



CLEARING

Loïc Raguénès

As far as possible, 2009
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translated by John Doherty

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We feed on images. We devour them morning, noon and night; even as we sleep. Blind, we must still be able to see them. Orion for example. And beyond death too. But since this is not the case, as far as I know, it would seem that we don't feel very much, in spite of all our fine speeches, with their unforeseen inverse effect.

We're under-employed. Or, to be precise, form under-employs us. Our human sensorial capacities, always so limited, are incriminated. There's no doubt as to the infinite formal conquest of human understanding in a painting à la Condorcet that may be suggested here or there – but in return, also, there's a hope that when the images come, they'll feast on us.

For the time being, by and large, they ignore us. And this is how the sustained modern effort to titillate them, to combat them, to destroy them, to educate them, must be interpreted. The diet of the image, yesterday, today and tomorrow (but in particular today) is naturally dissociated.

So what's a "dissociated diet"? I refer to the authoritative work on the subject, whose thirty-fifth reworked edition was published in Heidelberg in 1981 by the Germanic professors

Hay and Walb. And I might quote, somewhat at random, from the preface to the tenth edition: "We ourselves and our patients feel that a Dissociated Diet would constitute an advance in the culinary domain, as it is easier to follow than other methods of alimentation. One must of course acquire a knowledge and practice of it, as in the case of any other innovation. With a view to the best possible introduction to the Dissociated Diet, we have endeavoured to adapt it, for our clinic, in such a way that it corresponds to the tastes evinced by human beings, and that each individual may compose it in compliance with the directives indicated." In a word, the point is to nourish one's organism healthily so as to prevent illness, while improving intellectual and other types of ability and performance. Ultimate ethos: "Food must in the first place be useful, then agreeable; and finally, it must be consistent with the laws of chemistry." This sublime artistic programme is spiritualised in another leitmotif that runs through the volume: "No one can eat on your behalf, or digest in your place. No one other than ourselves can take in, assimilate and transform our food, or eliminate our waste."

Flawed reasoning; because in the West there is the artist, who ingurgitates and fabricates for us (in fact Loïc's brother – first clue – is in the restaurant business). So, lo and behold, when we find ourselves in front of a wall bearing small images by Loïc Raguénès, we see a regimen, with instructions – something that has been distinguished and set apart on a plate, that we prepare to sample with pleasure (a stimulus, if ever there was one, to good nutrition, because a subsistence diet isn't everything; there must be voluptuousness).

This is an image which fortunately, right away, offers the eye distinctive symptoms of the contemporary, without which we wouldn't *want* any. An image of today couldn't be created, since everyone ceaselessly reproduces, represents, resembles. It comes to us, fortunately, mediated, weighed up, balanced, found, averaged, sapid or not, connoted, reworked ad infinitum or barely at all, derived from industry or natural husbandry, data banks, magazines, photograms, amateur Internet sites, canonic objects. A fork, a duckling, a lime tree will do just as well as any umpteenth reproduction of a famous painting: Fra Angelico, Antonello da Messina, Watteau, Courbet (one may be more or less a citizen of Besançon) Cézanne / France, Seurat (the indispensable Seurat); and at this point, three dots to be pondered on...

Images repeated, pricked (a minor operation which, after the kneading, aerates the dough and facilitates the fermentation process), hunted down, the better to bring them back. Quality cooking, painstaking treatment (avowedly artisanal) in coloured pencil, but which doesn't, for example, shun the microwave oven, here replaced by Photoshop's bitmap software, which allows the artist, in a quarter of a second at the oven, really, after selecting his image (I've seen him do so), to raguénèsise it as a heated-up, souped-up sauce with a unique flavour, always the same; and then to sign; to scrawl. In these images, ungulate animals, but also birds in a cerulean sky, or a spinach-coloured, sad hyena in a cage, perchance, can sometimes be made out.

