

Images in Orbit

With Yan Giguère's three most recent series, both public and critics have been principally struck by the use of a narrative fragmentation in the display of the photo-images, resulting in what were soon being referred to as "constellations" – an apt word likely inspired by the title of one of the ensembles, *Attractions*. Taken together, the two terms effectively suggest that there are forces at play between the images that establish their relationships by *satellizing* some of the smaller ones around the hub of larger central elements, which become sources of centrifugal energy and mass attraction. Would we be justified, then, in classifying the images according to a relational typology that identifies some as more important than others, linking their narrative impact to their size, or even to their aesthetic handling (given that they are produced using different types of camera)? It would be a mistake to attempt such an exercise: what confronts us in these works is not a strict order, a spatial topology that can be decoded, a rigorously rational arrangement. That an image be one size and not another, that it be created using this technique rather than that, is not the result of a logical decision but of an instinct for the image required, related to its plastic qualities and what it represents – and ultimately to the visual effect it produces in relation to another, to all the others.

The constellation-like disposition of images was used for the 2007 series *Choisir*, and it was at this point that reviewers first began employing the term. But in fact Yan Giguère had anticipated the critics in 1997, when he first began experimenting with this way of hanging images in *Ici et là*.¹ As he has explained in an interview, this installation approach was rooted in "the idea that time doesn't necessarily unfold as a series of moments; instead, moments may burst out simultaneously."²

But when images are presented as part of such a hanging, and when within that hanging motifs recur, settings seem the same, figures reappear and series are completed, there is nevertheless a sense that there's some form of narrative structure in operation. And – since photography is all about time, which it manipulates and captures, invokes and reorganizes – that there must be some relational link between the various temporal instants. It's hard to discount the idea that this method of showing images is shaped in some way by the narrative impulse, by a coherent ordering of images that are snatches of space-time and that can be apprehended and identified to form a complete picture of a particular, maybe even recognizable, situation that is developing over time. But how can this second conclusion be reconciled with our initial observation, that the photographer creates his combinations intuitively?

¹ *Ici et là* was part of the exhibition *Antidote, la légèreté à l'œuvre*, curated by Jennifer Couëlle. Also including works by Sylvie Laliberté, Jean-Pierre Gauthier and Jérôme Fortin, it was presented at Plein sud, centre d'exposition en art actuel, in Longueuil.

² "Gravity and Tropism: An Interview with Yan Giguère by Sylvain Campeau," *Ciel Variable*, Montreal, no. 87 (2011), p. 26 (trans. Käthe Roth).

It has been generally agreed (perhaps a little hastily) that Yan Giguère belongs to that family of artists for whom photography is necessarily narrative. This movement has been assigned a variety of labels, suggesting that the kinship between its proponents is actually hard to define and that encapsulating their artistic approach under a single designation poses a problem. In the past, a number of artist-photographers built up image corpuses based on a narrative thread, a biographical impulse or an urge towards self-portraiture.³ Some of those who fell into the last category did so more or less by extension, since it was often not they who appeared in the images but their friends and family, whose connection to the photographer could be deduced from various clues. Others took a fictional approach, practising a form of literary essay by inserting evocative and sometimes poetic phrases between or beneath their images.⁴

In these practices everything was organized sequentially, in increasingly revelatory successions of images forming ensembles that can only be described as narrative. For some, of course, photography is always narrative in the sense that the image it produces can invariably be linked to a time that begs to be reactivated and a space that begs to be identified.⁵ A photographic image is always the freezing of a decisive moment between a before and an after, and it can lead to a reactivation of that transitional instant. The decision to exploit this essential characteristic of the medium has to come from the photographer, however, and it may not be central to their aesthetic discourse.

Can Yan Giguère really be said to belong to this group, since he admits to being interested in the simultaneous bursting forth of moments, those temporal capsules of which each of his images is a manifestation? Doesn't this interest run counter to the idea of a photographic approach dominated by the inevitable narrativity of its images? Obviously, this artist creates sequences that have an unequivocally narrative dimension. This is clear from the recurring appearance of certain figures – notably his partner, featured frequently in *Choisir* – of his own likeness and of places that quickly become familiar, and even of images that form clearly defined series. Still, it seems impossible to discern a narrative structure that encompasses the images as a whole. And such a structure would contradict the artist's avowed desire to encourage the coexistence of moments plucked from a totality that resists the sequentiality of a continuous narrative.

