

## ‘L’absolu rugissement débraillé d’une absence insensée de la métaphore’: poetry, photography, eroticism

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Denis Roche’s texts on the painter and photographer Henri Maccheroni explore a paradoxical limit. In well-known essays, Roche had described photography as an art of the senseless, a conquest of the ‘nothing-to-say’. It had drawn the attention away from products (images) to manifest an *act* (framing, shooting, snapping). The object now was repetition, time, circumstances and the pure materiality, *l’entière matérialité* that was made present by *l’acte photographique*, not situations and their meanings:

Au ‘ça a été’ qui troublait si peu, au fond, Barthes, se substituerait plus pleinement le ‘rien à dire’, même au plus fort de la captation d’une expression, d’un sourire, d’une forme, d’une lumière.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, on Maccheroni’s photographs he had much to say. They even seemed to elicit from him some particularly flamboyant writing (as they did to many other writers).

Roche was the most gifted poet of the *Tel Quel* generation and enjoyed a considerable reputation among significant writers such as Bernard Noël, Christian Prigent, Jean-Marie Gleize and Emmanuel Hocquard. In the 60s he published texts which

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<sup>1</sup> Denis Roche, *La Disparition des Lucioles (Réflexions sur l’acte photographique)* (Paris: Éditions de l’Étoile, 1982), p. 138. See also in ch. 5 (‘Entrée des machines. Littérature et photographie’), the section ‘Mise en rafales’ p. 54 sq. Roche defined the art of photography as the organisation of the encounter of Time and Beauty (‘Conversations avec la lumière’, *Les Cahiers de la Photographie*, 15, 1985, p. 138.).

seemed to reject more forcefully than any other the metaphysical approach that had dominated poetry in the preceding decade. Le Seuil published *Forestière amazonide* and *Éros énerguène* respectively in 1962 and 1968 and in 1972 he declared poetry inadmissible (*Le Mécrif*)<sup>2</sup>, abandoned it and became a photographer, just as Rimbaud had, almost a century earlier, and soon an important theoretician of photography. The transition had in fact started in some of Roche's later poetic texts, cut-ups from the textual residues of someone's existence, portraits in the form of *antéfixes* composed via strict framing procedures which he declared in retrospect similar to the photographic act:

La méthode mise au point était simple: répéter à l'infini, en étant libre de m'arrêter à n'importe quel moment, une même longueur de texte – non pas un *même texte*, mais un même nombre de signes, une même longueur d'écriture déjà faite. De même, je m'en rends compte maintenant, qu'un appareil photographique ne crée pas une situation ou un geste ou un objet donnés, mais, les 'cadrant', il les oblige, comme lors d'une répétition, à exister à nouveau [...].<sup>3</sup>

His own photographs often staged this act of photographing which was at the centre of his critical writing, through a number of original techniques: framing a scene so as to include reflections of the photographer in windows or mirrors, inserting another camera within the frame (sometimes shooting the scene through the viewfinder of a camera within the frame), capturing the photographer on his way back towards the centre of the frame when using a timer, or joining within the same frame two different images, in a relation of formal and/or temporal continuity.<sup>4</sup>

However, there are many ways of manifesting senselessness and Maccheroni's photos produced a different experience. Roche described their powerful way of presenting 'material entirety' as 'l'absolu rugissement débrillé d'une absence insensée

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<sup>2</sup> Paris: Seuil/Tel Quel, 1972. Reprinted in *La Poésie est inadmissible. Œuvres poétiques complètes*, Paris: Le Seuil, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 54. See also *Dépôts de savoir & de technique* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), p. 107. Jean Arrouye called it a 'poétique procrustéenne' ('Écholalies', *Les Cahiers de la photographie*, 23, 1989, p.49).

<sup>4</sup> See Denis Roche, *Ellipse et Laps*, Paris: Maeght Éditeur, 1991 and Gilles Mora, *Denis Roche. Les Preuves du temps*, Paris: Seuil & Maison Européenne de la Photographie, 2001. These two books contain good selections of Roche's photographic work.

de la métaphore'.<sup>5</sup> Such images, he also wrote, belong to the rarefied category of those which attract words like magnetized filings, which generate *urchins of words*:

D'autres images sont [...] comme des limailles aimantées: elles vous jettent dans des oursins de paroles, elles vous transforment en flux d'événements crépitants, elles font de vous des mangeurs de constellations et d'hémorragie, vous vous sentez pris dans des mosaïques en ébullition, des coulées et des mascarets inattendus, vous êtes livrés aux ventouses et aux galops de poils, aux grappes sans gêne, aux glycines fades et aux lumières malvenues.<sup>6</sup>

Is the nothing-to-say essential to photography compatible with the verbal proliferation thus described and exemplified? Had Roche been forced to return to an earlier, vehement, possessed or energuminal poetic voice?

