The Desire to Understand and Photography

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- 1 Photography is part and parcel of the history of Surrealism, and a far-reaching and active part of that movement. In choosing a provocative title—*L'Image au service de la révolution*—for his collection of essays, Michel Poivert's intent was to show that, far from being an accompaniment to writing and publications, the photographic image operated as a way of thinking necessary for that analytical process called Surrealism at the service of revolution. To grasp the phenomenon, it had to be observed as it developed from publication to publication. André Breton did not, strictly speaking, theorize about this issue, the way he managed to have plenty to say on an idea about poetry, art, reason, or aesthetic history. On the contrary, he incorporated the photographic image within the way his imagination worked, and converted the photographic model originating from realist origins to a quite different ordeal of truth. Here we come upon logic in an open history. This major feature rounds off the horizon of intellectual references, and is incorporated in the dialectic device the way it is part of the issue involving dreams and automatic writing.
- 2 On 1 April 1935, in Prague, André Breton delivered a lecture with the highfaluting title, nicely attuned to the tone of the day, "*Position politique de l'art d'aujourd'hui*". What did he do to draw up the expected indictment against bourgeois society? He made commentaries

on photographs, a portrait of Gustave Courbet in front of the rubble of the Vendôme column, and reproductions of his pictures, so as to contrast his inspiration with the more political afflatus of a painter such as Jacques-Louis David. After developing certain ideas on Arthur Rimbaud, he highlighted the specific character of art and poetry, which is to withstand “the collective service of an idea”. To be more clearly understood, he referred first to the suicide of Serge Alexandrovich Essenin, and then to that of Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky, made mention of André Malraux’s speech, talked about Surrealism, and its conception of personality, and suddenly made reference to a picture by Edouard Manet. This picture was a still life. He knew it well, because it belonged to Jacques Doucet. Risking a slight generality, he suggested that *Le Lièvre* had been turned down by the Salon jury, although, he continued, the motif, in all its accuracy, was “every bit a match for any photograph”. His argument consisted in pinpointing the process of recognizing works that people did not understand, a process that would apply to Surrealist works and Edouard Manet’s hare alike. Adolf Hitler, he reminded his audience, persecuted Marxists and banned avant-garde art. A word to the wise is enough! But what we can see, today, in this reasoning is perhaps less a political warning than the idea of a photographic model used as the criterion for a “human future” which would see fit to introduce “a daylight which we know will end up by being total”, instead of the nocturnal darkness of ignorance. This absolute daylight is not the realm of what is photographically visible, but that of a work equivalent to Edouard Manet’s. André Breton summoned Benjamin Péret and Max Ernst, but in a climate compatible with “life”. A magic word, for photography as well. This detour also suggests that there was, for Breton, a use of photography that helped him to see in a Gustave Courbet portrait the very image of revolutionary contradiction, and to be captivated thereby. The book’s differing viewpoints give us total access to this metaphor of “daylight”, from the phenomenon of ecstasy to a form of objectivization which overcomes a decline in artistic expression. André Breton admitted a series of appearances by Man Ray, Brassai, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí, Georges Bataille, Louis Aragon, and Walter Benjamin, and, on a subject as complex as this, we can vouch for a level of coherence that is not obtained by a surplus of explanatory simplification. The historical data provided help us to follow a use of photography which, without losing its objective character, becomes an abstract object. The Surrealist revolution which, in parenthesis, did indeed take place, is considerably indebted to him for its spirit which could not be politically assimilated. It may not have changed life, but it certainly changed photography.

- 3 With the exhibition *L’Événement*, on the other hand, we are faced with assimilation. Involved here is the analysis of an event factory, starting with the emergence of photographic reportage in the 19th century. The theme consists in showing how imagery becomes the actor of history, by putting forward differing types of events: the Crimean War, the conquest of the skies, paid holidays introduced (in France) in 1936, the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, and 9/11. Historical analyses shed light on the parameters determining a notion which can be thought to interrupt an established order and create something new. The technical, aesthetic and symbolic dimension forms a limitation which seems, if not to provoke the event, then at least to define it in a stable manner. “Everything happens”, said the painter about the hare, but for the media everything does not happen. For the fall of the Berlin wall, the *proscenium* effect of the Brandenburg Gate was important. And the terrorist logic behind 9/11 orchestrates the sort of socio-cultural analysis illustrated by this show. Photographs record, loop-like, what we wish to see. It remains to be known what we can do with it. Thomas Ruff’s image (*JPEGNY02*, 2004) refers

to the debate mentioned in the introduction by Michel Poivert about the experience presupposed by the manufactured–fabricated–event for a pre-ordained history. When the analytical process becomes a picture book (Bertold Brecht’s *Kriegsfibel*, an ABC of war, vieing with Jean-Luc Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinema*), understanding can become a harrowing phenomenon.

- 4 Patrick Vauday, for his part, tries to understand Eugène Delacroix, Paul Gauguin, and Claude Monet through what he calls “the decolonization of the picture”. His standpoint has the advantage of permitting a sort of explanation of the link between art and politics, but under the aegis of the word “politics” he merely describes the artistic process. Decolonization becomes a weak word when you read Eugène Delacroix’ *Souvenirs d’un voyage dans le Maroc*. It summons up an historical perspective, at least, if only to observe the thick veil formed by the art-and-culture admixture. “The desire to understand, which I have no intention of denying”, wrote André Breton, “shares this in common with other desires, that in order to last it must not be completely satisfied.” Photography is perfect in this respect.