Enough, then, of dissociation. A reduction and rapid exhaustion of comparisons: Loïc Raguénès isn't a painter,

and in fact, though he probably never cooks, he has developed a "creative method" that's formidably effective (genre: freeze-dried soup).

To resume, then: *since 2002, Raguénès's pictorial method, with its simplicity of means and great elegance, has consisted of using photographs whose elaboration he extends in his own way, to different degrees.*

On the one hand, in effect, he uses Photoshop to rework the photographs he has chosen, enhancing the photographic grain to the point where they are reduced to the infinity of pixels of which they are comprised.

He then accentuates the spectral dimension of the images, painstakingly colouring or painting them, each time monochromatically, in a range of soft colours.

These photographs, depicting a large spectrum of social and artistic (but mediated) practices, see their process of unrealisation emphasised, though without ever being turned into a process of representation.

On the contrary, applying his method with a light hand, he reveals the optical fascination that can be found in the eye which, through abstraction, brings reality into being.

Loïc Raguénès is also, in a sense, the iconographer of a project whose dimensions are perhaps encyclopaedic, based on an intimate rereading of modernism in its pictorial, architectural, filmic, televisual and iconic dimensions and fictions, not without a touch of nostalgia.

Between the artistic, the technical and the reflexive, LR's images unhinge the effects of signification induced by this set of photographs, and the indeterminacy of their provenance, including, possibly, that of their purpose, while

bringing subtlety to the medium, and the scale.

At the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dole, Raguénès decided, for the first time, to set up a dialogue between works in two different monochromes – one white, the other pink – and wall paintings, notably image-blocks by default – thus accentuating the uncertain status of his images.

With empty screens, due to a supersaturation of light that complexifies the operant reduction, or a composition of hyper-referentialised spaces that take on the memory of different generational subcultures potentially threatened with extinction, joyous, voluntaristic neo-neo-pointillism seems to plot a scission, while displaying many distinct signs of contemporaneity.

Is the idea, then, in spite of oneself, to give oneself up unscrupulously to the charms, the spells (repetitions and copies included), as well as, perhaps, the dead ends of painting?

Loïc Raguénès, using Photoshop, gives logical expression to an image in dots – myriads of dots – without leaving out a single one. He lines up a succession of little groups on the pictorial surface, each time in monochrome; which leads him, classically, from the full to the empty. Is it a breach that he makes, or, as in relief, an over-generated trompe-l'oeil of atoms and particles known to be nothing other than a wonderfully illusory opalescence of bombarded optics from which he makes bitmaps that he subsequently wraps in a glaze of light? Is it the points, dotted lines, dottings, neo-televisionism, over-playing these infinite little rectified points (his poetry does admittedly have something of a tendency to natural rhyme), that pixellise the view?

We no longer exclaim, like Meyer Schapiro in '58, "‘Imagine,’ said Renoir, ‘*The Wedding Feast of Cana* in little dots’" (in the '78 *Selected Papers*). And he continued, "I can't imagine it". It's the opposite that seems unimaginable to us, namely the idea that a vision could be anything other than a question of filters, pixels, dots, defragmentation, specks.¹ The process having become democratised, this is what Raguénès is talking about, if he's talking about anything other than the accumulations, techniques and knowledge that wonderfully prevent us from seeing what we're nonetheless looking at, less in retinal terms than because the instruments of perception, and of sentient, sensual, intellectualised cognisance blur things as intensely as they inform.

Haziness, then: a recourse to the inevitable punctum of Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* as it guides and retains LR in his choice of images, like the wearing-away or usage of the extreme tip that Deleuze talked about (thrice balefully) in his preface to *Difference and Repetition*: "One writes only at the tip of one's knowledge, the extreme tip that separates our knowledge from our ignorance, and causes the one to pass into the other."