It is worth pausing a moment on the roar of non-metaphoricity. Here is an obvious tension between rhetorics and semantics: a metaphor (*absolu rugissement débraillé*) describes as that which cannot receive meaning via metaphors, a series of images, taken among 2000 photographs (Figs. 1 and 2 give examples<sup>7</sup>).

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<sup>5</sup> 'The absolute dishevelled [slipshod/unkempt] roar of an insane absence of metaphor' in 'Les Grands Rugissants', *Obliques 'Maccheroni'- 2000 - photographies du sexe d'une femme* (Nyons: Éditions Borderie, Le Magasin Universel, 2000), pp. 120-23. This text was reprinted in *La Disparition des Lucioles* under a modified title 'Les quarantièmes rugissants', the 'roaring forties' - whirlwinds that develop over vast oceanic expanses below the 40<sup>th</sup> parallel south.

<sup>6</sup> 'Certain images are like magnetized filings: they throw you onto urchins of words, they turn you into crackling flows and overflows, they transform you into devourers of constellations and haemorrhages, you feel seized in boiling mosaics, carried by unexpected slides and tides, rendered to furry suckers and gallops, emboldened vine clusters, bland wisterias and unwelcome lights.' Denis Roche, *Le Boîtier de mélancolie* (Paris: Éditions Hazan, 1999), p.186. In an interview on *La Poésie est inadmissible*, Roche described his early poetic manner in similar terms: 'le flot des mots, leur pluie continue s'opacifiaient lentement'. 'Denis Roche au complet', entretien avec Jacques Henric et Jean-Pierre Salgas, *Artpress*, 198, January 1995. Reprinted in *Les Grands entretiens d'Artpress - Denis Roche* (Paris: Imec éditeur, 2014), p. 86.

<sup>7</sup> Fig. 1, *Oblique, op. cit.* p.121; Fig. 2, original print in Jean Khalfa & Henri Maccheroni, *L'Intime* (Nice: La Diane Française, 2012). All images copyright Henri Maccheroni.

Denis ROCHE

# Les Grands Rugissants



Il n'y a rien.

Qu'un sexe. Qu'une seule photo du sexe d'une femme.

Donc : qu'un rien seul sexe.

L'absolu rugissement débraillé d'une absence insensée de la métaphore. (Le rugissement serait l'éclat abouti, l'autre bout, bruyant, de la rougeur initiale, par quoi on suppose encore que tout a commencé. Rougissement qui entraînera, rudoïement oblige, le rugissement auquel tout éventuel coït en appelle. Entre les deux actions, en bout de tronc donc, comme en un front qui en mène large, n'est-ce pas, il y a comme un hoquet, un gap de sens, un témoin blanc, un laconisme, un état parfait d'action, qui n'est rien d'autre que l'exposant accolé du rugissement de l'issue, c'est-à-dire le rugissant, une idée inouïe de déplacement tourbillonnant, de folie d'air, de trombe en voyage : le grand rugissant.)

C'est lui l'explication des textes qui entretient l'air mort.

Je pourrais trouver un moyen de renvoyer ici à la digression sur le "pitre des bouches" à quoi nous aurions affaire dans l'effort de percée du sens, dès que se pose la question d'écrire — C'est-à-dire comme ici. Où justement se pose la question, en commençant d'écrire, qu'il n'y a pas de sens.

Qu'il n'y a pas de sens.

Il n'y a rien.



121

Fig.1

This metaphor is coherent in its attempt to convey an experience of the meaninglessness of what is non-metaphorical: serious roaring is likely to cause dishevelment, but it is excessive, composing aural and visual extremes on a sublime or oceanic

scale, as indicated by the title of the text ('Les grands rugissants') and does not give any understanding of this absence, which was to be expected since this is the experience of an absence of conceptuality. But the syntactic uncertainty created by the unusual framing of a substantive (*rugissement*) by two adjectives susceptible to be perceived, each in turn, as substantives (*l'absolu, le débraillé*), clarifies things a little. The roar can be read as absolutely 'dishevelled', out of place, but it might also be that this series of photographs manifests so unexpectedly the absolute that it is experienced as a roar:

L'absolu  
Rugissement débraillé d'une absence insensée de la métaphore

The issue with metaphors is not that the abstract is dependent on the figurative, as is usually stressed, as if this origin made it obviously reducible to the figure, or that metaphors only add rhetorical emphasis, but that the production of metaphors constructs a material figure solely in view of some inchoate meaning, reducing materiality to the stuff thought needs in its process of abstraction. This relativity to pre-existing meaning is understandably anathema to an immanentist conception of poetic writing and of art. These images would thus positively block the figurative process at its inception. *In-sensé* or un-sieved through metaphor, the absolute roars in these images, conceptually mute, dishevelled again at last.

