

Photographic Memories

As I set out to write about the work of Yan Giguère, I regretted not being a poet or a novelist. His photographic installations, composed of hundreds of images, stir us like a celebration of everyday life. They have the capacity to trigger an immediate dialogue with the spectator. But to sustain this conversation, and to match the beauty of what he offers, one would need to be, it seems to me, a poet: to have command of a literary form that would allow one to capture on paper the sensorial impressions these scenes provoke in those who observe them. Poetry would surely be the perfect medium in which to transcribe the deep-lying memories conjured by the multitude of images Giguère creates. And there would be as many narratives as works – as many stories as there are gazes cast upon installations rooted in an intimacy that is not ours, but that we seek naturally to understand.

Yan Giguère's compositions exert a fascination that arises from the nature of photography, the same fascination associated with the family album, which brings together, on film, instants of domestic life. The photographic album is the embodiment of a connection to the past that instantly invokes the faculty of memory. But while operating according to the same logic, the situations and anecdotes that Giguère's images reflect remain hidden, owing to the absence of the author. Although his myriad shots fill the public space of gallery walls, the private stories elude us. In her book *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*, Martha Langford explains how the photo album serves as an *aide-mémoire* in recounting past events and how, ultimately, it can be seen as part of the oral tradition.¹ “[The album] ‘engenders a text’ that is not a text but a conversation.”² Giguère's work launches the same dialogue, but indirectly. Certain images, on the brink of disclosure, seem pregnant with stories we long to recall.

¹ Focusing on the collection of photographic albums belonging to the McCord Museum, which date from 1860 to 1960, art historian Martha Langford traces the structure and content of the albums through to the mnemonic formations of orality. Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversation: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).

² Martha Langford, partially quoting Anne-Marie Garrat in “Introduction: Show and Tell,” *ibid.*, p. 20.

Made up of hundreds of photographs, Yan Giguère's installations extend broadly across gallery walls. The huge number of images displayed explains in part why the three major projects he had completed by 2013 took a total of ten years to execute.³ His practice operates invariably within an extended timeframe. The compilation of *Choisir*, exhibited for the first time in 2007, was accomplished between 2003 and 2007, *Attractions* was executed between 2007 and 2009, and *Visites libres* between 2009 and 2013. These series are composed respectively of 174, 102 and 260 photographs. This extraordinary mass of images evidently took some time to assemble, particularly since Giguère – who does not (with rare exceptions) use found images or archival documents⁴ – shot them all himself. As he goes about his daily business, he is constantly taking pictures of the scenes that compose his life and surroundings. These photographs have something of the randomness of the snapshot, offering a series of intuitively chosen moments of everyday existence. This accounts for there being so many, but we sense that they have in fact been selected from among an even larger corpus. It may seem at first as though the artist's work is governed by the spontaneous and the short-term, but this not the case: between the moment a scene is recorded and its presentation in one of his mosaic-like gallery installations, the artist follows the steps of a systematic and rigorous process.

On the technical level, Yan Giguère generally opts for the medium of analog photography, used less and less frequently in this digital age. It is a choice that signals a certain resistance on the artist's part, as well as heightening the atmosphere of nostalgia emanating from his compositions. He also collects and uses cameras from different periods.⁵ The visual quality consequently varies from one image to the next, complicating interpretation; some of the portraits are blurred and vague, others overexposed. The result is not only aesthetic diversity, but also confusion about when the shot was taken, a kind of superimposition of different periods (depending on which camera has been employed) – an uncertainty that is exacerbated by the frequent use of black and white. The short-

³ The artist's other projects include *Bienvenue* (2002), *Chavirer* (2001), *La tentation de la transparence* (2000), *Travail en cours* (1999), *Ici et là* (1997) and *Horizons* (1994-1999)

⁴ The *Visites libres* series, for example, includes original prints of old family photos.

⁵ Giguère has posted images of a number of these cameras on his website, alongside photographs shot with them. The presentation of these instruments, for the most part discontinued, points to the imminent demise of the analog process. Artist's website, accessed May 2016: <http://www.yangiguere.com/>.

term and the long-term cohabit in Yan Giguère's practice. The numerous snapshot-like, random-seeming images are actually the result of painstaking and lengthy procedures: development in the darkroom, selection, and finally assemblage in the studio. Relying on a strategy of accumulation, the artist creates a photographic ensemble that is displayed on the wall according to a variety of visual and thematic motifs, drawing the gaze towards an infinity of possibilities.

