

VALERIE JOUVE: CONCRETE POETRY

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It is in and through everyday life that organs (eyes, genitals) are humanized. They have been transformed by history, by work, by social life and culture. This transformation operates in the everyday realm, it flows from the everyday and concludes within it.

Henri Lefebvre – Critique of Everyday Life

The photographs are in color and show life-size figures in a suburban or urban setting.

The landscapes are of Marseilles or the rings of suburbs that surround Paris, where Valerie Jouve lived. In the landscapes the natural and the man-made seem to flow into each other reciprocating an unfinished movement. The portraits appear to have caught some awkward gesture that is difficult to define, as in the films of John Cassavetes in which the camera stays on actors as they struggle to realize their character. The pictures are about ephemeral behavioral gestures, subjects lost in thought, elementary actions caught "in-between"; digressive moments, a certain urban solitude. Moments appear almost intimate, and seem to allude to the cinema, but they do not give us the reassurance of even the slightest narrative closure.

This is a poetics of description. It is an aspect of French art that goes back to Daumier and Courbet. What we see is a particular kind of inner life that is a response to contemporary urban realities – this inner life, which is so close to us we feel we could describe it if we were novelists - is shown to us in the most concrete terms. The term “concrete poetry”, as I am using it, alludes to two things. First, Thomas Bernhard’s novel *Concrete*. This novel, as the title implies, is about coming to terms with physical matter, in Bernhard’s case, under the bleakest of circumstances. The term itself is directly taken

from the literary movement “Concrete Poetry” practiced principally in France in which the letters that make up a poem create a shape that corresponds to its meaning. There are other suggestive possibilities for “concrete” but I leave them to the reader. From an interview with Valerie Jouve: "Photography can construct in a concrete poetry as distinct from an abstract language". These are portraits of people that she has asked to pose; but unlike most portraits where the subject confronts the camera, the photographer and "presents herself", for Valerie Jouve the dialog is made more interesting by being more complicated and imaginative. The result appears to have the effect of montage within a single image. The present tense is stretched out indefinitely. A complex, ambiguous interaction within the frame is the key: The dialog is between the suburban landscape and the subject, and between the photographer and them, as they all interact. This is an art of improvisation. Jouve's photographs observe an ongoing and evolving physical interaction in-media-res. It is almost an anthropologist's way of observing humans, were it not for the fact that we see in this dialog, a certain trust or sympathy, if not intimacy, between photographer and subject that "scientific detachment", or sociological study would not permit. What is this dialog about?

From an exhibition in Paris at the Centre National de la Photographie from 1998: *Sans titre No.4* 1992 shows a man on the left side of the frame from the back as he turns his head to the right. Behind him to the right we see gray buildings behind trees dotted with modern light posts and cars. In the manner of Caspar David Friedrich, the foreground is in very sharp focus, the background is distinct but hazy, and there is no middle ground.

Friedrich, like other artists of the Romantic period considered the visible and tangible phenomena of nature to be manifestations of the invisible and ineffable: the fingerprints of God. But Friedrich's work is encoded, or enshrouded, with religious symbolism. His landscapes are fragments from a larger undefined whole, in which a solitary man, dealing with the fundamental questions of life and death, confronts the mystery of nature. Often, as in the famous *Wanderer above the Sea of Mist*, we see only his back. By eliminating the middle ground, the indistinct and soft background unifies and regularizes the complex shapes of nature into a picture that is essentially mystical and meditative. Jouve's work takes from this what she needs, because I think she also wants to speak about this mystery of nature. Let me add, although it might seem obvious, that I think humans and their creations are also a part of nature. One glaring difference with Friedrich's pantheistic aesthetic is that Ms. Jouve does not make pictures with the religious temperament of a mystic, but on the contrary, with the skeptical temperament of a research scientist, a field worker (underpaid, but with a sense of humor!). A sociologist (which is how she began) who observes the small details because they are especially eloquent about who we might be.

Jouve is a photographer who uses art, rather than an artist who uses photography. The difference might appear simply semantic but it is not. John Baldessari, for example is a great artist who uses photography to deal with concepts much as a designer organizes material into a series of ideas on a page; the visual is, as with most contemporary art, rhetorical. Other far less successful artists simply use reactionary formalist formulas to create "beauty" ready-made-to-sell such as Uta Barth; or they use photography to

