

## RÉTROFICTIONS



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INTRODUCTION & PHOTOS

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FICTIONS

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❧ *Rétrofictions* est une publication d'artiste de nature collaborative qui juxtapose six œuvres photographiques à six œuvres de fiction rédigées par six auteurs différents.

Les photographies qui constituent le point de départ de ce projet ont été trouvées dans des marchés aux puces, dans des ventes de garage ainsi que chez des antiquaires. Elles datent des années 1920 jusqu'aux années 1950. On y retrouve des individus seuls ou en petits groupes dans des environnements détendus. Les personnes qui ont pris les photographies sont inconnues ainsi que les sujets de celles-ci. En me servant de peinture blanche, j'obscurcis les figurants et cet effet d'opacité suggère la disparition éventuelle des sujets par le passage du temps. L'effacement du passé crée par contre un espace pour imaginer de nouvelles histoires.

Les six collaborateurs de *Rétrofictions* ont été invités à écrire un court texte de fiction en réponse à une œuvre photographique de leur choix. Les auteurs ont eu carte blanche en ce qui concerne le contenu, le style et la langue de leur contribution et ils étaient libres d'ignorer les titres que j'avais attribués aux œuvres.

Je suis redevable aux auteurs de *Rétrofictions* pour leur sens d'ouverture et pour avoir réanimé le passé de façon si créative et si inspirante.

❧ *Rétrofictions* is a collaborative artist publication that juxtaposes six photographic artworks alongside six works of fiction by as many authors.

The photographs that form the starting point for this project were found in flea markets, garage sales and antique stores. They date from the 1920s to the 1950s, and feature individuals or small groups of persons in casual settings. The original photographers are unknown as are the identities of their subjects. Using flecks of white paint, I obscure each figure in the snapshots; and this “whiting out” of the past suggests the eventual fading of all subjects over time. The erasure of history, however, creates a space for new stories to be imagined.

Each of the six contributors to *Rétrofictions* was invited to write a short piece of fiction in response to a photographic work of their choice. Authors had *carte blanche* with respect to the content, style and language of their contribution, and were free to ignore the titles I had previously assigned to each image.

I am indebted to the authors of *Rétrofictions* for their openness towards this project, and for animating the past in such creative and inspiring ways.

*John Latour*

## WHITE SHADOWS

I used to live on a street lined with trees. In the summer, the trees cast shadows across the sidewalks, which seemed to shimmer like an underwater world when the leaves were moved by a light wind. The taller trees with hundreds of rustling leaves sounded like a giant getting up but going nowhere.

The found black and white photograph *Young Child with Extended Hand* (2011) seems to revive this experience while filling the scene with an unknown toddler. The absence of colour in the picture clearly demarcates a large tree's silhouette, although I cannot identify the species. The child seems to be examining a shadow cast on his hand, or perhaps he's trying to catch the outline of a leaf as it moves to a breeze, back and forth, in and out of his hand. His body is covered with small white dots,



which also look like shadows, but they are the wrong colour. The white dots appear as negative shadows, the opposite of silhouettes, although they are equally opaque and delineating. It's impossible to see beyond them on the photograph. Being white, these dots reflect light instead of absorbing it into darkness. But of course, nothing casts white shadows. Their presence seems at once magical, scary and surreal.

*Jennifer Allen*

## MISSING

“Fished all day, nothing but an old boot,” my uncle says. “But Frank caught a big stick.”

“Looked just like a fish,” Frank says. “Damn thing broke as I landed it.”

Before he goes for fried chicken, my dad takes their picture on the motel steps, holding the pieces of stick fish. They come inside, hot and smelling like green water, carrying eight bags of ice between them. My uncle holds the tops while Frank slits the bags. Ice cracks and thunders into the motel bathtub. My uncle’s eyes, black-brown, beetling under his lumpy forehead, stare back at me while he tries to remember something. He gives me the fish pieces and pulls a mickey out of his pocket to help him think.





He has pieces missing from his memory. He took a bad fall playing hockey in the winter. Out cold for three days, he can't ever play again. Frank from the garage goes around with him most of the time, even when they are on vacation, but that's okay. Most people like Frank too. The woman at the motel did not want to rent to him but my uncle joked her and said he needed Frank like

a seeing eye dog and then the woman gave my uncle the key.

