

**Etienne Hatt**

about *Chiens de fusil*

for the eponym book published at le Bec en l'air

Paris, January 2015

# Reconciliation

Les Chiens de fusil by Léa Habourdin may seem disconcerting. This apparently disparate book combines photographs and facsimiles of double pages of notebooks in which there are small irregular printouts of readings stuck with adhesive tape, sketches and drawings of awkward style, and isolated, often enigmatic phrases. Images are repeated with different sizes or framings. According to whether they are vignettes, thumbnail images or full-page photographs, they do not have the same status. So, in addition to disparity, there is ambiguity. However, Les Chiens de fusil is a very coherent whole: the notebook double pages are from the notebook that the artist kept between 2007 and 2010, when she produced the series “Aux loups”, “Cours toujours” and “Cahier de doléances” from which the photographs were taken. Les Chiens de fusil is a time-slice taken from an artist’s works, delving into a creative process. But the book is not a reinterpretation of her work, its making-of, its documentation, or its explicit clarification. In it, the notebook pages cannot be dissociated from the photographs with which they alternate. Rather, Les Chiens de fusil affirms that the artist’s work process is research, that it must not be confined to research, but that the research must be rendered and considered as an integral part of the work process. The series “Preuves objectives 01 : notes sur l’attraction” (2011-2013) was to radicalise this affirmation by right away associating photographs, drawings and annotations.

The term “research”, which evokes the systematic approach and the objectivity of science, seems inappropriate. But Léa Habourdin asserts its use, making science a model to be approached in her own way, that is, by giving priority to intuition. For the artist has no

method. Or rather, she does not consciously follow any rule or procedure. She collects the images by multiplying the shots and prints. She lives with them, surrounds herself with them, tests their resistance to the eyes, and approaches them by arranging them on the wall or in her notebook. Her shots are not guided by a specific plan, but just by a state of mind, a thought or a word that she came across and which she noted. There are many of them in *Les Chiens de fusil*, such as “Essaims et Nuées” (“Swarms and hordes”), “Effa roucher” (“Scare away”). In a second stage, the images accumulate around a theme to form a series. But, as soon as the shot is taken, there are recurrent motifs.

The animal is one such motif. Wolf, bear, or grey crowned crane, it is above all wild. Léa Habourdin never photographs it in its original environment. Instead of nature, she prefers the artificiality of dioramas and zoos. If she works in these places, which are a means for viewing a world that is naturally hidden, it is not out of interest in their capacity to create fiction. In this respect, one must distinguish her from Hiroshi Sugimoto, who sees photography as a means to complete the illusionism of the diorama (“Dioramas”, a series started in 1976), or from Manit Sriwanichpoom who, on the contrary, wants to reveal the fiction of this device by highlighting showcases, their edges and their reflections (“Safari”, 2005). Not to mention Richard Billingham, some of whose wide views, which highlight the solitude of animals, also describe the architecture of zoos (“Zoo”, 2005). As opposed to these three artists, Léa Habourdin works indistinctly in one or other of these places. But it is not so much because she is attracted to the indetermination between the living and the dead that her close-ups create as to the representation, or, more precisely, the fantasy vision of wildlife conveyed by dioramas and zoos. In fact, having arisen as a reaction to the animal cages favoured in the 19th century, dioramas, soon followed by zoos with their “natural” islets that can still be seen today, aim to evoke the animals’ original environment in order to return to a wildness that 19th century scientific classification had standardized. If one believes Léa Habourdin’s photographs taken in the dioramas, returning to the wild

also entailed multiplying predation scenes. Perhaps this was a way to keep the animals' bestiality at a distance in order to assert humankind's civility and to extend an age-old opposition sustained by Christianity and its representations, in which human-animal hybrids that break with this dualism are seen as negative figures.

