Picture Story: For Sven Augustijnen

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The program called Oral Culture that the gallery engages in such activity. It is certainly not the first time to present ideas more actively than they normally do. The desire to present the work of several artists, sometimes unfinished works of art as an opportunity to discuss not only the content of the lip-synched presentations. We pretended to think with Jan Mot and Julia Wielgus about specific works and about the machinery that it needed to happen. It was the interest in creating a space to discuss ideas more actively than a regular exhibition format? Did such type of works deserve a different structure than a regular exhibition format? What is this different from say, a public conference on iconology by Erwin Panofsky but using the lecture as also the different strategies of addressing the content of the lip-synched oral culture? Was organized in 2008-09 explored live oral debate the work of several artists, sometimes unfinished works of art as an opportunity to discuss not only the content of the lip-synched oral culture? Was organized in 2008-09 explored live oral debate the work of several artists, sometimes unfinished works of art as an opportunity to discuss not only the content of the lip-synched oral culture?
Picture Story.  
For Sven Augustijnen

By Sophie Berrebi

AMSTERDAM, APR. 28 - A year or two ago, you trusted me with one of your own texts, a letter to Manon de Boer, which you asked me to read to an audience. In that letter, printed in a book on Manon’s work, you wove together evocations of her films Sylvia Kristel — Paris and Resonating Surfaces, with Ryszard Kapuściński’s account of an episode of the decolonisation of Angola and your own memories of Portugal.1 It was a beautiful text to rehearse and to read aloud, and many of its sentences have stayed with me. In “L’histoire est simple et édifiante”, Une sélection d’articles parus dans Paris Match, première partie 1960-1972, the exhibition that you presented over Christmas at Jan Mot’s gallery in Brussels, I felt you reprised – although you might disagree with this - aspects of that piece of writing. Specifically, what struck me was the similar way in which you intertwined different storylines. In the exhibition this was done through presenting double spreads of issues of the French weekly Paris Match, which you displayed on long tables that stretched across the length of the gallery. By placing the magazines side by side, you created a narrative (the idea of a frieze, came to my mind - I will get back to that in a moment) that mixed ‘la grande et la petite histoire’ to use a hackneyed French journalistic expression. Although minimal, the display was persuasive. Looking at the pictures and reading the headlines and captions we could follow, spread after spread, fragments of stories of anonymous and famous individuals caught in moments of political turmoil in Congo, Vietnam, Cuba, Aden, Northern Ireland, Israel, Lebanon, and other points of contact between East and West and North and South, during a period dominated by both the Cold War and decolonization. The interlacing of anecdotes and historical moments recalled the format you adopted in your letter to Manon, yet, here the procedure emphasises not your voice but the one articulated strategically by the team of Paris Match between 1960 and 1972, that is for the most part, under the directorship of Roger Théond. Théond, who had a reputation of ruthlessness when it came to getting exclusive rights for the best press photographs, is routinely described as the man who ‘made’ Paris Match, who was responsible for putting stars on the covers and sensational titles under his pictures. He is less known for having been a keen collector of nineteenth century photography.

The gallery display was also a way for you to present another story, one that you have been researching for a while. It concerns the production and use of a Belgian rifle called the FAL ( Fusil Automatique Léger), which you patiently described to me. Produced in Belgium, from 1953 to 1988, you explained that it was nicknamed ‘the right arm of the free world’ (a phrase that I found again on the web), because it was used, in particular, by the armed forces of many NATO countries. Yet by a twist of history, it often ended up in the hands of revolutionaries from all sides of the political spectrum including communist-inspired. Even though it was never the subject of an article in Paris Match, the FAL frequently appeared throughout its pages. You showed me how to recognize it, and when I visited the exhibition we tried to identify it on pictures taken in all corners of the world, seemingly inoffensive like a newspaper tucked underneath an arm, pointed menacingly or dangling from a shoulder of a non-uniformed combatant.

Differently from the personal memories you evoke in your letter to Manon, the events described and illustrated in Paris Match seem to have little connection to your own life. Was the magazine even popular in the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium where you grew up? Of course we know about most of the events it recounts: decolonisation wars and episodes of the Cold War. Yet I discovered many conflicts I barely knew about, conflicts in which the FAL was used, conflicts that had slipped in between the pages of history books and that we were too young to remember (well, not yet born, to be exact). A weekly such as this one, when rediscovered as you told me you did, while walking around flee markets in Brussels, is a perfect tool to question our need for narrative, our relationship to history, memory and visual representation. It is also a mirror to the chaos of the world we live in today.

I only ever saw Paris Match at the home of my grandparents. They called it Match, and I can still hear their voices asking each other if they had remembered to pick it up from the newspaper kiosk around the corner from their Parisian apartment. I didn’t know at the time that this was not an affectionate diminutive but the name of the magazine before the war. I read somewhere that in the years following the end of the Second World War, people were suspicious of picture magazines. They reminded them of magazines such as Signal and Il Tempo published in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, that were printed at hundred thousands of copies in different languages and circulated as propaganda across occupied Europe. In its format and use of images, Paris Match is the heir of those magazines; although I also read that when the newly named Paris Match appeared in 1949, it was careful to adopt a light political touch (pro-West, of course) in order to reach the broadest audience possible.