To this degree blemished, routinised, weighed down, threadbare – multiplied, Raguénès formulates; talkative, he remains silent. And his group leads pointillism to the Op artists, to their variation-filiation-deviation. He manages to instill into it a certain innocence; undoubtedly because, chosen for its index of figurability, as in dreams of elsewhere, he makes it an object of transition.²

Traditionally, with his dots, when a painting is looked at from a certain distance, the flecks of colour can't be told apart. In optical terms, they merge. But unlike the diverse divisionisms that followed on from this, fusing the beams of light generated by each colour, and making use of their addition, LR, since he functions in terms of reduction, manages, amusingly, to subtract what the process classically adds, when life presents itself as division. Is this a zero-sum operation, or does whiteness reduce the plenitude of its coloured variant (apart from the vanity that's indulged by the merest little picture)? Not all that much: the frequencies, in their mattness, give rise to the retinal buzz that has to do with the neutral, but also the technique of the plasma screen, which uses an ionised fluid similar to neon insofar as it consists of electricity illuminating a gas. From another point of view, however, Loïc Raguénès implements a discursive function of the breach (molecular) in which the photon annihilates, after the manner of Lucretius, as soon as it becomes luminous; but this is probably not so much because he has chosen to be a painter (in the old style, by and large) as because our instruments sometimes enjoy an unconscious lead, an iota of technological differential over our representations and ways of seeing which renders them premonitory, superior to us.

This tension, then (if one cared to be cruel), between the obvious impersonalisation of the procedure, with its charge of metaphors, usages and excess, and the advancement of a signified content by an image, which is taken to be shareable and immediately comprehensible by the viewer (rarely made explicit as such, indeed, as might

be expected from the title of the work) would smoothly integrate Raguénès's work into a history of art of the proper name that would consist of pitilessly perceiving and interpreting only on the basis of this untypical marker, at the expense of formal identifications and representational structure.

We see Nicole Kidman, i.e. an abyss full of signs before even being a signification; not forgetting that a time may come when she will mean absolutely nothing to anyone – but one may certainly not count on *us* to imagine *that*.³

So what is the scope of the image in an economy that is both rigorous, retinal, supersaturated and pictorial, minus its iconographic value, other than to be wholly confined within a memorial enterprise, a family album without a family, a diary? In their spurned *dilection*, images are a prey to LR's monochromes – which he asserts all the more clearly by presenting them here (one white, one pink) for the first time – while also being strangely called on to colour them; because the images he chooses, on the basis of the variable affective coefficients he attributes to them, and works on, look like motors whose function is the multicolouration of a logic that has faded almost to the erasure-upsurge he brings into play (unless they be taken as nothing but dirt, the way some seek to replace time by *uchronia*).

And also, no doubt, because the use of the monochrome makes it possible to avoid talking about painting in terms of the intentionality it is instinctively accorded by the modern tradition.

But if the signified content has the quality of absence that is the foundation of the signifier, then the image and its

presentation are no longer any more than a vain reminder that colour literalises, by a technical process which is, of course, purely citational and unimpeachable. In this system, should colour, and its methodical choice, based on unicity, be considered as a sort of labialisation, an intonation which alone can give us access to a space that is hopefully transparent?⁴

The image, then, all sugary and simpering, has a flavour of industrial praline and marzipan, like Mozartkugel, a souvenir of Austria, whose packaging also recycles a sort of Mozartian portrait.

Because the proper names he waves around, curiously, are not so much those of Francis Bacon, a death cap, Miró's workshop, Fra Angelico, Bob Dylan, Nosferatu the vampire, Françoise Dorléac, Chapi Chapo, *I, Christiane F.*, 13, *Addict*, *Prostitute*, inseparables on a branch, a Breton bonnet seen from behind, or a lily, as their pale hues, insidiously seductive, "the tender hegemony that renders itself intimately identical to the thing, and thereby, truly, theory" (theory, let us be clear, as in a procession of elements, ranks of rows, silhouettes, more than an exercise in thinking; in other words, like *Ipanema Theories*).