Another possible cleavage, where the substantive would be 'débraillé', the unruly, the slipshod, the unkempt, reinforces such a reading:

L'absolu rugissement  
Débraillé d'une absence insensée de la métaphore

The mess of a world suddenly un-tamed by metaphors is as shocking as a wild roar. Also, as often in Roche, there is a material generativity of the text as it goes: 'insensée' echoes 'absence' (*absensinsensée*). In itself an absence of metaphor could only be called insane in a metaphorical way, but experienced meaninglessness might lead to moments of insanity in a mind engaged in non-metaphoricity (some of the experiments of Artaud and Michaux might give an idea of what that would be).



Fig.2

Such complexities of *écriture* in the sense of *Tel Quel* (following the group's reading of Mallarmé) are evident throughout Roche's essay. They produce an open text, one that cannot be reduced or mapped to an interpretation, but rather constantly encourages the act of playing with the materiality of the text, the process of exploring a field of virtualities of meaning. But how is it that the stated plenitude of these photographs would lead to a textual production one had abandoned so spectacularly as an inadmissible game? Roche has often defended and illustrated the paradoxical

use of poetry as an anti-poetic device,<sup>8</sup> so it would be futile to want to solve this paradox. But a clarification is given in a separate text on one of these images, which Roche might have entitled *Ceci n'est pas une métaphore* (Fig. 3):



the irrepressible flux of words such an image provokes in effect prevents all attempt towards the rhetorical closure of meaningfulness, for instance all talk of myth and medusa: 'Never has such a direct image been seen to contain to this degree, to be so fully its own metaphor: the eye, its eyelid soft and heavy, of a hostile crocodile.'

L'effet agglutinant de pareilles images, s'il permet une montée irrépressible des mots, s'il provoque au vocabulaire, s'il met de la fièvre dans les esprits et les rend nerveux sans solution, empêche un quelconque professorat de l'ordre et de la construction de se mettre en train. Le rhéteur - l'amateur d'éloquence - qui croyait s'en tirer, devant ce sexe de femme pour une fois immortel, par quelque allusion au visage de Méduse et au clin d'œil de saurien roublard qu'elle lui lance ici, se fait tout petit devant l'épreuve, il ramasse ses papiers et reballe ses affaires, il ne peut que redescendre l'escalier et se perdre au dehors.

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<sup>8</sup> See in particular the preamble to his *Dialogues du paradoxe et de la barre à mine*, first pub. in *Théorie d'ensemble*, Tel Quel/Seuil, 1968. Repr. in *La Poésie est inadmissible*, *op. cit.*, pp. 432-38.

Jamais on n'a vu une image aussi directe—la fente d'une femme, flanquée de ses deux nymphes et serrée de près par toute une bande de poils—contenir à ce point et être tout entière sa propre métaphore: l'œil à la paupière lourdement molle d'un crocodile hostile.<sup>9</sup>

A fascinating eye is shown to refuse to see or be seen beyond its deeply textured surface. As a metaphor of itself this image indicates what 'admissible' writing could be: a material figuration that refers to itself only, refusing all transcendence to its surface.

This image belongs to a series of 2000 erotic photographs of which the painter Henri Maccheroni published a selection in 1972, in a *livre d'artiste*, with poems by Pierre Bourgeade.<sup>10</sup> This is a *series*, a notion essential in contemporary art, a *photographie interminable*, to use another of Roche's aphorisms, not just because of the sheer size of this immense series of images or profiles of the very same object (*le sexe d'une femme*), but also because it has generated other series of images (complex interpretations of these variations, using several photographic and pictorial techniques), all of which in turn elicited a considerable amount of books, by poets, such as Pierre Bourgeade, Michel Butor, Jean-Marie Gleize, Bernard Noël, Denis Roche, Bernard Vargaftig, among others, and a number of philosophers and art critics such as Dominique Baqué, Béatrice Bonhomme, Arthur Danto, Jean-Pierre Faye, Gilbert Lascault, Jean-François Lyotard, Raphael Monticelli, Jean Petitot, Pierre Restany, Michel Surya and Tessa Tristan.<sup>11</sup> Why is it that this particular work appeared as a fascinating revelation to so many at a time when the society of spectacle was turning

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<sup>9</sup> *Le Boîtier de mélancolie*, *op. cit.*, p. 186. This book is a personal history of photography in 100 photographs. The allusion to the myth of Medusa is self-ironical. Roche expanded at length on it in *La Disparition des lucioles*, in 'Le regard d'Orphée', a text he placed just before 'Les quarantièmes rugissants' (p. 141).

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourgeade, Henri Maccheroni, *A, Noir corset velu*, Paris : Les Mains libres, 1972. This title was inspired by the first line of Rimbaud's *Sonnet des voyelles*.

