One could say that each pebble, in itself, constitutes an acheiropoietic landscape. By accumulating the anonymous horizons, Céline Duval delineates a utopian landscape, an island around which we can never journey. Measure for measure, the horizon indicates the width of the screen, and the portion of sky that pushes the sand down towards the frame evokes an hourglass.

I am reminded of the spirit of certain images in *la Région centrale*, the film by Michael Snow (1971), where the unusual length of the shots provokes the extraordinary feeling of being linked to the universe by the cinema screen. In Céline Duval's slideshow, the scanning of the horizon line, photography's constraint, reminds us constantly of circularity: the circularity of the eye, of the lens, of the world. Céline Duval turns the world around in the time of an image, like Piero Manzoni in 1961 with his *Socle du monde*, in which the title of the work is simply inscribed upside down.

This series of amateur snapshots also describes a burlesque situation, the vain attempt to measure oneself against the horizon line. For the photographer this line is also the "natural level," the defining yardstick used to frame the image straight, for the subject of the photograph it is infinity, dying away in the vertical plane of the image on which he or she turns their back. *documentation céline duval* presents therefore once again - but subtly - an experience of limitation, that of the depth of field, or a view that we stumble up against.

The happiness promised by paid holidays and immortalised by a technique available to everyone, turns tragic however. All these men and women seem in effect to be washed up on the beach, drowned, or mermaids who, after Hippolyte Bayard, emerge from the background of the image. These strangers who return from the past stare into the lens of the same camera. The appropriation of the images creates an immense and troubling recomposed family, and this cortege concludes a particular history of photography, when the images needed water to be revealed. The photos gathered by Céline Duval from the cardboard albums or the jumble of the flea markets flow back unceasingly to the large "screen saver" that she has installed in the museum.

Translated from the French by Juliet Bates