Our room is upstairs from my uncle and Frank's. But our room has a couch to sit on by the television set, so the ice is in our bathtub. The bottles lie sideways or stand snug with each other, twelve of beer for Frank and my dad and one of rye for my uncle and my mother, and ginger ale for the rye and some for me. My mother does not want Frank there either.

She stands at the sink brushing curler kinks out of her hair, and says, "Honey, quit playing with those!" when bottles clink. I stir the ice with a piece of wooden fish to cover them.

From the couch my uncle calls, "Hey Sprout, how about a rye and ginger?"

"I'm getting it for him," I tell my mother.

She pulls my shirt, yanking me from the water, and my uncle gets up from the television. His staring eyes fix on us. My mother says, "You don't use a child to be your servant."

"No, no, I'll get my own," he says. But he's nervous now, he trips over the wooden fishpiece and smack into the bathtub, swirling under the water and ice in all his clothes. A wave whirls out of the tub and his dark eyes gaze up wide open as if he's trying to make us laugh.

Frank jumps to the bathroom at the noise. He backs away quick when he sees my mother, but he gets no farther than the door before my mother calls him back, crying, “Help me, Frank, help him!”

There’s blood in the ice and glass the colour of ice, the water going gold and pink. My uncle’s broken face and frightened eyes.

But Frank is there, he pulls my uncle from the water and stands him up on the white bath mat and my mother picks the glass out of his cheeks with her tweezers while Frank holds him and says “Shush, hush, hush.” Even when the glass is gone, he holds him in his arms and my uncle cries. Nothing can come between them.

*Marina Endicott*

THE WOMAN, THE VICTORY,  
AND THE SNOW-GLOBE DRESS

She passes through the city, its heat rising into the folds of her dress, her skin, her lungs. It is almost too hot to speak, or to see. There is no question of her destination, although it would be hard to explain to another why this place must be attended, with ceremony, with gravitas, with joy. As if it calls, and waits. She hears, and comes. In its circles within squares, its majestically aged trees, the shimmering small body of water found at the centre, she feels at home. There, she will at last be herself, as always. Despite the blistering temperature, her pace quickens, just a bit. She can scent the place before she sees it. Like yew and holly grown together, after rain.

So hot now that no-one has come here, it seems, but her. She is, but for me, alone. And for her, I have been here all along. I am the one who calls her, and waits. She



almost knows it. The pool of water deepens its green, as a lover's eyes darken. The trees sing their soft song, to welcome her. The mist rises from the surface, to cool and reward her. We do this for many, but today, now, we do this for her.

What has she lived through, what has it cost her? I know, and I know she will be well, in time. I was. She is already stronger than she thinks. In this place, with me, with us, she knows truths a little differently; her story comes away from the painful pins that hold it together. Here, she may be relieved of its burdens for a time, looking upon her life not through the gaze of others, but with her own eyes and heart, finding courage, and

beauty. She has done this before; she will do it again, find what she needs here to take away.

Our mist is not enough; she feels the heat still. There is no need to discuss or agree, only to give what we have to give. The wind changes course a little, passing newly through the trees, diving through my wings into the mist and water below, and then, to her, to move about her. She breathes deeply with pleasure as, one by one, the cooling misty drops move into the weave of her dress. She raises her arms and begins to circumnavigate the fountain, twirling gently and then faster, with joy. The dress is full of cool sifting snow, swirling excitedly in tandem with her turns.

Suddenly, she stops, just before me. The heavy cotton swings into place.

Hello.

Hello.

The snow continues to swirl, to eddy inside her, softly. I wait, to see what she becomes.

*Cynthia Imogen Hammond*

## PERSONAL EFFECTS

Jessica writes a catalogue number on the bottom of a porcelain cup and blows on the ink to speed the drying. After testing it with her finger, she paints over the mark with clear nail polish and sets the cup aside. Dragged down by mid-afternoon drowsiness, she yawns.