pastiche past art, such as Yasumasa Morimura or Tracey Moffatt, creating turgid, mannerist tableaux. The wealthy classes seem to like it. Jouve's pictures, far removed from art world concerns, seem to be in the middle of a dialog with past photography and art, without any ironic distancing; it is a dialog about human emotions in an urban space. This is a subtle exchange that is not rhetorical, it is visual. In that sense her work has much more in common with filmmakers than with that of other photographers in the art world. It is in the cinema of Tarkovsky, Godard, Rohmer, Bunuel and most of all Kieslowski, that we see a similar aesthetic to Jouve's. For, despite many obvious differences in their work, these filmmakers sought out the contradictions in the nature of man, especially those that were most difficult to deal with; that is, the moral and even the metaphysical, perhaps especially the metaphysical, for that very reason, but always in concrete terms. This is what made them unique. Many before and after them have depicted sacred subjects, miracles, etc. But very few artists sought to understand how morals and metaphysics work in everyday life. Novelists once did this as a matter of course, now it is rare – W.G. Sebald and Milan Kundera come to mind. Godard in particular, I think, has profoundly influenced this manner of seeing, as Pasolini described it, with a "camera consciousness". Godard creates many-voiced works, in which the historical, the cultural, the personal, art history, and the everyday contemporary landscape - inner and outer - are all synphonically arranged in a montage of counterpoint. In that sense of "camera consciousness" Valerie Jouve makes, rather than takes photographs. Not by herself as the proverbial hunters of images from the past such as Robert Frank, William Klein or Garry Winogrand, but with her subject, even, I would say, with the landscape, with the city, and of course that shifting space between all of

them. To better illustrate a point that I know is rather abstract (which disturbs me because Ms. Jouve's work is so concrete) let me illustrate it with a story from Robert Capa's wonderful autobiography *Slightly Out of Focus*. In this work Capa tells of a time he was in the cabin on a cargo plane with some parachutists who were going to land in occupied France. Capa photographed them as they jumped out of the plane; it was exactly the kind of dramatic movement he favored. He then, non-chalantly, writes that he stopped taking pictures the moment the last man had left because "the cabin was empty". He didn't count himself; he left himself out of the picture. He never measured that space between him and those young men about to jump into a landscape that would suddenly come up on them - but one that for him would recede into a horizon of infinite space. I see it receding still for all those photographers who followed him into what has become known as the "Photography of Concern" practiced by Aperture and Magnum and countless freelance photojournalists and hunters of the "big picture".

Back to *Sans titre No. 4*. Since we are left to infer from what we have we must rely on the relationship of this face, this body language, with that particular landscape and the space

between them, which appears to contain both the natural (trees) and the cultural (city).

Taking issue with Michele Poivert's superb essay in the catalog to Jouve's work from the Paris exhibition, I don't think that this space is at all like the descriptions of Foucault's "heterotopias" ("places that are outside all place" - "a pure system of relations without an element...") Foucault's "heterotopias", which are nothing more than endlessly deferred

dystopias, could never allow for the kind of paradox and play that is at the heart of Jouve's work, which is as far from dystopia as it is possible to get without making a musical! Her work is closer to Stanley Donen's and Gene Kelly's *On the Town* (via Godard's *A Woman is a Woman*) than to the apocalyptic lyricism of Straub/Huillet, who do illustrate Foucault very well. The grid of the young man's shirt beautifully mimics the grid of the buildings. The way he turns his head suggests the presence of another person, a certain tension, an apprehension. The buildings, the sky, the cars, the trees and light posts co-exist - for a moment - in an intimate relationship, each one playing off the other, as in a jazz improvisation. Randomness and order suddenly pass through one another and something new is created.

Then there is that uncertain step forward, that uneasy look. This uneasiness is simply part of the fear of being alive, which we all sense to one degree or another, and not a part of some larger narrative. Such is the case in the work of Cindy Sherman's brilliant early color work, where narrative amplifies everything into a significant moment, larger than life. Jouve always depicts a small moment, not a large one. This improvisation between photographer, subject and landscape all animate that space between them into a living, organic, material presence that describes the present not simply as a space, but as an organism with a relation of parts to whole that is ultimately unknowable. This is seen and not read. It is a visual poetics, without abstractions such as symbols, or theory, or philosophy, or ideology, or language of any kind. One can, if one is pre-disposed to such things, impose a variety of discursive or rhetorical strategies on Jouve's work. But then,

horribly, one can impose “rational” systems on anything. This essay does it as well, there is no avoiding it in writing one, but I hope that it has raised more questions than answers. The means (discourse) to understanding can, as we have seen, become an end in itself. What’s left out - invariably - is altruism. Jouve’s visual poetics is not an end in itself but a means to discover emotional and spiritual resonance’s that remain in unresolved "play" (in every sense). And THAT is the place where we humans spend our everyday lives, making our entrances and exits without the dubious benefits of fanfare (I’m thinking of Hollywood!) or the forced logic of narrative causes and effects. For Jouve these emotional relationships between improvisers are articulated in the most visually poetic of means: by making small moments "matter" (again - in every sense).

George Porcari©May 2000