All the more so as Loïc Raguénès has exacerbated the situation in recent times by directly seizing pictorial subject-objects drawn from the most exalted paintings, or at least their representation, and hanging them, in Dole, from coloured rails, the way James Stirling did a makeover of the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, period by period, in reverberant tones, with green RGB for the Primitives, and greys, blues, violets and yellows for the moderns. Or again

he links up with the Matissian tradition of the lascivious painter who, for noble artistic reasons, prevails upon young women (exclusively) to undress before him. To this process, LR subjects only innumerable images, via the bitmap matrice, in the course of long, patient afternoons. Having picked them up here or there, he scrutinises and palpates them, like a pointer, and thereby, we may be sure, contributes to the inexorable legal extension (already in progress, naturally) of the status of images in relation to which we should see a form of individuation, an underpinning of rights and duties, notably moral (not everything can be resolved in pecuniary terms), which prevent us from getting them to do just about anything we please, as is still the case. Or again, anticipating this movement, he proposes pure, austere, non-titillating image-blocks – something like Saint Andrew's crosses painted on a wall, as may be seen on administrative letters, signifying an exemption from postage charges for the sender, who's curious to know what the authorities could possibly desire so strongly to inform him about that they'd seek to enter into contact by letter, to the point of paying the cost of return post.

Picture rail, anchoring point, background or socialising trompe l'oeil might thus constitute an encouragement to read his work, for example, through the prism of *An Average Art. Essay on the Social Uses of Photography*, a study by Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski, Robert Castel et al., which is iconic and dated (very '70s, with its spendidly sober "Minuit" cover and its pitiless conclusions about photography-objectivity-reality and pictoriality), like LR's

photographs, the invariant purpose of which, whether one likes it or not, is legitimation. LR is hereby promoting a certain nobility of art in the age of its downgraded reproducibility, and cobbling together, between the habitus of a meticulous class and a painterly ethos, small drawings whose slightly master-craftsmanly dimension might be supposed to achieve expression, ultimately, in *Ardéchois Coeur Fidèle*, a high-end French television series of six 55-minute episodes that began in November 1974.⁵

But the dot, as a modality of working time, was also that which counted out those interminable erstwhile Wednesday afternoons we spent doing homework; after which we watched television, or thumbed through the viewing guide, the modernistic grid. The artistic enterprise, always more or less monopersonal, is now more willing to practise an individualised schedule that can be activated only after the works committee has been consulted.

As Siegfried Kracauer remarks, in *The Salaried Masses*, “It has to be recognised, according to Professor Heyde, that the monotony of an identically-repeated job leaves the mind free for other objects. The worker contemplates his class-based ideals, secretly settles scores with his enemies, or thinks about his wife and children. Meanwhile, the work continues.”

One may then proceed by the enlargement of regression, dots, globules or droplets, as by the use of a microscope, from the Little Chemist to the game which stimulates three-year-old children’s manual skills. They start off passing strands of wool through holes, point after point – “I hereby lay a wager: braiding, for the painting of

the future, could well play a similar role to that which, for three centuries, was played by perspective.” (Hubert Damisch, talking about François Rouan) – and end up with a picture for Mother’s Day.

And then there’s *The Art Of Not Going Too Far*, a children’s colouring book seen by LR one Saturday in a shop in Dijon.⁶ He’d gone there to buy coloured pencils; meadow-green = exactly what he needed for an A4 drawing (his method’s homothetic). Herein one learns about tracing a line, and demarcation, the “crazy pricking of dependence and independence, pin after pin of obsession” that Dominique Fourcade talked about in relation to Pierre Buraglio.