She rises to collect the next batch of items, her legs stiff from too much sitting. She checks her watch. Another hour to go. Rory, her supervisor, chews thoughtfully on an apple while doing a Sudoku puzzle, his computer radio playing light rock. By now she knows almost every insipid song by heart and wishes just once he would turn it to something else. She can almost feel herself aging down here in the windowless basement, air conditioning making her throat sore while the day outside is hot. She looks forward to the end of summer and her return to school in the big city.

With a sigh, she takes a box of artifacts back to her work station and pulls the lamp over to see them better. According to the accession form, the items were donat-

ed by the estate of a First World War veteran. Canteen, gas mask, shaving kit—things the museum already has in triplicate. Vaguely annoyed, she takes out the metal shaving kit and gets a waft of old man smell as she opens it. The razor's knurled handle is suitably masculine; the blade, still fixed in place, predictably rusted.

She removes the little mirror from its ragged brown velvet pouch, catching her reflection for an instant. Turning it over, she finds a wallet-sized black and white snapshot nestled safely against it. In that moment she gets a flash of recognition across time and space, as bright as the light in the mirror. Goosebumps spring up on her arms.

The picture would have hardly been worth framing. Its subject, off-centre and soft-focused, is a woman holding her infant up with one hand, making his chubby arm wave at the camera with the other. The baby is motion-blurred and the woman's face is turned away. A piano anchors the background with upstanding hominess. The relaxed domesticity of the image is just the thing a soldier would have longed for while standing in a trench, knee-deep in mud, on the other side of the ocean. Her spine prickling, Jessica slips it into her backpack.

That night in her own familiar bedroom, she takes out the photograph and examines it once again.





She cannot shake the feeling of recognition it gives her. Before bed she hides it under a pile of old gym clothes in the bottom of a drawer, even though no one will miss it. She is the only one alive who knows of its existence.

Late that night the burden of her intrusion settles heavily on her chest. Near morning, after hours of lying awake, she burns the photograph over the toilet bowl. Feeling purged, she finally drifts towards sleep, comforted by the stirring of the birds. Summer is in full swing, and her whole life lies in wait.

*Lea Nakonechny*

ROLAND BARTHES'S "REFLEXIONS ON  
TWO WOMEN ON A CANOE" (1934)

*Translator's note*

In 1933, Jean-Paul Sartre was sent to Berlin to replace Raymond Aron as the head of the *Institut français*. While in Prussia, he came into contact with an innovative type of philosophy that was later to influence much twentieth-century French theory, namely, phenomenology. Although he was never able to meet the founder of the phenomenological movement, Edmund Husserl, while in Berlin he attended the lectures of Eugene Fink, one of Husserl's most advanced students. The experience, Sartre later recounts in an interview published in *Esprit*, was "a revelation."

In the months that followed Sartre's 1934 return to France, he met a very keen young student with a bright future: Roland Barthes. Both men crossed paths by chance at *L'eau qui coule*, a popular *brasserie* on the Boulevard Montparnasse. According to Barthes's diary (entry dated June 23rd, 1934) they had an intense discussion in

which Sartre initiated the nineteen-year-old Barthes to the “secrets” of husserlian philosophy. In a gesture that was later echoed in Barthes’s *Mythologies*, Sartre impressively performed a phenomenological analysis of a peach cocktail.<sup>1</sup>

In a notebook he kept during his two years spent at the lycée Louis-le-Grand, (the so-called “green book”<sup>2</sup>), Barthes jotted down a series of reflections seemingly spurred by the encounter. Interspersed between drawings of a private nature, the green book in fact contains Barthes’s earliest surviving analysis of a photograph. It is based on a close inspection of an image he had seen hanging behind the bar at the *Café des Écoles*, which he patronized regularly throughout the late 1930s. As such, it is of great historical interest, despite the text’s fragmentary state. Aside from a passing mention of a “lost” green book in the *Œuvres complètes de Roland Barthes* (vol. 6, p. 462, note 4), Barthes’s text has largely escaped critical scrutiny. The present translation is based on the author’s transcript of folios 23–24 (BNF call number MS B.1934–gg4).