<sup>11</sup> For a review of the artists' books published by Maccheroni with a variety of writers, see Tessa Tristan, *Dioptriques dans l'œuvre d'Henri Maccheroni* (Rouen: Éditions Daniel Duchoz & Ipsa Facta, 2002), and 'from Series to Book...' in Jean Khalifa (ed.), *Maccheroni Books/Works* (Cambridge: Black Apollo Press, 2007), pp. 48-69. His books with Faye and Lyotard are probably the most significant as reflections on the relationships of the pictorial to the poetic.



the representation of its theme into a banality? Let us first look at the historical context of its production before considering some of its formal features.

A few markers of the context are necessary. The late 60s in France saw a rebirth of Dadaism: the bookseller and publisher Jean Petithory, a friend of Breton and Maeght, published the photographic experiments of the Dadaist Raoul Hausmann, as well as Man Ray's *Mannequins*.<sup>12</sup> Jean-François Bory wrote his *Prolégomènes à une monographie de Raoul Hausmann* (Paris: l'Herne, 1972), Henri Chopin created the journal *Ou?*<sup>13</sup>, a creative space for voice poetry, Bory, Bourgeade and Petithory published *l'Humidité* where among several avant-gardes (in particular the Lettrists) the first theoreticians of body art in France, Michel Journiac and Gina Pane published texts and images of their work.<sup>14</sup> In one of his first manifestos of 'art corporel' Journiac wrote:

Le Corps est l'origine première, l'interrogation que l'on ne peut éliminer. L'entreprise dite créatrice renvoie fondamentalement, politiquement et matériellement, à son propre corps ou au corps de l'autre saisi comme un absolu qui accepte ou rejette, attire ou repousse, il n'y a pas de corps indifférent; et s'il faut parodier le *Discours de la méthode* le *Cogito* du corps est l'origine et le moyen par lequel se peut mener l'enquête nommée création, s'exercer un incertain travail.<sup>15</sup>

All these writers and artists shared an interest for the body and the infinity of forms it can be the source of, while refusing all representation of object or meaning. Of his method of shadow-writing ('mélano-graphie'), directly producing shapes on the photographic plate, Hausmann wrote:

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<sup>12</sup> Man Ray, *Résurrection des mannequins* (Paris: Éditions Jean Petithory, 1966). Raoul Hausmann, *Mélanographie* (Paris: Éditions SIC-Jean Petithory, 1968).

<sup>13</sup> *Revue Ou?*, partial reprint by Alga Marghen, Milan: 2002, with recordings by Heidsieck, Gysin, Chopin and Hausmann, among others.

<sup>14</sup> *l'Humidité*, full reprint, Al Dante: Marseille, 2012. On *Ou?* and *l'Humidité*, see Gaëlle Théval, 'Ou – Cinquième Saison & l'Humidité' in Jean Khalfa (ed.) *Hands Free / Les Mains Libres - From Dada to Lettrism and Body Art* (Cambridge: Black Apollo Press, 2013), pp. 26-43. *l'Humidité* also published works by a number of Lettrists such as Lemaître and Spacagna. See Frédéric Acquaviva's article on 'Jean Petithory and the Lettrist Book', *ibid.* p. 44-56, and his remarkable *Lemaître, une vie lettriste* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> 'L'objet du corps et le corps de l'objet', *l'Humidité*, no 14-15, June 1973, repr. in Michel Journiac, *Écrits* (Paris: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 2013), pp. 112-17.

Si je remue l'ampoule électrique, les OMBRES ne parlent plus de la signification, elles rendent l'image d'une chose qui ne reste plus chose, qui évoque autre chose que la chose.<sup>16</sup>

