Jean-François Chevrier - Rethinking Legacies

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REFERENCES

Chevrier, Jean-François. *La Trame et le hasard*, Paris : L'Arachnéen, 2010

Chevrier, Jean-François. *Entre les beaux-arts et les médias : photographie et art moderne*, Paris : L'Arachnéen, 2010

Chevrier, Jean-François. *Walker Evans dans le temps et dans l'histoire*, Paris : L'Arachnéen, 2010

- 1 As it ushers in the series of Jean-François Chevrier's seven books currently being published by L'Arachnéen¹, *La Trame et le hasard* seems right away to offer a reading key to this ambitious series, positing at once the terms of reflection and the way in which that reflection will be conducted by the author: it is actually in "constellation" mode—a principle which J-F. Chevrier associates, in the wake of Mallarmé's famous "Throw of the dice", with certain 20th century praxes stemming above all from Surrealism and Constructivism—that the different texts (either reworked or hitherto unpublished) are organized, producing a line of thought about modern art that is truly moveable, and formulated in these pages by interposed crosschecks, thus letting the reader have the pleasure of combining successive analyses. The author thus already defends his conceptions by the adopted structure (fragmentation and resonance, going beyond usual pigeonholing), which leans on works that have been precisely examined, with judicious anachronic comparisons, on many artists' quotations whose aptness must be underscored, and lastly on a relatively limited body of images which is, however, never merely illustrative.
- 2 A noteworthy thing about this general overview and the numerous issues which come to the fore therein is that some of them make it possible to grasp—without

oversimplifying it—one of the essential contributions made by J-F. Chevrier to the history and theory of photography, namely the invention of the nowadays well-known “picture-form” concept. The author only very infrequently uses this term, which has helped to describe a certain number of photographic practices in the 1980s and 1990s, with Jeff Wall still the emblematic figure in this respect, but connected questions recurrently crop up in the first two books about the composition/anti-composition relationship, shedding valuable light on the author’s thinking by updating it where called for. So whether what is involved is contrasting the “untimely character of the event” with the “regularity principle”, as J-F. Chevrier identifies it, for example, in William Burroughs’s use of the cut-up and in the ornamental factor in Sophie Taeuber’s œuvre, or whether it is a matter of the use of montage with Josef Albers leading to a combinatory perception, or, alternatively, the claim of “non-composition” made by the Bechers, the challenge is often to shatter the unity of the text and/or image, and find a “ruse” to foil the *clichés* (Walker Evans’s *Many Are Called*—a series brought into the picture on many occasions by the author in his third book—being, in this respect, an eloquent illustration).

- 3 By overlapping with the issue of different forms of determinism, the appearance of photography actually plays a fundamental historic role which J-F. Chevrier puts into perspective: with its advent “disturbing the imagination”, photography brought the media culture into modern art, as this latter distanced itself from the fine arts system and, on the whole, opted for other references. In one of the most powerful passages of *Entre les beaux-arts et les médias*, J-F. Chevrier demonstrates how such a process, achieved by way of Pop Art, tends to put the “culture document” in the place of the “experience document”. All of a sudden, one of the major challenges of this research resides without fail in the painting/photography relationship, which the author manages to hoist to a degree of complexity which we can only welcome. Far from the usual dichotomies, J-F. Chevrier lends an ear as much to photographic practices which re-enact and thwart the pictorial, painterly legacy as to those of painters informed by the reproducible image (Gerhard Richter), and he does so by renewing the terms of the discussion, with Henri Matisse, for example, as intermediary (photography as safeguard against the excesses of subjectivity), and by the more implicit but thoroughly relevant evocation of abstract painting. More generally, the last essays in this second volume of the collection convincingly give closure to a moment in the demonstration, as well as several decades of work, clearly reformulating the refusal to choose between photographic *mise en scène* (staged presentation) and *instantaneousness*, and explaining, if need there be, the fact of devoting a complete book to the inventor of the “documentary style”, the first person, perhaps, to have managed to negotiate the apparent contradiction between composition and information. So, quite to the contrary, by lucidly attesting to the “impossibility of the clean slate”, *Walker Evans dans le temps et dans l’histoire* develops once again the issues already raised (the question of the artistic legacy in particular), by refocusing the attention on Evans’s work while at the same time further opening up the problem(s) of time—already previously broached in Michelangelo Pistoletto’s work by way, *inter alia*, of the stimulating principle of “retrospection”. Among the fine studies which stake out *Walker Evans dans le temps et dans l’histoire*, finding the compatible remove between formal analysis and historical contextualization, the critical examination of Evans’s work measured against such immense figures as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Dan Graham and Andy Warhol represents one of the great assets of the book, which thereby goes beyond its strictly monographic

status. To give just one example, the idea of “delayed present”, which hallmarks Graham’s stance, finds in its occurrences in Graham’s œuvre a novel spirit, far from usual categorizations.

- 4 A paradox remains: while the example of Evans quite masterfully shows it, if only through the effectiveness of the “book” form, and while a number of studies in the first two compilations are forever pinpointing the capacity of artists to make use of many different procedures (including *trame/plot* and *hasard/chance*) to get away from composition as inherited from fine arts, why let the “picture-form” alone, no matter how coherent it may be, enjoy the privilege of “guaranteeing the experience document”? On this point, the very last—and hitherto unpublished—text of *Entre les beaux-arts et les medias* comes across like a more than welcome theoretical readjustment, with Ahlam Shibli’s artist’s book given as an example which, it just so happens, belies the exclusiveness of the picture-form setting itself up as an experience document. In addition to the advantage of making a whole host of hitherto scattered texts accessible, these first three volumes thus finally offer readers a chance to reposition (and at times relativize) some of the author’s seminal concepts, from which other hypotheses benefit. A much needed updating, whose sequels we shall read with all the more attention.
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NOTES

1. This article is based on the first three volumes of the collection. The publisher is announcing the 2011 publication of four other books which will complete the series: *Des Territoires*, *Les Relations du corps*, *L’Hallucination artistique* and lastly *Œuvre et activité*.