1. See Alain Renaut, *Sartre, le dernier des philosophes*, Paris, Grasset, 1993, p. 125.
2. The notebook was handed down to Barthes’s then lover Henri Pourcel, who bequeathed it, along with his entire literary estate, to the Bibliothèque nationale de France in 2008.



[FOLIO 23r]<sup>3</sup> Notes on the small picture depicting two women on a canoe (at the *estaminet*, rue des Écoles).<sup>4</sup> Photography has two temporalities. The time of my looking, and the time of the photograph that looks back. How does it come about that I experience a backward glancing time while being conscious that my looking is always anchored in the continuous present? I stare at the two women on the boat. I look away. I look again. They're still looking at me: every time my eyes fall upon theirs, there is a flash of recognition: we glance at one another *here* and *now*. And yet their time is always already past. Thus, there must somehow be a special "phenomenological faculty" so to speak (a faculty of my consciousness) that *produces* the time of photography: [FOLIO 23v] the photographic thing [*la chose photographique*]<sup>5</sup> appears; it is there now; it appears in the stream of my temporally oriented consciousness [*le flux temporellement orienté de ma conscience*], and yet as image it appears as past. Where does

3. Words underlined in Barthes's manuscript have been italicized.
4. *Estaminet* is an outmoded French word for a café in which one is allowed to smoke.
5. Barthes no doubt employs the word *thing* to emphasize the fact that the photograph is a kind of *object* in the world.

the past come from in the instantaneous present (that Husserl calls *Jetztzeit*)? The answer: *I pro-ject it outside of myself* [*je l'extra-pose*]. Photography ultimately shows me that *the past cannot exist within subjectivity*—hence its externalization as foreign, as other. The photographic past is not bygone time; it is a contingent “now” that shows me the foreign face of the temporal continuum itself, the face without a face, as it were. Retro-presence.

What do I (the phenomenological “I”) experience when I am facing the face of the past other (or the past face of the other)? My mind projects presence, whereas the photograph projects absence. If I were to abstract from all the concepts I project onto images, to perform “phenomenological bracketing,” what is left? All that remains is a description—visual information—a *screen* for intentional projections [*visées intentionnelles*].

Photography is really a kind of *ekphrasis* then. Sartre speaks of photographs as constituting a kind of “quasi-experience”: they don’t provide the fullness of experience, but “arrest” [*fixent*] the objects they depict, and thereby merely show one of their potentially infinite “faces”. [FOLIO 24r] It follows that what photographs do is literally *describe* an absent presence. *All photographs are thereby structured like literature*: they compel me to image forth what the text cannot—and would not—show.



(Provided I read actively, and read onwards.) They are apparatuses that compel my mind to creative agency [*ce sont des dispositifs qui font agir ma conscience*]. Unbeknownst to me, I become the sole author of the fiction they seemingly bear forth as evidence.

[FOLIO 24v] Ekphrasis of an invisible fiction then. [Illegible sentence] . . . preamble for an essay on the American photograph of the two women on a canoe (signed “J.L. for E.R.”). Start with a quote from the English song “*Row row row your boat*”. But on which stream do they gently flow? The stream of free association, of borrowed quotes and ideas, which has no beginning and no end,

but that produces pleasure and always ends up mirroring itself. The first paragraph of my essay should read as follows:

“In 1933, Jean-Paul Sartre was sent to Berlin to replace Raymond Aron as the head of the *Institut français*. While in Prussia, he came into contact with an innovative type of philosophy that was later to influence much twentieth-century French theory, namely, phenomenology. Although he was never able to meet the founder of the phenomenological movement, Edmund Husserl, while in Berlin he attended the lectures of Eugene Fink, one of Husserl’s most advanced students. The experience, Sartre later recounts in an interview published in *Esprit*, was “a revelation” . . .