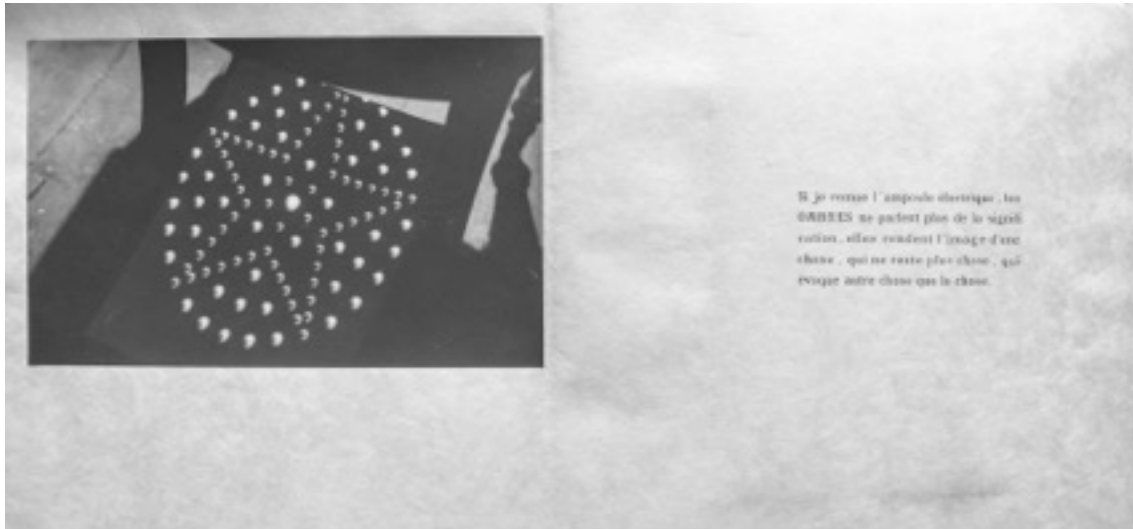


Fig. 4

So these images did not appear in isolation but found their meaning and audience in the particular intellectual context of the mutation of late Dadaism (and surrealism) into body art, of a reaction against the metaphysical conception of writing which had dominated the poetry of the 50s in favour of a renewed interest in the mechanics of language and writing in their materiality (sound and glyph). This context was also what the situationists termed *société du spectacle*, which triumphed for Baudrillard in pornography. Through his work on the image of the body Maccheroni aimed to attack the invasion of commerce in the sphere of the intimate, a sphere that art needed to re-conquer for the individual. Reflecting on this history, he wrote in 2008 a text which echoes Journiac:

Dès leur origine, mes photographies furent une réponse à la déferlante pornographique qui [...] entachait l'intime beauté de la femme. Elles exaltent de la féminité sa puissance de révélation. En ces temps de régression rampante, elles s'opposent au Puritanisme qui, lancinant, s'insinue dans notre société, portant

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<sup>16</sup> Raoul Hausmann, *Mélanographie* (n.p.).

atteinte à la ‘pensée créatrice’ dont l’Eros est une des composantes essentielles...<sup>17</sup>

There are interesting links here. We will see that the relationship of pornography and puritanism could be confirmed by Giorgio Agamben’s analysis of pornography as a ‘secularisation’ in the theological sense of an extension of the domain of the sacred to spheres immune to it so far, as opposed to a profanation which would be an extension of the domain of usage over that of the sacred, the forbidden. The link between ‘creative thought’ and body/desire is of course inherited from the surrealists but also echoes Deleuze and Guattari’s constructivist conception of desire as creation rather than lack. Eros is essential to creativity because it is the construction, in the closest, the most immediate of material realities, the body (but not the face, except through the deformation of masks as in the works of Hausmann or Janco) of archetypes or virtually meaningful shapes:

Fixation obligée des phantasmes,  
le sexe de la femme en sa géographie vivante,  
est le signe des signes.  
Le hiéroglyphe des hiéroglyphes.  
L’expression première des alphabets...<sup>18</sup>

For who knows how to see it as a virtual infinity of singular forms, for instance by producing thousands of them, this sign can become a matrix of sign. The act of the creation of signs must be thought again in its original link to the body and only secondly in its terminus, abstraction.

This semiotic interest was later on reflected upon through meta-artistic experimentations, several series of ‘archéologies virtuelles’, abstract syntaxes of fundamental forms combined with different materials to generate works of which the perception nevertheless constantly renewed the presence of the viewer to the visible as such. In 1986, Jean-François Lyotard wrote a remarkable text on this in *La Partie de peinture*, a reflexion on a meta-work, a series of 21 paintings (or silkscreen prints when in book form) each instantiating a possible combination of three simple

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<sup>17</sup> Henri Maccheroni, *La Légende du sexe féminin* (Strasbourg: Ponte Vecchio Éditions, 2008), p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

forms with 7 samples of fabric reflecting contemporary reality (camouflage, jeans etc. Fig. 5 gives the matrix and Fig. 6 a proposition within the system)<sup>19</sup>.



Fig. 5

What was remarkable was that each ‘statement’ produced through this simple syntax immediately detached itself from the generative matrix to produce a different and unique experience for the spectator. For Lyotard such serialism could usefully be compared to the work of Cézanne, endlessly trying to measure up to the light reflecting on the Montagne Sainte-Victoire. The game the painter played, in the experience of finitude, against an ungraspable opponent, nature, became in ‘postmodernity’ a solitary game, no longer the representation of objects but the implementation of syntaxes in the visible (archaeologists and anthropologists had long seen things that way).

