

Fake for real

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It does not seem very daring to describe Marina Gadonneix's pictures as being depopulated. The emptiness of the places she presents, one after another, demonstrates – if not a preliminary rule characterizing the whole series, a constant which is merely foiled by rare, always ethereal apparitions. Here, a mannequin bending dangerously while levitating on his windsurf board; there, five or six half-naked bodies lying under an artificial light; somewhere else, the back of a female figure standing in front of a porthole-shaped halo; still elsewhere, a few groups seemingly made of the ambiguous fabric of dreams, tidily arranged in a row, miniatures dispersed or wavering indolently like the non-dead momentarily feasting in the hotel in Kubrick's *Shining*. On the whole, nothing that would disturb the general arrangement or not follow its order; no one inhabits these places.

However there is no hostility whatsoever in these spaces dedicated to hospitality. Why then is there a void so obvious that each element constituting the images seems selected only to accentuate it better? Is it, to borrow Benjamin's famous analysis of Atget's inventory of Parisian streets, the continuation of the detective role of photography? Remember the commentary: « It has been rightly said that he had photographed these streets like one photographs a crime scene. The crime scene, too, is deserted. It is photographed for the purpose of gathering evidence. In Atget's work, photographs start becoming evidence for the trial of History. It is there that lies their secret political significance. They already call upon a determined examination. They are no longer subject to detached contemplation. They worry the person who looks at them; in order to understand them, the spectator guesses that he must search for an entry point.» What is it that Benjamin points out in Atget's photographs? The conflict between two different genres: the landscape (including its urban version) on the one hand, conventionally intended for mere "contemplation"; genre pictures, on the other hand, in which a narrative requires that the plot animating it be deciphered, and demands the « determined » movement of the eye, relating one gesture to another in order to organize their common intelligibility. The conflict between these two genres is invisible or « secret », since the traditional markers of the narrative, the characters and their actions, have given way to an empty set, having become the print of their disappearance, of their execution. Not only has the possibility of the supposedly descriptive innocence of the landscape disappeared, but a peaceful view has become proof of its opposite, the framework for another genre, a scene in

which all the actors, dead victims and vanished guilty, have faded out of the scene. In other words, the « landscape » is the corpse abandoned by a genre picture, left in the suspense of its unsolved enigma.

In addition, if a large part of the landscape tradition has consisted in designating the ideal place to live, if the landscape – prosaically descending from the garden of Eden – has always traced the concrete outline of a promise, one will have understood that its reaching the ranks of « evidence » of its *own* assassination testifies to the beginning of an era of the uninhabitable, a time of generalized expropriation. A survey of the places no longer reveals the space favorable to possibilities, but multiplies the settings of a single impossibility. In such conditions, photography no longer benefits from a descriptive unity, nor from a temporal homogeneity: it is torn by the irony of a confused script.

It is that sort of irony that Marina Gadonneix's pictures reiterate. Again, are brought back to life Christmas trees, rigid horses on all fours, standing bears picking fruit, sea animals caught in the middle of their nautical movements, rocky reefs, sand beaches, snow, the sea and its depths, the blue sky and the delicate fluff of the clouds. The landscape reappears at the surface. Indeed, an artificial resurrection, *through the looking glass*, since all this debauchery of nature and innocence is merely a sign here, an illusion of depth, a metonymic landscape in dotted lines. In addition, photography no longer captures the movement of life, it merely duplicates a stillness that very much preceded it. Frozen for an apparently short-lived eternity, justifying *a contrario* the taste for panoramas of mountains covered by snowy, pure whiteness, the landscape, from site has become a time indicator: revealing a time that has stopped. « The trial of History » claimed by Benjamin is over, and its verdict has been rendered: there is no more History. And one understands easily the logic that takes Marina Gadonneix from saunas, leisure centers, waiting rooms, urban transit zones (all these purgatories that Marc Augé calls non-places), to television studios. Time is also dedicated to inaction there, time out of the disappearance of the possibility of action.

Photography's fascination for stillness (that is, for the paralyzing effect of *fascination* itself) is far from new. From the tradition of architecture and sculpture photography, to the original work and certain famous contemporary examples, certain critics, rightly ignoring dimensional distinctions, have inferred a relation between the goals of sculpture and that of photography: a similar monumental necessity (space stricken down by the time of History through the heavy bias of celebration) would animate them – even in failure, if one recalls Man Ray's famous photograph of Duchamp's *Fountain* in Stieglitz's review¹. Obviously, Marina Gadonneix's

¹ Thierry de Duve has written essential pages on this subject in *Résonances du ready-made*.

photographs also play constantly on the shift between the deliberate flatness of the picture (their stressed geometrical construction allows a calm symmetry, the recurrent echo of an image inside another image, including the places where they are produced, with the series on television studios) and the three-dimensionality of the sets. But what they emphasize is clearly something else. For they find no dignity in the nobility present or most generously lent to the objects they reproduce. Neither an art manufactory, nor the expression of a popular or historical genius, this strength belongs to the opposite side: on the side of the fake – and of the poorest kind, belonging to no one, but imposed on everyone, proclaimed as such. Here too, there is a precedent. We know from Diane Arbus' correspondence how excited she was about going to photograph Disneyland's outdoor artificial sets. Without any intermediary, without any obstacle, the image met the image. Multiplied, separated from a randomly documentary function, the power of the image would take place without referent, or rival – producing, absolutely, its own archive. But in her snapshots, an unnatural mist and a gothic atmosphere still floated, offering to the cardboard constructions a probability of existing. No trace of that here. The dream turns out to be dry, and the self-breeding of the image is turned sterile. As proof, the rare visitors shown from the back, lying dead or living dead. What is left then? Nothing, perhaps. The violence of obviousness, if, as Edmond Jabès has suggested, the latter consists, in its own heart, in underlining the void. This means placing Marina Gadonneix at Lynne Cohen's side, for instance, among those who renew melancholy and invent unprecedented variations around the ancient *vanitas* motif. This would be fair, however it would mean ignoring that which characterizes, with a real emphasis, the last series on television studios. What is that? Color. The crime is transported somewhere else, as Barnett Newman suspected in his famous question: *Who's afraid of red, blue and yellow?* Indeed, the colors, gathered and multiplied in the test patterns populating the deserted sets, or spread out on large monochromes, are glorified. And the photographs invent a museum for them. A close-up on a test pattern recalls a Morris Louis, a red staircase a constructivist painting, etc.

What is the hypothesis behind these “commissioned landscapes”? No longer a call for the insurrection of analysis affirmed by Benjamin, nor the sad denunciation of a daily life alienated and prisoner of its own recurrent funerals. Neither the cynicism of an image played in a loop, having become the only horizon of the image itself. On the contrary, what is celebrated here is the decomposition of the image itself, its disintegration into simple elements: the explosion of colorful sparks. There is definitely no melancholy here, or else like a mask for a profane joy: there is no more landscape, no more paradise – space is left free, like above bunk beds with no bedding, for light, for it to diffuse and diffract. For an instant,

the fake is colored in real, and the real becomes an image that offers it to us like a chance, its
« entry point ».

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