*Translated from the French by E. Ralickas*





## QUI CONSTRUIT L'IMAGE

*Il faut que la lumière ait frappé de ses photons des matières, des corps réels, qu'ils aient été renvoyés par eux vers l'objectif, vers la zone sensible de la chambre noire où est tendue la pellicule qui en gardera la trace, le souvenir chimique. Les grains argentiques de la gélatine, émus d'ombre et de lumière, leur valeur d'intensité variable, mesurent leur quantité physique, enregistrent par leur transformation la trace de leur existence.*

—Anne-Marie Garat

D'abord, les faits: le portrait d'un homme à chapeau et à moustache, vêtu d'un complet, qui pose les deux pieds dans l'herbe au bord du chemin, avec en arrière-plan la rivière, et le remblai en pierre de la berge opposée, des clôtures, quelques arbres qui s'estompent et la silhouette blanchie de quelques bâtiments.

1

il est apparu dans l'été  
solonnel c'est le mois d'août  
la crinière de lion du soleil

2

le corps dans son firmament  
avance par ricochets  
sous la peau nébuleuse

3

l'archiviste ne trouve aucun indice  
pour accrocher ses doigts gantés de blanc  
sauf le vide du ciel sans marge

4

sans doute que c'est un siècle  
pour le voyage des particules  
et la téléportation de masse

5

j'écoute le portrait devenir visible  
dans un crépitement d'atomes  
comment était le passé

6

fier de ce qu'il est  
incrusted dans cet instant  
dévêtu de mystères et d'intériorité

7

je prends le personnage en relief  
par la partie peinte détachée du temps  
qui n'est plus photographie mais sculpture

8

le nom n'est rien me dis-je  
le présent absolu vacille  
les arbres un cœur feuillu à la Jim Dine

9

l'homme au complet devant le moulin  
existe davantage et à jamais  
c'est mon parent quoi répondre

*Jean-Éric Riopel*



ŒUVRES DANS L'ORDRE D'APPARITION /  
WORKS IN THE ORDER OF APPEARANCE

*Young Child with Extended Hand*

2011 · 9,2 × 14,8 cm

*Two Men Holding Unknown Items*

2008 · 12,8 × 8,9 cm

*Woman in Chequered Dress in Front of an Angel Fountain*

2011 · 9 × 12,7 cm

*Mother (or Woman?) Holding a Blurry Baby in Her Arms*

2011 · 7,9 × 5,5 cm

*Deux femmes dans un bateau*

2010 · 9 × 13 cm

*Man in Three-Piece Suit with House & Trees in Background*

2008 · 11,4 × 7 cm

Toutes les œuvres réalisées par John Latour :  
photographies trouvées et peinture acrylique /  
All works by John Latour: found photographs and acrylic paint

## BIOS

JENNIFER ALLEN is the editor of *frieze* d/e and lives in Berlin.

MARINA ENDICOTT worked in theatre before turning to fiction. Her novel *Good to a Fault* was a Giller Prize finalist and won the 2009 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book, Canada/Caribbean. *The Little Shadows* was shortlisted for the 2011 Governor General's Award.

CYNTHIA IMOGEN HAMMOND is Associate Professor in the Department of Art History, Concordia University, where she teaches courses in architectural history, art historical methods, and feminist cultural landscape theory. In addition to publishing on women, architecture, public space, and landscapes, Hammond maintains a studio practice and is one of the founding members of the art/design firm, pouf! art + architecture. Her book, *Architects, Angels, Activists and the City of Bath*, was published by Ashgate in February 2012.

JOHN LATOUR est un artiste visuel qui vit à Montréal. Il est représenté par Pierre-François Ouellette art

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LEA NAKONECHNY was born and raised in rural South-west Saskatchewan and earned her degree in Film Production from the University of Regina. Her films *Turn to the Wind*, *Two Museums* and *Edge of the Desert* have screened around the world, winning awards at US festivals. She continues to pursue writing and directing from her current home in Montreal.

EDUARDO RALICKAS has translated texts by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Bruno Latour, Éric Michaud, Daniel Vander Gucht, Friedrich von Hardenberg, and others. He holds a PhD in art history from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris) and the Université de Montréal. He lives and works in Montreal.

JEAN-ÉRIC RIOPEL (né en 1971) a publié trois recueils de poèmes, *Papillons réfractaires* (1999), *Dans le blanc* (2001) et *Fermeture des livres de comptes* (2006), tous publiés aux Écrits des Forges. Il a dirigé la revue de poésie *Estuaire* de 2003 à 2011 et il vit à Montréal.

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