The difference of photography, as opposed to painting, is that now the movement is from singularity to sign. Desire comes first because in photography there is

<sup>19</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *La Partie de peinture, Essai de Jean-François Lyotard sur L'Archéologie du signe avec 21 sérigraphies d'Henri Maccheroni* (Cannes: Maryse Candela Éditeur, 1980). A reproduction of this artist's book was published as a supplement to issue 1 of the journal *Metafore* (Florence: La casa Usher, 1986). Lyotard's text was reprinted in *Essais sur L'Archéologie du signe d'Henri Maccheroni, textes réunis par Germain Roesz* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), pp. 57-70.

a first presence to a physical reality even if this reality is presented each time as a variation within a series, as a possible composition of the object, obsessively multiplied by very close focuses, oblique perspectives, plays between light, grain, fold and darkness, etc. In other words erotic photographs are ‘matrices de signes’, and the photographer could protest vigorously on formal grounds (not moral nor social ones) when they happened to be seen as pornographic.



Fig. 6

There are further formal features. The first is that these are photos of one model. As Arthur Danto remarked, all the paratext points to it,<sup>20</sup> but, importantly, they must be so in principle, since none of them needs to be anchored in a personhood. In pornography, the renewal of the model or actor is essential: it is a fast-rotation genre where the spectator always wants to see different actors performing the same thing, which sets it aside from mainstream film fascination, where the spectator is shown different things performed by the same actors. In these photographs there is neither actor nor performance, they indicate no beyond and just manifest the surprising infinity of the phenomenally given in itself. This also explains the choice of

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<sup>20</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *Power and Beauty (Obliques, op. cit.)*, p. 58. See also *Sexe et mort dans les vanitas d'Henri Maccheroni* (bilingual, trans. by Jean-Pierre Faye) (Crest: Éditions La Sétéree, 2001).

the object, which is essentially folds and multiplicity (Mallarmean folds, multiplied by lace, lighting and occasionally make-up). Thus this a-conceptuality or structural indeterminacy of the phenomenal, as captured by the photographic act, and the infinite series it can engender, lead us back to a poetic refusal of the transcendence of an object of representation as well as desires for its mastery.

By contrast, as Christophe Hanna writes, pornography is prose and all documentary prose is pornographic.

La pornographie moderne proposait comme une synthèse métaphorique du fonctionnement pragmatique de toutes les formes de proses. Devant un film X, on ne lit plus la fiction filmique, on n'interprète plus des figures cinématographiques (photographiques et narratives), on voit, on quête des yeux, une réalité. Le film a réussi quand il a pu devenir l'équivalent de : voici la réalité (de l'action sexuelle des stars fascinantes (de beauté et de capacité sexuelle)). Des représentations porno doivent donc émaner quelques stimuli qui nous touchent en sorte qu'on soit comme aspirés (au moins momentanément) vers une vérité matérielle, phénoménale et qui transcende la représentation, sort d'elle et la dépasse. Le lecteur/ voyeur, l'espace de l'impact pornographique, demeure lié à un régime de réception où il capte, cadrés dans des formes de fictions, certains éléments qu'il prend pour bribes de réalité pure.<sup>21</sup>

If commerce imposed the transcendence of the object to its representation or the relativity of the representation to a pure reality, in these photographs, through framing and repetition the object is nothing other than the idea of all its possible profiles, each one a moment in a manifestly open-ended series of variations. The eye never leaves the immanence of a surface and learns to perceive it as a plenitude rather than a lack. There can always be the surprise of a new image in the series. This is why Roche insisted a freedom from meaning:

Donc: qu'un rien seul sexe.

L'absolu rugissement débraillé d'une absence insensée de la métaphore.

...

Où justement se pose la question, en commençant d'écrire, qu'il n'y a pas de sens.

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<sup>21</sup> 'Entretien avec Christophe Hanna' - propos recueillis par Olivier Halévy, *Musica Falsa*, 8 August 2003. See also Christophe Hanna, *Petits poèmes en prose* (Marseille: Al Dante, 1998), p.42, and 'Denis Roche – La poésie comme révélateur' in Christophe Hanna, *Nos dispositifs poétiques* (Paris: Questions Théoriques, 2010), pp.111-27.

Qu'il n'y a pas de sens.  
Il n'y a rien<sup>22</sup>

This refusal of a beyond to the image is confirmed by a further feature: there are no faces here. Agamben remarked perceptively that the face is essential to pornography, if not its keystone: here the representation is meant to show an insolent, shameless face standing out against the mechanics of the bodies.<sup>23</sup> And what differentiates the face is the gaze, in its singularity or autonomy, in its movement and expression, a depth beyond the surface of flesh which distinguishes bodies otherwise shown as stereotypical assemblages of organs, often arranged in categories. This is why, uniquely in the history of film, the only imperative for actors or models, is to fix the camera and why faces must always be visible. For Agamben the *regard insolent* signifies a detachment of being from act, a transcendence to flesh and signifies what he calls *the ultimate impossibility of profanation*, the impossibility of a total subtraction from the domain of the sacred.<sup>24</sup> With this in mind, pornography would be a new phase of capitalism, recovered from the cultural revolts of the 60s. The fireflies of resistance have been extinguished as Pasolini famously said,<sup>25</sup> and now that the most intimate has lost its immediacy, its usage value, that the immediate's value is only in its relationship to an identity, an image, all reality is now absorbed in the system of circulation and exchange. Human beings, perpetual tourists, wander, hypnotized by a world that has been fetishized in the form of merchandise. If the fascination by a gaze, a beyond of all flesh, generalizes the sacred to the complete sphere of existence and introduces distance and representation within the intimate, its opposite, profanation would be a movement of desacralization, where what was removed is

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<sup>22</sup> 'Les Grands Rugissants', p.121. 'Qu'un rien seul sexe' might be derived from 'rien qu'un seul sexe'.

