

HoldBack the Night

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“In my end is my beginning

(Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Four Quartet*)

Le Voyeur, 1989, silver gelatin print framed under glass, 80 x 120 cm. This is the first image in the inaugural series by Eric Rondepierre entitled Excédents. It belongs to an ensemble that is currently constituted by some fifteen photographs: black images with a few white words as subtitles.

Like all the *Excédents*, Eric Rondepierre sampled *Le Voyeur* from a foreign fiction film with French subtitles. Using a video recorder, he stabilized and photographed on his television screen a fleeting television image (1/24th of a second). Not only are these “black images” rare in the first place, but Rondepierre’s ones are stringently selected. The video frame is extracted only when the interaction between the black surface, the white subtitling and the title of the film (which gives its name to the work) produces the pleasure of a pun or flash of wit. For example, *La Vie est belle* (It’s a wonderful life) is the title of an *Excédent* at the bottom of which we read that “the situation is not as bleak as it seems.” But the one I really prefer is *Le Voyeur*, which is the French title of the Michael Powell film from which it is taken (*Peeping Tom*, 1960). It shows the fragment of a dialogue saying: “Switch it off?” “No”.

Without the voyeurism of this artist who for years has been tapping movies in order to capture what Denys Riout calls “talking monochromes,” we would just be dazzled: thanks to him, “we see *nothing*.” Above all, we see that we see nothing. Thus, by reproducing the visible, Rondepierre’s art makes blindness visible. If *Le Voyeur* belongs in a history of the limits of the visible, as begun over a century ago, a history that flirts with disappearance, then the artist exercises this limitgaze as an allegorist: he does not invent the image, he confiscates it (Craig Owen). Cinema provides a readymade image (a frame), television endows this image with a particular texture,(1) photography gives it document status and the artist plays at extending this journey through the media since this “reshot” also takes the form of a mouse mat (a “multiple”), a work designed to “be present” at the threshold of computer screens.(2)

Nonsubmission to the temporality of “normal” perception, deviance of the gaze neglecting narrative and figural elements, slippage from one support to the next, the rupture of the filmic flow, theft and appropriation of the “minor”—such are the actions whereby Rondepierre has entered the world of art. He did so with a “black painting” in which we read “Switch it off?” The fact that this inaugural work is haunted by an ending paradoxically guides what comes next. It constitutes, in a sense, the masterpiece, a work wrested at the last gasp from nothingness. The work to come will always have something of this tone, especially when the image is dealing, not only with the mutation of the media, but also with their degradation, as

in the series *Précis de décomposition*.⁽³⁾

A high-tension image

Insofar as he shows us what “exceeds” sight, the artist makes us the accomplices of his scopic perversion. The moment we agree to contemplate *Le Voyeur* is the moment the title also applies to ourselves, placing us in front of the image as if we were wearing glasses so dark that you can “see” in them without being seen. The image becomes a screen for fantasies, a surface for projections. Switch it off? No. Aren’t these words that lovers might whisper in each other’s ears? Or perhaps what house burglars might say when worried by a noise. It is possible to imagine many different situations, but one can also glimpse an existential drama playing itself out in this trivial dialogue. The meaning of the words being, “Must everything come to an end?” In the darkness, precisely when the film has stopped, the words have me projecting my own mental cinema. The surface that is hollowed out behind the words ⁽⁴⁾ thus opens up in front of them, for within the deepest darkness, what is there left to switch off, if not the light in the room where “I” am now? We can therefore think of the work as being exhibited in an inverted theatrical space: to see the image (the stage) where “nothing can be seen,” the theater must remain lit up.