Choisir, 2007

This series of 174 images focuses on the woman in Yan Giguère's life, herself an artist.⁶ In a compilation of photographs taken over a fifteen-year period, the protagonist is shown pursuing the day-to-day life she shares with the man behind the camera, who occasionally quits his usual spot to stand for a moment beside her. The various scenes that compose the project offer flashes of an everyday existence apparently divided between creative work in the studio and ordinary domestic life. Clearly, though, the common denominator that links the different subjects represented – trees, interiors, religious symbols – is the artist's wife: transcending the traditional portrait, she reappears again and again throughout the series, in a tribute at once discreet but deeply appreciative.

Attractions, 2009

The installation of the *Attractions* series follows a roughly horizontal path whose elements, hung quite sparsely at the start, increase in number and density towards the end. Shifting thus from the simple to the complex, the disposition of the photographs is also marked by striking contrasts between small and large formats. The central theme of this group of 102 images, executed over a two-year period, is the concept of "garden," of growth: tropism. The series also explores the relation between the human and the vegetal. Each of the plants portrayed possesses some particular healing or mind-altering property, so the idea of growth is related not only to the organic, but also to the spiritual. An

⁶ Marie-Claude Bouthillier is a well-known artist, and her extensive presence in Yan Giguère's projects results in an overlapping of public and private space, of art and life.

ascending motif recurs in a number of different images that share a common verticality. Far more abstract than the other series owing to its theme and the natural elements it portrays, *Attractions* can be seen as a kind of meditation on change and on personal aspiration.

***Visites libres*, 2013**

With its 260 photographs, *Visites libres* is certainly the most comprehensive and dense of Yan Giguère's projects. The images, selected over a period of four years, revolve around the idea of habitation – indoors and out. Its views of abandoned cabins bordering country highways and deserted houses evoke the rural, but there is a strong urban dimension too, in the shots of apartment building lobbies, backyards, factory facades and industrial buildings. There are also many faces – unknown to us, clearly well known to the artist. But anonymous or familiar, it hardly matters: their multiple and regular presence is a constant reminder of collective life and interpersonal relations. Pictures of wasp's nests, with their multiple cells, seem to echo other images conjuring family and community, social organization and disruption. A number of shots were taken during the demonstrations of spring 2012 – the “Printemps érable – when Quebec students, with strong support from the general population, formed a movement to protest increases in tuition fees. The impulse to take to the streets and inhabit the public space in order to reassert the power of collective life and combat social apathy runs through the composition of *Visites libres*. The tightly hung images form a wall that seems to almost literally bear down on us. In fact, the unusual depth of the supports on which the photographs are mounted – all made by the artist – transforms the mural into a bas-relief and the images themselves into objects. They form a common front. The tour that *Visites libres* invites us to take is unguided and directionless, non-linear and non-episodic. Like *Choisir* and *Attractions*, it has no narrative thread. It encourages, rather, complete freedom of movement.

The constellation-like display on a wall of images of varying dimensions is the product of meticulous and methodical work accomplished in the studio. The juxtaposition of a face

concealed behind a piece of gridded canvas and the alveoli of a wasps' nest (*Visites libres*), for example, or of a hand holding a partly-eaten apple and pictures featuring circular motifs (*Attractions*) is determined by both visual/aesthetic and conceptual connections. But the arrangements are also the fruit of other associations – real, virtual, sometimes secret. The receiver does not possess the true keys to the reading of these murals, so translation of the works is impossible. Although the titles shed some light, the explosive installation approach employed by Giguère does not *explain* the images in any way; yet it is at the very heart of his work, integral to its vast richness. It allows those who perceive it to project, freely and subjectively. The aesthetic experience is accompanied, however, by a curiosity that necessarily remains unsatisfied, given the lack of any information that would permit the viewer to contextualize the images as a whole. Nathalie de Blois has described “a somewhere-else, a space of freedom that is in the realm of subjective experience; a poetic space we can penetrate and that shows what could happen to any one of us.”⁷ For her part, Valérie Litalien speaks of “the photographic archipelago as a kind of solitude,”⁸ confirming on the one hand the works’ nostalgic power and, on the other, our own isolation as we confront their massed images.