<sup>23</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), p. 89 and *Idea of Prose* (Albany, NY: Suny Press, 1995), p. 126.

<sup>24</sup> This could be linked to Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of faciality and religion in the 7<sup>th</sup> section of *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), pp. 205-34.

<sup>25</sup> 'Il vuoto del potere', *Corriere della sera*, 1 February 1975. Roche alludes to this text in a 'Lettre à Roland Barthes sur la disparition des lucioles' (*La Disparition des Lucioles*, *op. cit.*, pp. 153-56). For a history of the reception of Pasolini's article see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Survivance des Lucioles* (Paris: Minuit, 2009).

now brought back into the sphere of use and invention. The eye, closer to touch, would approach the detail to recompose it, would marvel on the irregular (which is perhaps how we should understand Breton's *merveilleux*). If the rediscovery of immanence to the world is what is at stake in this photographic work, then it is clear that there is no place for the face, at least in its frontality.

This condemnation of pornography as secularisation, universalization of the relationship to the sacred or anti-profanation machinery is not immune to criticism.<sup>26</sup> Rather than its being seen as a power exercised by the image itself, it could be understood as satisfying or exploiting the fantasy of a power exercised by the viewer, a scopophilic pulsion. It would be understood not just as a desire to see what cannot be seen, but, in the obsessional representation of a gaze prisoner of the mechanics of bodies, a desire to master the autonomy of the gaze, that is the difference of the other, whose gaze escapes the self's grip and gives it the constant feeling of being seen or at least visible. This is the attitude of the young child fearing what the adult sees of her or in her, and reacting by constantly seeking to master the adult's attention, to 'make eye contact' or 'lock' onto the gaze, but this experience of the gaze of the other as a power that the self needs to dominate could be generalized to all relations, as Sartre noted:

S'il y a un Autre, quel qu'il soit, où qu'il soit, quels que soient ses rapports avec moi sans même qu'il agisse autrement sur moi que par le pur surgissement de son être, j'ai un dehors, j'ai une nature; ma chute originelle c'est l'existence de l'autre, et la honte est - comme la fierté - l'appréhension de moi-même comme nature, encore que cette nature même m'échappe et soit inconnaissable comme telle. Ce n'est pas, à proprement parler, que je me sente perdre ma liberté pour devenir une chose, mais elle est là-bas, hors de ma liberté vécue, comme un attribut donné de cet être que je suis pour l'autre. Je saisis le regard de l'autre au sein même de mon acte, comme solidification et aliénation de mes propres possibilités.<sup>27</sup>

Lacan found here one of the principles of his analysis of the 'human object', that is the human as seen:

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<sup>26</sup> See for instance Mehdi Belhaj Kacem's 'L'esprit du nihilisme', a review of Agamben's book, *Chaoïd*, 9, Autumn 2005, <http://www.chaoïd.com/numero09/lesprit.pdf> [accessed 15/11/2014]

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 321. This text had a significant impact on Fanon's analysis of the racist desire to dominate the gaze of the other.



L'auteur fait tourner toute sa démonstration autour du phénomène fondamental qu'il appelle le regard. L'objet humain se distingue originellement, *ab initio*, dans le champ de mon expérience, il n'est assimilable à aucun autre objet perceptible, en ce qu'il est un objet qui me regarde. Sartre met là-dessus des accents extrêmement fins. Le regard dont il s'agit ne se confond absolument pas avec le fait, par exemple, que je vois ses yeux. Je peux me sentir regardé par quelqu'un dont je ne vois pas même les yeux, et même pas l'apparence. Il suffit que quelque chose me signifie qu'autrui peut être là. Cette fenêtre, s'il fait un peu obscur, et si j'ai des raisons de penser qu'il y a quelqu'un derrière, est d'ores et déjà un regard. À partir du moment où ce regard existe, je suis déjà quelque chose d'autre, en ce que je me sens moi-même devenir un objet pour le regard d'autrui. Mais dans cette position, qui est réciproque, autrui aussi sait que je suis un objet qui se sait être vu.