If my gaze goes no further than the surface of the image, responding to the discrepancy between the dialogue and the black ground, I can see this announcement of an early lightsout as a metaphor of the modern heritage that any artist active at the end of the twentieth century must confront. Darkness would then respond to “that point in the affairs of the world” described by the Situationist International at which all forms of expression begin to run on empty, and parody themselves.”⁽⁵⁾ However, if I take this metaphor seriously and read the work “to the letter,” then the discrepancy between black and white does not exist. The photograph reads “clearly” as an act of resistance in a nihilist spirit: an attempt to extinguish the night. And to do that, you first need, as Rondepierre does with his *Excédents*, to hold back the night. But perhaps, too, what *Le Voyeur* is very simply saying is that “what happens is so much in advance of what we think, of our intentions, that we can never attain it and never know its true appearance.”(Rilke)

Thus the image is an enigma that excites and worries rational thought. The text and pictorial surface are like two poles between which a difference in potential appears. The current runs through meaning and the work is the place of a shortcircuit (and not only because the only figure it contains is a text whose vocabulary alludes to electricity). By covering *Le Voyeur* with a reflective glass surface, as he has all its companions in the *Excédents* series, Rondepierre has heightened the polarization of the image because he has endowed it with another regime of visibility that is incompatible with the first. Either I can deal with the economy of white and black, or I can experience a black mirror over which slides my own ephemeral reflection. By becoming a reflective surface, *Le Voyeur* includes me in its play: as the privileged witness of my scopic appetite, I am made to see myself there, precisely, where it is lacking, like a form without matter, ready to disappear. *Le Voyeur*, which has already provoked the history of monochrome painting, now flirts with that of the readymade or of multiples, and also crosses paths with that of the Vanitas.

A still life

Most importantly, however, the image joins the clan of my “blacks,” which I cherish because they show that there is something in them that refuses to be frozen, that lives on (a photograph may be a frozen image, but it is not a dead one; it is a still life). *Le Voyeur* moves me with the same kind of emotion as works such as Malevich’s *Quadrangle* and the *Black Paintings* of Ad Reinhardt. There, the not-exactly-right angles of the black square on a white ground, an

expression of pure sensibility, sustain the universal excitement of the world: rhythm. Here, the different tones of black unified by a reduction of value contrasts stand in opposition to the vacuousness of the monochrome and the almost-black is “a last vestige of light” (Reinhardt). *Le Voyeur* helps expand that tender zone in which richness touches on as cesis: its words are a way of teasing darkness, of animating blackness, of instilling an exquisite vibration into it and creating the conditions of a gaze in a state of vigilance.

Finally, I would say that I was lucky that *Le Voyeur* fell into my lap. “Fell”—the word seems appropriate when talking about a lowering of the horizon: this “black” is not a treasure unearthed by the artist in the high reaches of the Sublime, but something patiently found in his immediate ambit. I love *Le Voyeur* because it makes me laugh at what I have loved, because its joyous negativity relativizes the dogmatic radicality of modern truths. Is it not inspiring to think that this image existed discreetly in the most banal part of our contemporary world, and that this artist should have decided to bring it to light, thus making a humorous and unemphatic statement about the necessity of an almost nothing? *Le Voyeur*, an appropriately named photograph that represents the desire to see. An image named desire.

Translation : C. Penwarden

Notes

(1) Looking more closely, the edges of the lettering breaks up into parallel vertical striations. The irregularity of their contour provides an index to the texture of the image as a whole. It is constituted by a field and its opacity is due to the density of a network that forms a screen.

(2) The mouse mat was sold at the Biennale de Lyon (in 1995) and reproduced as an “original work” with the *Dictionnaire multimédia de l'art moderne et contemporain*, RMN/Hazan.

(3) The series *Précis de décomposition* (1993/95) deals directly with “archive disease.” The artist extracted images corroded by time, humidity and storage from movie reels. In each constituent photograph erasures, deformations and blotches are integrated into the economy of the image and thus renew its meaning (see Thierry Lenain, *Éric Rondepierre, un art de la décomposition*, Brussels: La lettre Volée, 1999).

(4) The surface is like Proustian mist : “Here, it is already the river itself, but there, the view has stopped, one can see only nothingness, a mist that prevents one from seeing any further. In this part of the canvas, paint neither what one sees, since one sees nothing, nor what one does not see, since one must paint only what one sees, but paint that one does not see; that the failure of the eye that cannot sail on the fog should be inflicted on the canvas as it is on the river, that is very fine.” Marcel Proust, *Jean Santeuil*, Gallimard, Tome III, p. 282)

(5) “Le détournement comme négation et comme prelude,” *Internationale situationniste*, no. 3, December 1959, p.11.