Our Albums

The organizational and mnemonic principle behind Giguère’s work is the photographic album. Clearly, there is no physical “album,” but the concept is there. His installations are conceptual and expositional reconstructions of the kind of personal albums that survive the passage of time.

Non-linear and non-narrative, the mosaics have no beginning and no end. Time is deployed cumulatively, with multiple diverse temporal fragments appearing simultaneously on the gallery walls. “Here,” as Julie Gagné has observed, “time operates

⁷ Nathalie de Blois, “Allez-y, entrez ! Mais entrez donc !,” introduction to the exhibition *Bienvenue*, presented at the Galerie B-312 in Montreal, in 2002.

⁸ Valérie Litalien “Le monde-fleuve, théâtre et courtepointe” introduction to the exhibition *Visites libres*, presented at the Centre Vu in Quebec City, in 2013.

like thought, it bursts forth regardless of chronology or linearity.”⁹ The organizational framework encompassing Yan Giguère’s images echoes the way recollections appear in our memories – out of time and out of context, often springing to mind and accumulating irrespective of the chronology of the events that were their original source.

The link between photography and memory has long been recognized. As Martha Langford tells us, the Kodak company began comparing the snapshot to memory and the camera to the storyteller in the early twentieth century, and the connection was confirmed in slogans like the one used to advertise the Ansco Vest-Pocket Camera: “Keep the Doors of Memory Open with an Ansco.”¹⁰ Langford notes that the appearance of this new form of visual record-making was met – as writing had been – with claims that it represented a threat to memory and a potential cause of mental degeneration. But this idea has never been borne out, for mechanical methods of reproduction cannot substitute for the workings of the human mind.¹¹

In fact, according to Langford the reverse is true. She sees the emergence of photography and its corollary, the family album, as a stimulus to memory – an *aide-mémoire*. The ideal circumstance in which to view an album is in the company of someone who can tell us about it. Because of its personal nature it is intended for a restricted circle, usually close intimates. This, as the author points out, licenses singular arrangements of situational images, which, if we are to understand them, require explanations that are often enhanced by anecdotes. This is one reason why the interpretation of an album can be considered part of the oral tradition and an aid to memory. But Yan Giguère’s absence – the fact that he is not there to tell us the stories and explain the circumstances surrounding the images – means that this conversation can never take place. He hides the stories that lie behind the photographs. Furthermore, the public presentation of an inherently private object creates a fatal break in the connection to the past. But Giguère counters this rupture by making his private “albums” the subject of his oeuvre, an art

⁹ Julie Gagné, “Visites libres,” *CV Photo*, no. 97 (winter 2013).

¹⁰ Langford, p. 4.

¹¹ Ibid.

practice conceived and executed for the public space. In other words, the suspension of the conversation concerning the original narrative is an integral part of his process, and the rupture forces the receiver to fill the biographical narrative void. So the focus becomes not so much what we are shown but how we see ourselves in relation to it, how we project into it. If there is no author to accompany us, what are we left with besides our own stories? And as they are recalled to our minds, they enter into a dialogue with the stories that confront them.

Martha Langford has noted the natural tendency we have to turn prosaic pictures into poetry. On reflection, this propensity is perhaps a need – the need to dream and to listen to stories. Albums emblemize the stories of people’s lives, she writes, giving “voice to the intensity of human experience.”¹² It is in this same space, it seems to me, that Yan Giguère operates. Only his stories are not told. They remain private and mysterious. But they are transcended by the quality of the images that compose his murals and of the subjects he represents, captured permanently on film. His images whisper stories about life – stories of love, of change and elevation, of communion and community. They are full of hope and beauty. And they remind us, to borrow Langford’s expression, of the importance of “remembering to tell.”¹³

Marie-Claude Landry, Curator of Contemporary Art

¹² Ibid., p. 21.

¹³ Ibid., p. 198.