Presumed Independent: Wordfree imagery

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Heather Allen: *Pictures from Home*, Le Havre: Ed. Flux, 2000

Claude Closky : *27 x 20*, Le Havre : Ed. Flux, 2000

Vincent Julliard : *Courtesy Roudra / Rocaille*, Caen : Frac Basse-Normandie, 2000

Roland Moreau : *Colorama*, Le Havre : Ed. Flux, 2000

Xavier Veilhan : *la grotte / la forêt*, Brétigny-sur-Orge : Centre d'art contemporain, 2000

Elysian Fields, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou : Purple, 2000

Présumés innocents : l'art contemporain et l'enfance, Bordeaux : capcMusée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, 2000 / *Presumed Innocent : The Album*, Bordeaux : capcMusée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, 2000

- 1 It's no surprise that art circles are involved in the general trend of image proliferation—their visual calling earmarked them right away. But this phenomenon goes hand in hand with a conspicuous disaffection with the written word, and we should like to raise some questions about the forms of this new balance. We are witnessing a new phenomenon—the emergence of hitherto unknown editorial policies and the cross-fertilization of objects that used to be mutually foreign to one another. So we can see the exhibition catalogue turning into a magazine—a trend that is being symmetrically expressed by the way many magazines on the borderline between fashion and design are turning artistic. What's more, a type of publication that pertains to the artist's book—an object designed by an artist, but without any critical baggage—is now often supplanting the exhibition catalogue. Among the seven or so titles in question here, five belong to this latter category. There are the three books published by the Le Havre art school. In inaugurating a collection of publications connected with shows put on by this establishment, this threesome adopts a praiseworthy distribution strategy by combining Claude Closky with two young artists, Heather Allen and Roland Moreau. The technologies now available for

working out such printed products both facilitate and simplify the production process: disks go directly from artist to printer. The absence of any informative and discursive back-up does not, as it happens, stem from any intentional principle, as Pierre Guislain, director of the school and of publications, acknowledges, but from an economic constraint. Words, these days, come at a price.

- 2 Without presupposing any possible cause/effect links in this area, one notes in these new collections of discourse-less images a distinctly regressive trend, associating books with childhood and games. So Vincent Julliard comes up with a flip-book, Xavier Veilhan with an album with cardboard pages, and R. Moreau with a colouring book. Their form may be taken from the publishing world earmarked for readers at least ten years old, but these books all clearly display another dimension: R. Moreau's colourings turn out to be obscene, the printed sequences created by V. Julliard as strange and disconcerting as his *Théâtre O.R.L.*, and the Gothic typography used for the lettering of the titles *La Grotte* and *La Forêt* refer to a Teutonic pantheism whose juicy timeliness is only revealed by reading between the lines.
- 3 Over and above their belonging to a similar tendency, the catalogue for the exhibition *Elysian Fields* and the publication which, to use the authors' terms, "prolongs" the *Presumed Innocent* exhibition (which also boasts a catalogue), incidentally, illustrate two contrasting positions with regard to the images. Their shared point—in addition to the fact that some artists are represented in the two books—has to do with the preponderance of imagery and the lesser role allotted to the text, confined to the illustration captions and, in the case of *Presumed Innocent: the Album*, to a very short introduction on the back cover. This introduction, penned by designers Michelle Nicol and Nicolas Trembley, tells us that "this album is a landmark in the representation of teenage culture in contemporary art ». What legitimizes the submission of the title to today's cinematographic and musical marketing—a way of "sticking" to the subject. A few lines further on, however, we are told that the book "includes the specific projects of fifty international artists on the themes of childhood and adolescence ». Two avowedly different themes, but ones which the album enjoys blurring. For a consultation of the album does not really help to reveal the slightest internal organization which might tell one theme apart from the other. On the other hand, it seems that the sequence of images complies with no particular rule, but rather cultivates mixture and disorder. The representation of the "teenage culture" is described as a "global phenomenon [...] that must be traced back to the 1970s". This somewhat programmatic sentence unfortunately finds no practical application within the work, which discourages any attempt to catch the thread, whatever it may be.
- 4 *Elysian Fields*, on the other hand, offers an example of an object that responds to precise rules of construction, no matter how arbitrary they may seem. The pitfall of this catalogue is that it lets the contents float on the strength of the overall cool aesthetics of the exhibition it accompanies, but, on the contrary, it does manage, based on the very slim argument represented by the reference to the brain's dreamlike activity, and almost without any succour from the text, to be clearly divided into well defined parts. The book is developed in four parts, identified by specific colours, with a system of columns which defines the areas filled by the coloured veils of increasing size, which cover the images. The use of a two-colour system, apart from a few pages of four-colour reproductions at the beginning of the book, manages to introduce a variety in the image sequence with a certain sparseness, and the images thus avoid the monotony of their juxtaposition. Last of all, the object is nice to handle, and the connection between the suppleness of the covers

and the paper between them gives an undeniably substantial look to the whole thing. The most striking result lies in the favourable arrangement that this kind of know-how manages to prompt in the reader, urging him/her to discover in the selection of pictures, and the reasons for it, possibly more motivations than there were at the outset among those responsible for the catalogue.

- 5 *Presumed Innocent* sins through over-confidence in the images, as if their strength and quality should instantly guarantee the success of their compilation. *Elysian Fields*, on the other hand, stems from a confidence given to publishing work itself, and an obvious mastery of the page layout. Olivier Zahm and Elein Fleiss, working together as it so happens on *Experimental Jetset* for the art direction, and breaking with the mysteries of the printed thing, know what demands the absence of words exposes the publisher to. Young, fresh images will not win their independence without a struggle in the face of the big bad text—while, in other respects, the issue of the validity of this freeing-up remains an open one.