Toute la phénoménologie de la honte, de la pudeur, du prestige, de la peur particulière engendrée par le regard, est là admirablement décrite [...] <sup>28</sup>

So the imperative given to the actors or models to look at the camera could be explained by the spectator's desire to master a gaze, if only to verify in this gaze the rapture of ecstasy.

Both explanations could apply, the defiant gaze could reinforce the desire of scopic mastery, but in any case, it is clear that the photos that drew Roche back to writing did not belong to this commerce: they pointed neither to the transcendence of an absolute real that prose aims for, nor to that of an insolent gaze. When the possibility of a face is hinted at, it is that of a hostile animal, withdrawing its gaze under the thick folds of its skin. Here there is only the recognition of the plenitude of a being in its surface, with no *interiorité* other than that of its many folds.

These images were met with a variety of forms of writing. One could propose to group them under the categories of hauntology, ontology and the sublime. Bourgeade uses *hantologie* to refer to the surrealist inspiration: obsessional variations on the most sensitive of flesh, focuses where the object approximates the size of the film emulsion, oblique lights shining on reliefs, a nature made to look wild, even when laced with African body paint and Oceanian tattoos. Bernard Noël would be the representative of such a poetry where consciousness is haunted by the body. Another, ontological reading, sees in these images an education of the gaze, trained to look back at the world as one of original singularities. Michel Butor, Claude

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<sup>28</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire I* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), pp. 240-42.

Louis-Combet or Jean-Pierre Faye (writing on *transformat*<sup>29</sup>) would illustrate this approach. Louis-Combet summarized it well:

L'impression qui s'impose n'est pas celle des fastes d'un culte barbare oublié puis ressuscité, mais bien plutôt celle d'une réalité minérale, d'un phénomène de roches, dû à l'érosion, et qui ramène la pensée à l'infinitude des temps géologiques. [...] Les vivants mollusques, les algues ruisselantes, les bourgeonnements charnus ont dû migrer vers les zones humides du dedans, abandonnant les lieux aux stries et cannelures ornementales, gardiennes abstraites d'un sol consacré au feu et voué à la sécheresse austère des lendemains d'incendie.<sup>30</sup>

Another reaction still to these images is possible, seeing here what Jean-François Lyotard characterised as the reinvention of the sublime in contemporary avant-gardes. Is classically described as sublime whatever exceeds the capacity of the imagination to subsume the content of the sensations it produces under a concept, in other words what cannot be perceived as an object. It could not therefore be the object of an aesthetics of *mimesis*. The failure of imaginary expression could only be experienced as suffering, only compensated, for Kant, by the pleasure of feeling the demands of reason, the faculty of the infinite, rise above all imagination. But for Lyotard what characterises contemporary art, freed from the constraints of representation, is precisely the presentation of the indeterminable, of what is beyond or below concepts. In this meditative asceticism where the eye foregoes its prejudices, the sublime returns but is now relative to time rather than space. The aim now is to manifest sensations as they happen, in their origin and uncertainty as well. This focus on the event of the present moment, rather than its content, was already captured in Manet's *tout arrive*, 'everything happens',<sup>31</sup> but Lyotard took as

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<sup>29</sup> Jean-Pierre Faye, Henri Maccheroni, *Dialogue suivi de Court traité sur le transformat* (Romainville: Al Dante, 2000); *La Sorte*, suivi de *Rage donc & Les Transformants féminins: diptyque* (Bordeaux: Pleine Page Éd., 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Claude Louis-Combet, *Le Chemin des vanités d'Henri Maccheroni* (Paris: José Corti) p. 86.

<sup>31</sup> In a rare poetic text Lyotard wrote: 'Nous épions l'événement, la phrase qui s'échappe d'entre tes jambes, et les mondes qu'elle offre.' *Obliques, op.cit.*, p. 17. On Manet's important dictum and his relationship with Mallarmé, see Dominique Fourcade, *Est-ce que j'peux placer un mot?* (Paris: P.O.L. Éditeur, 2001), p. 59. A section of this text was separately published as *Tout arrive* (Paris: Michel Chandeigne, 2000).

emblematic of this shift Barnett Newman's statement 'the sublime is now'. Accordingly, what Lyotard sees in these pictures is that they never summarize a subject but rather manifest, in their seriality (and thus essential link to the form of the book), the perpetual renewal of the content of sensation as well as the concern as to whether something new could still happen. Roche and Vargaftig are probably the writers who exemplify the best such a conception. In a text entitled 'Écho amassé/désordre si vif', Bernard Vargaftig noted 'je n'ai pas cessé de manifester ma gratitude à l'artiste pour avoir rendu tellement visible que cette matière est de la pensée' and continued:<sup>32</sup>

Cette rumeur  
Qui se déchire

L'abolement  
La même image

Lointain avec  
Tant de détresse

Comme un lac  
Dans le sommeil

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<sup>32</sup> Obliques, op.cit., p. 95.