Rather than accessible mildness, what strikes me today looking at those issues you compiled, is the crassness of those captions and the populist vulgarity of the images that invoke in turn shock and phony proximity. We see the horrors of massacres and fighting, and revolutionaries resting: “la révolution c’est fatigant” (revolution is exhausting) reads a headline set next to a laughing Fidel Castro posing in front of the sea. No words, however, are put in the mouth of the always-impeccable British royalty. Its members are portrayed repeatedly, in all points of the globe, their stiff posture suggesting remnants of imperialism in the new Commonwealth. Images of Northern Ireland bring terror closer to home. Home, that is clearly for Paris Match, France. Brightly coloured maps that look as if they were drawn for children repeatedly tell how large a country is compared to France: ‘this country is large like X times France’ captions claim, as if it was necessary to reiterate amazement at the greatness of France despite its diminutive size. However much its political and economic power slowly declines, France remains the measure of the world of Paris Match.

Unfolding like a ribbon through the gallery, your display evokes the idea of an enlarged filmstrip: horizontally, the issues touch one another creating a continuous narrative (mostly there are several copies per issue, so that we can see the full article that you selected). Vertically, the narrow...
tables accommodate exactly two issues, so that the eye travels lengthwise but also up and down on the tables. Large and smaller photographs alternate close up views and wide-angle shots. Surveying the homogeneity of the printed paper, the layout of each issue of the magazine disappears; or rather it becomes a portion of the whole, an edited sequence within a larger story. Walking along the tables propels us through the twelve years of news that you compiled. If I was a historian, it would be easy to read your installation as a ‘history of events’, which is reduced here to bare bones, to a repeated undifferentiated, and over-excited listing of tragic and spectacular events, sewn together through similarly-styled titles and captions. Walter Benjamin famously quoted Abel Gance comparing film to hieroglyphs, and arguing for the need to acquire a new visual literacy. The image that came to my mind instead was that of the Parthenon friezes I recently saw again in London. Perhaps this is because of the repetition of postures, the circulation of gazes from one double spread to another, an illusion of entangled bodies and figures caught in movement. But as it is in those friezes, thrust is combined with stillness and stability. For each picture is also composed and selected so as to tell a complete story (but not, as a caption of Paris Match would state, to ‘make history’). Ultimately, what those double spreads from the 1960s testify to is a fascination for and a belief in the power of the image.

Another newspaper man of that time, Albert Plecy, stated this explicitly in 1962, in a book entitled Grammaire élémentaire de l’image: «Il est vraisemblable que les historiens situeront un jour, vers les années 1960-1980, un fait important dans l’histoire du monde: le passage d’une civilisation fondamentalement marquée par le verbe à une civilisation marquée par l’image”. 2 Plecy’s beliefs led him to create in the mid 1970s in disused Provence quarries, what he called Cathédrales d’Images; events composed of monumental slide projections. Reading about these enabled me to put a name to childhood images I had never been able to identify: a pale gravelled, sandy floor, crowds assembled in large cold white caverns contrasting with the warm countryside outside. I think my grandparents must have taken me to these projections when I was very little. Thinking back, I wondered if there could have been a connection between my grandmother writing about pictures under the guidance of Barthes and these events by Plecy. Put in other terms, how far or how close from one another were the worship of images in Paris Match and their critique by contemporary semiologists? By being both spectacular and restrained your installation triggered that question. Beyond it, it created an extra diegetic space, a mental space traversed by a series of images: Greek friezes, cinema scenes, and childhood memories. Triggered by the slightly discoloured photographs of the dustb back issues of Paris Match, those mental pictures reminded me of the pleasures of remaining at a distance rather than immersing myself in ‘cathedrals of images’, of stepping back to imagine, remember and think rather than plunge into events filmed in real time. Speaking of which: did you see the Guardian is addressing that death of photojournalism by launching a website for uploading users videos? It is called ‘guardianwitness’. Seeing this confirms to me how timely your reflection on Paris-Match is, and how useful it is to help us think through the representation of events then and now.

Thanks to Sven Augustijnen, Jan Mot and Jelmer Wijnstroom.


2 “It is likely that one day, historians will locate an important moment in world history, in the 1960s to the 1980s: the passage from a civilization fundamentally marked by the word to a civilization characterized by the image” (my translation)

The work by Sven Augustijnen, L’histoire est simple et édifiante, Une sélection d’articles parus dans Paris Match (2014) was first shown at the gallery end of 2014 and will soon be part of the exhibition at the Kunsthaus in Zurich, EUROPE – The Future of History, opening on June 12 and of the exhibition Art in the Age of... Asymmetrical Warfare at Witte de With in Rotterdam, starting on September 10.