³ Gilles Mora and Denis Roche, who are among the artists and critics to have explored the subject of autobiography in photography, coined the neologism “photobiography.” From the literary realm, Philippe Lejeune’s notion of the “autobiographical pact” and Michel Beaujour’s study of the self-portrait are also significant. The self-portrait genre is evidently a fertile starting point in photography.

⁴ Among the Quebec artists drawn to this approach during the 1980s and 1990s, those that spring immediately to mind are Raymonde April, Richard Baillargeon, Michel Campeau and Bertrand Carrière. French practitioners include Raymond Depardon, Sophie Calle, Christian Boltanski and Denis Roche.

⁵ How many times, while visiting an exhibition of works by Henri Cartier-Bresson, did I hear spectators endlessly asking the same question: “Where is it?”

Although the photographic image can be seen as a chunk of space-time that suggests the possibility of a narrative chain, this is, as I have said, a characteristic of the medium that has to be deliberately fostered. Yan Giguère clearly does this. But since he is also preoccupied with the coexistence of different temporalities, he is obliged at the same time to produce ensembles of images linked in short sequences and to develop other narrative relationships.

When confronted with these constellations, we, as spectators, are naturally convinced that each individual image has to be the start of something. But ultimately, in spite of the narrative tension the artist provokes, it's difficult to link the narrative fragment we feel we perceive in each image to the others, so as to form a continuous sequence. It's almost as if the narrative impulse were being short-circuited, interrupted by image blocks that can't be seen as following on from other images or series.

Still, drawn in by the narrative progressions of certain elements, we, as spectators, seek others, and, failing to find them, assume that there is an order but one that remains inaccessible to us, privy only to the author.⁶ So a story nevertheless edges its way in, powerfully enough to establish its own existence but never clearly enough for us to grasp the full picture. It remains, we assume, the property of he who offers us glimpses of it.

One wonders if this is not the inevitable fate of anyone who attempts to exploit the narrativity of photography. It's as if the promise it offers of a structured story, unfolding in a succession of complementary space-times, is a kind of mirage. Some critics are clear about this: according to them, photography should not be viewed as potentially autobiographical but rather as a form of self-portrait. Even when it operates by association, revealing – in a kind of extended self-portrait – moments from a photographer's private life rather their own actual image, it uses pictures of friends and family and their familiar settings to create an embedded story, which can only be inferred. There is no real possibility of recreating and reconstructing the story behind what we are being shown. Photography leans towards narrativity, convinces us of its possibility, brandishes the illusion, but cannot fulfil the promise of a sustained account. And of this Yan Giguère's work is a perfect example. It proves just to what extent photography is a kind of operant illusion.⁷ But there's something else it would be a mistake to overlook: despite what we may believe, the narrative form does not have to be continuous, particularly in photography.

In Yan Giguère's constellations, the narrative impulse is simultaneously revealed and impeded by the urge to juxtapose the actuality of different temporal fragments. So if they do involve narrativity, it has to be seen as omnitemporal, resulting in ensembles of images that are not concerned with successive moments, but with concurrently existing

⁶ It was bound to happen! In spite of myself, apparently inevitably, I've ended up referring to an "author."

⁷ He is obviously not the only example – Raymonde April is another.

moments. It's a *blocked* narrativity, in both senses of the term: the unfolding of each narrative ensemble, presented as an isolated block, is blocked.

But perhaps it's even simpler than that. Perhaps we wrongly imagine that narrativity can only occur in a spatiotemporal continuity, without gaps or obstacles, and since Yan Giguère's works clearly don't conform to such an arrangement we're at a loss as to how to label them. Is there a form of narrativity that corresponds more closely to what the photographer is doing?