And so on, it would seem, in this very French style of object painting: “Love, let us go and see if the rose”, etc., eternally bathed in the sensual shadows of a glade which, we might recall, is that of contemporary artistic approaches – a way of touching the subject that can be found at <http://www2b.ac-lille.fr/weblettres/tice/dubellay.htm#T%C3%A9l%C3%A9chargement>, “Hyper texte pour l’étude d’une œuvre intégrale *Les Antiquités de Rome* de Du Bellay” (here too, I’m perforating the text): “The objective is to set out the hypotheses of interpretation... The hypertext in question proposes entry via the title, form and analysis of the enunciation. A student, at the keyboard, brings up a series of observations on the entry he has chosen (on the screen, the text concerns the highlighting of certain significant effects). He has to comment on them orally in front of the class, via light... The paradox of the Du Bellay project is defined thus: it wants to ‘draw powdery relics out of the tombs (...) of the old Romans’, to bring back that

which is no longer; to adjoin ‘in this little picture painted in poetic colours’ something that is now only powder”; that of soft-lead pencil, without fixative, on Arches paper.

Points that are those of the peripheries of entry, and that indicate *where* one wants to act. Controlling the movement of the cursor on the two dimensions of the computer’s graphic screen: a ball, a sensitive surface or a flexible handle, and *how* one wants to act. One or more buttons, and a pressure that indicates to the program a precise function: selection, activation, a request for a choice of possible actions.

But let us look further – let us grammaticalise, in effect, this “Nostalgia Radio” aspect of the question that encapsulates Raguénès’s technique: *where* one wants to act, and *how* one wants to act, through a fine, personal, established network, with a technique that is itself based on reminiscence, an attentive or trenchant choice of photos, and their maceration, which turns them into images; syntagms from the ‘70s or thereabouts, frozen into death: Niemeyer, Joe Dassin, François Truffaut (and not Eustache), *New Life* (but is it Grandrieux or Dante?), *Emmanuelle*, or indeed, almost, Narciso Yepes’s guitar arrangements for *Forbidden Games*, if, curiously, Brigitte Fossey were not absent. As things stand, we’re not highly paedophilic; *Les Poseuses* are shooting up. On the other hand there’s the fact that the film dates from 1952; which proves that it’s worth specifying the time frame. A conquered indeterminate future? Certainly not. An absolutist present, ceaselessly deceased, once and for all. Yesterday mystifying and individualistic, for want of better.

A preterit of action may thus be mentioned; 1) because it’s not known what that might mean, exactly, with its indeterminate value; 2) because the preterit is a tense that “does not exist” in French; it is this sixth past tense that LR activates, casually, because of its unpronounceability in its idiom, in painting; which does not rule out the possibility of 3) inveigling into the ear, in art, a petrifying-petrified fountain that’s relatively agreeable;⁷ or even placing speech as a whole – cowardly relief – under the sign of preterition;⁸ and 4) because the preterit, in those languages that use it (the typical example being English, at least in the oft-garbled form that’s current in contemporary art), is a *simple past*. Tracing out a past action that the present has undone means that it’s neither exactly a simple past that narrates previous time nor an evident imperfect; and this is why LR’s art is ultra-fine-tuned. Action, because he shows us the rhetoric of the paint or the pencil that marks out circles or time, and appeases the puritanical ethic of the formal work; but without *retroaction*, because this year, again, Loïc’s doing living languages. The form’s simple and tranquil; it’s a question of bitmaps. For regular verbs, add “-d” or “-ed”. For those that are irregular, on the other hand, you have to learn the different forms by heart.

