

THE INFINITE IMMEASURABILITY OF IMAGES

“I love you until I can no longer see or hear, until death” Marguerite Duras, India Song

In John Murphy’s oeuvre, cinema and the photographic image occupy a singular place. Over the years they have taken on a decisive role if not one of prime importance. During the 1970’s and 1980’s the appearance of images from within a pictorial surface was in a certain manner, at the heart of his artistic process. At the time, little attention was paid to the screen like quality of the latter: it was not in the form of a window, divided into squares separating the artist’s eye from his subject as can be observed in engravings from the beginning of the Renaissance illustrating the principles of perspective, nor did it resemble a flat, horizontal surface such as a photographic plate or photographic paper coated with light-sensitive emulsion, nor a sort of flat vertical screen similar to those used for cinematic projection. It was more of a profound density, generated through the application of layers of nuanced glazing, almost a painted coat of fur or plumage, a skin or a hide, on which the artist would inscribe images of beings, animals or objects or perhaps even simple phrases, mostly drawn from the history of art, without reference to a simplistic art of quotation, but rather to the principles of recollection.

John Murphy’s photographic images derived from cinematographic film scenes – or rather John Murphy’s photographic paintings – operate on the same register, in that their presence is not due to their physical appearance – their surface aspect, the way they look, their sharpness or their precision – but to the way they come into being – their genesis, their consistency, their depth and their density – and above all according to their evocative capacity above and beyond the beings, places and events they depict. One can also discover, as is the case with the oeuvres presented here in reference to the work of Marguerite Duras, the screenplay behind the performance, the novel behind the screenplay, the reality experienced behind the written fiction, the author’s self-projection within each character as well the autonomy of the latter in relation to the their author’s biography. At the risk of a major misinterpretation, it might seem that in John Murphy’s work everything is the antonym of everything else since the here and now seem to lend names to the beings, places and deeds as much as the original figure, which actually generated them and bestowed them with their titles, in that the latter seems to disappear, fade or withdraw from what it originally produced. This however does not necessarily mean that we are faced with authorless beings or an author without figures, or with specters or ghosts, but rather incarnations of incarnations, which come forward each in their turn, one after another, side by side, inside each other – or rather at the heart of each other – to greet one another on the threshold of the image, before the final and unforeseeable reminders of memory.

If belief is a mental process that allows human beings to accept the unknown, the unexplained or the indescribable, memory is a delicate process, which allows us humans to embrace our own history as well as that of the world that surrounds us, even if we don't necessarily understand all the whys and wherefores, the paths and destinies or even what fortune or chance holds in store for us. So, where does our belief in the fugitive truths of images fit in? Or the memory of them we retain? "Delight with oneself, faced with oneself" (Marguerite Duras, *Caprice*). In the choices he makes, his frozen images, his careful re-framing, his use of perspective, his reduplication of the image, John Murphy makes tangible and perceptible what connects real-life experience with the shared history of the world, singular desire and collective memory, personal sensitivity and communal vision. In the same manner, each of his exhibitions is like a subtle device that places the spectator at the center of a system of representation that is as real as it is fictional, as present as it is absent, fixed in time as it is timeless, as steady as it is unstable, as palpable as it is insubstantial and as dense as it is porous. The eye subsequently wanders both inside and around each work, filling the space or the vacuum between each grain of the photographic image just as it fills the distance or interval between each work; a wavering feeling that sometimes might be precipitated into a miracle of vision: the eye becoming impregnated with the image in the same way as a swimmer is with water until he dissolves and becomes as one with it as in the case with Anne – Marie Stretter «floating on the water, drowning in each oncoming wave, asleep, perhaps, or weeping in the sea.» (Marguerite Duras, *Le Vice-consul*). An act that is intertwined with the spectator's constant desire to hold on to or even tear from the skin of experienced reality or its filmic representation, a fragment, a trace or a fine layer of the events, facts or bodies, which otherwise would be symbolically destined for destruction, disappearance or to be simply forgotten and which reduplicates that of the story in relation to its author: "The film has been finished and it's out of our hands, and it has left us behind, and it is beginning its journey across the world, containing within its being painful shards torn from our bodies, leaving us eternally deprived and itself eternally deprived of us." (Marguerite Duras discussing, *India Song*).

What John Murphy has on offer for us today resembles a struggle with an angel, but one, who like Paul Klee's angel advances towards the future while looking into the past: the angel of seeing following on from the angel of history... Might there also be une petite mort of seeing? In other words, an ephemeral vertiginous instant, an insane snapshot of life, of beings, of places and things, without measure, duration or perspective, which even defies all notion of time and space and which the photographic image in spite of everything condenses – or even sublimates – into a unique, irremediable and absolute image.

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