I think there is, and it's manifested in the organizational principle Yan Giguère has developed in creating his constellations. This characteristically photographic principle is based on the meticulous assembling of syntagmatic ensembles, composed of short series combined with isolated images, whose content establishes obvious relationships between all the elements, creating paradigmatic axes that complete the effect of the initial ensemble.⁸ This is likely what I was trying to get at when I spoke earlier of omnitemporality.

I think, in fact, that the artist's constellations represent a reasonable, even perfect, example of what could have happened in so-called narrative photography right at the start. The first experiments in the genre did everything possible to create narrative sequences, rather on the literary model. These series of images attempted to establish a syntagmatic chain, using a "phrasing" based on a syntax of continuous images. But each image is actually also a block, an ensemble whose limits can be defined, whose borders can be closed – which can, in a sense, be compacted into a state of complete self-sufficiency.

Clearly, the same could be said of other artists who have taken a comparable approach to the image. But Yan Giguère seems to have achieved more effectively than most the synthesis between a sequential organization and the more sporadic relations generated by the paradigmatic axis of a community of images grounded in places, people, details and aesthetic handling. And this, it seems to me, is fairly well expressed by the title of the second corpus presented in this book, *Attractions*.

How is this omnitemporality, a combination of continuous sequences and isolated blocks, manifested? First, in a very obvious characteristic feature: self-portraits. In *Choisir*, particularly, but also in the other series, there are several, and it's clear that their subject is represented at different moments in an artist's life and that they are shown in an order that is far from chronological. Then there are the images of his partner, Marie-Claude Bouthillier, herself an artist and therefore familiar to the visual arts community. But had she been entirely unknown, the situation would have been the same. She appears quite

⁸ Moreover, I find the title of the first series to make full use of this constellation arrangement quite revealing: *Choisir* – "Choose."

frequently amongst the images, in various settings, sometimes with Yan and on occasions that betray their shared private lives. The places where they are portrayed are also leitmotifs, while other distinctive features and recognizable spots reveal without a doubt that the setting is Montreal.⁹

But there's something else again. And although it may seem anecdotal, ultimately, it isn't.

Photography is familiar to all, and since its invention close to two hundred years ago there have been countless images produced during different historical periods, executed using widely diverse methods. We know that the photographic image has changed, reflecting the evolution of the medium and its techniques. Aesthetic approach, degree of representation, resolution, even support – all have been influenced by successive innovations. So when faced with an image, whether consciously and knowledgeably or simply as the result of a vague impression, we are able to judge at roughly what period it was made.

But Yan Giguère is an inveterate collector of cameras and a great connoisseur of the chemical formulas behind the products required to develop photographs. The images he displays in constellations are often taken with different cameras, depending on his latest find or discovery. Both the general appearance of the image produced by the particular camera employed¹⁰ and its subject determine the size of the final print and its place within the ensemble. The images thus bear a kind of temporal stamp. For instance, without necessarily being able to articulate or define it, we recognize the difference between an analog image and a digital image, or rather we *feel* it. The distinction is just as clear to us, spectators, as the one between images of Yan and Marie-Claude at different points in their lives.

Things are complexified by a practice employed quite frequently in *Visites libres*, which focuses on habitation. The series again includes a number of self-portraits and images of Marie-Claude, but there is a fresh element: archival images. This new presence heightens our sense of the age of the photograph and of the passage of time already suggested in the first two series, whose autobiographical (or self-portraitizing) component is more marked. But it also evokes a vaguely metaphysical moral doubt that emerges fairly often in photography, with its close links to time, crystallized in the anxiety caused by the realization that our inhabitation of the earth comes with an expiry date.

Now, the omnitemporality that Yan Giguère aims to exploit seems to be a way of both denying and acknowledging this fact: we are just passing through, and photography is one way of penetrating the depths and revealing the poetry of our transience.

⁹ Since the images were captured some have changed – or even disappeared!

¹⁰ As well as the chemicals.

The attempt to harness the omnitemporal power of images is also, perhaps an expression and a celebration of the simple joy of being. Maybe what the constellations of Yan Giguère evoke is the lightness of our own orbiting through the depths of time.

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