1. Cf. the 2002 memoirs of the French reality TV star Loana, *She Called Me Speck*.
2. Peristaltic work that Eric Troncy saw as being generally applied in the mid-'90s (long years of training, searching and artistic research for Loïc Raguénès), which, not without violence, resulted in the cross-section that allowed LR to set up his practical system of generalised synonymy (thus establishing relationships of semantic proximity between words and expressions in a given language, in terms of very similar significations, and thus obscurities).
3. "A delicious trap was sprung by Raquel Welch in person on an official visit to Paris. She was staying in one of the prestigious suites on the third floor of the Ritz, reserved for her by UNESCO. Not only was she a charming ambassador, but she combined her statuesque beauty with a detailed knowledge of ballroom dancing, which, due to a generational effect, is becoming rare, and has been chosen by the international organisation as a priority target for a rescue effort. Waiting for her as she left via the side door to have breakfast in the kitchen with the staff – who, for the duration of her short stay, had elected her as a delegate, though without union affiliation, and, for once, in line with the Charter of Amiens – was Mick Jagger, accompanied (hang onto your hats) by André Rieu on his violin, for a glamorous polka, as one might imagine. Part of episode was filmed, fortunately, because the entire proceeds from the sale of this, admittedly, slightly forced memory are going to Handicap International."
4. The sentimentality, naturally, of kisses in extreme close-up. But objectively, also, what is pronounced in these images, framed at the level of the larynx, or perhaps the pharynx.
5. Or, how does one become an artist, and what kind of object is one most likely to produce, without excessive determinism, when one is precisely a child of... (fill in your own choice), in this current dry, mild, climate, so conducive to distribution and publicity outside any context of scientific-type elucidation, and which, thereby tempered, curiously brings together pOp and the sociology of combat (which Pierre Bourdieu, regarding the instrumentalisation of his works, feigned to find offensive, we don't doubt; and like everyone else at the time, he no doubt spoke ill of Vasarely)? As to the equivalent of the cottage lacemaker, working with Photoshop, and not unaware that competition exists: on the other side of the Atlantic one might cite Wayne Gonzales; and over here, Xavier Veilhan shows what distinguishes the infinite cloud, in the Raguénès manner, from the supersignifications of the *Landscape-Ghosts*.
6. One possibility would be to see his work in a localist Dijon context: the roofs in traditional multicoloured Burgundy tiles might explain the existence of an image like *Moulinex* in his corpus; and there are visual proximities with Didier Marcel's work. Then there is a dialogue with Le Consortium, which, however futile, is close: LR's *Dancing*, for those of my age, is reminiscent of Philippe Parreno, while his televisionism suggests Pierre Huyghe's *Mobil TV*, including the fact that the pixelised graphism of the word "Documents", printed in red on the back cover of *Speech Bubbles*, which was published in 2001 in the "Documents sur l'Art" collection, presents some similarities with Loïc's *Vie nouvelle*, also published by Les Presses du Réel, in the collection "La Salle de Bains", in 2005. And I note that a still more intimate source of his pointillism may be detected, quite simply, in the dieresis on the "i" of his first name.
7. Somewhat like those novels by Cadot where it suddenly starts snowing. In '95-'96, LR was reading "Ma vie privée", by Emmanuel Hocquard, in Pierre Alferi and Olivier Cadot's *Revue de Littérature Générale*. Hocquard had experimented with a *blaireau* (in Franch, "badger" or "shaving brush") in a throwaway theory consisting of "a) a method; b) a particular type of activity (*Robinson badgered around all day*); c) the result of this activity (*today, Robinson produced a superb shaving brush*); d) the concept." But the Raguénèsian dachshund, with its irresistible short-haired palette, which, for better or worse, risks becoming the artist's emblem, is a muscular burrower, a bit old-fashioned, short of social visibility, and also short-legged (as ridiculous as, "It's abstract painting!" "It's figurative painting!" – the very thing that also allows such distinctions to become operant once more). Google tells us that the dachshund was originally bred for badger-hunting, which is why LR has used it in dozens, scores, whole lengths of wallpaper, as gorgeous marrons glacés. Another, more doubtful literary alliance would consist of crossing the mutt with the evil Meudon Master of the three little dots (whose name, one notes, has more to do with touches than dots, and for whom "Love is infinity placed within reach of poodles"; in this case doctored dachshunds. But Eros, being an anti-destiny, etc.).
8. This figure is *excusive* of style, in that it consists of talking about something after announcing that one is certainly not going to talk about it, e.g. "I'm not here to tell you..." or "As far as possible, we shouldn't talk about this". A considerable part of the present text derives from a recycling of phrases and fragments found on the Internet; or indeed looted, e.g. Antonia Birnbaum's 2001 lecture, "K. sociologist (Regarding S. Kracauer's *The Salaried Masses*".