Léa Habourdin does not subscribe to this opposition. This is less by sympathy for the animal world than to understand humans who, according to her, also have a form of relationship based on parading and predation, which are often combined in a same erotic tension. Devoid of sensuality, this tension is made of violence and suffering and refers to Georges Bataille's *Érotisme*, which is one of the artist's sources. In this respect, the opening plate of *Les Chiens de fusil* does more than just set the stage. It plunges us into the heart of the matter. It brings together images taken within a few hours in Lithuania in the summer of 2008. Léa Habourdin meets two women friends, photographs one applying her make-up, the other showing off a tattoo –significantly, an eye– and captures the ambiguous gesture of affectionate strangling. Then she goes to the local zoological museum and she photographs dioramas: a bird of prey seizing a hare, or three wolves competing for the body of a deer. The artist has laid the foundations of work which, for several years, will consist in analysing people's behaviour in the mirror of animal behaviour, to highlight our animal side or, more precisely, what animals and people have in common, until there is no distinction between the two kingdoms or worlds. This lack of distinction is also reflected humourously by the peep board through which people can place their heads and pose to be photographed as gorillas, or by the expressions that the artist devises, such as "Ne pas oublier d'être bête" ("Don't forget to be dumb") or "N'oublie pas tes cornes chéri" ("Don't forget your horns, dear"). Conveying this tension between beings implies turning towards bodies or, more precisely, being interested in apparently banal gestures, whether they involve touching, catching or uncovering flesh. This is why Léa Habourdin hides most of the faces, which would introduce psychological considerations, and keeps only the bodies, often fragmenting them in order to stress the gesture. A double page

of the notebook reveals this attention. On the left is a vignette showing two boys holding each other by the forehead. They seem to be both attracting and repelling each other. One is seen in three-quarter profile, while the other's face is hidden by his arm. Especially, Léa Habourdin has coloured in red all the parts of the image that are not related to the gesture that she shows in negative in pencil on the right-hand page. One must probably relate these opposing approaching and removal movements to several diagrams of arrows that punctuate the book. The vignette subtitled "FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELT WHILE SEATED" explains briefly how to buckle and unbuckle a seatbelt. Another, bearing the annotation "the war continues", is a diagram of emergency exits. When compared with the predation scenes, it takes on special meaning. For it is in the montage of disparate elements that the diffuse meaning of Léa Habourdin's images, sketches and annotations becomes defined. It stimulates to associations of ideas, highlights analogies and creates metaphors. It gives her work a documentary value which is lacking in each of the elements when they are taken separately. This is because the artist belongs to a generation for which the documentary, after being too often reduced to an apparently neutral style, implies in fact neither literality nor transparency and even finds fulfilment in artifice and construction, whether it is a matter of staging, or, as with Léa Habourdin, of montage.

With the latter, the artist outlines an empirical ethology, an intuitive study of her congeners' behaviour and also her own. Her participative manner of observation gives her work an autobiographic character. The artist appears several times. In one case, she is at one with an inflatable crocodile, a playful representation of the wild animal. In another, she sitting alone on a bed. This last image is associated with a photograph of bombardments of Arles (the city where she studied) and, at the very bottom of the page, the words "casi un abrazo". When asked, Léa Habourdin reveals the tragic dimension that links together these disparate elements. The documentary's would-be objectivity has given way to a very subjective approach which however

goes beyond the ordinary personal diary and, in a way, aims at the universality of science.

Nevertheless, this documentary ambition does not exhaust the montage by Léa Habourdin, in which the connections are also based on the images themselves, and on the feelings, impressions and energies that they create. Far from being random, the artist likes to create oppositions between aggressiveness and gentleness, and between the archaic and the contemporary. She also contrasts the flows that bring the photographs to life. Thus, in the double page that has five vignettes on the right and five arrows on the left, the arrows indicate the movements of the eyes induced by the images. If we stop to take a close look at these arrows, we can make out, by transparency, the back of the page of the original notebook. This is the negative drawing mentioned above, which the artist produced from the photograph of a gesture. For the moment, it is a potential future image. A few pages later, it will already be an updated past memory.

Léa Habourdin's art calls into play our imagination and our memory. Both literally and figuratively, it unfolds between and also behind the images. This characteristic probably explains why everything is coherent in *Les Chiens de fusil*, especially the irreconcilable.

Translation Peter McCavana

Katharina Günther

*for and everything becomes nothing again*

London, May 2016

# Border Crosser

Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) - rare bird of prey with unique morphology, only member of the Pandionidae sub-order ; genus name refers to the mythical Greek king Pandion, whose daughters and son-in-law were transformed into fowl (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*)

We are all animals, they became birds.

Deep in the Baltic woods the stage is set for an ancient play. The narrative is written by nature itself : the arrival of life on this planet, the nurturing, protecting and caring for our young until they spread their wings to repeat the circle of birth, copulation and death once again. *and everything becomes nothing again* follows the breeding cycle of an osprey couple from hatching until the two fledglings leave the nest. The raptors, with their dramatic colouration and the piercing eye of a hunter, make emphatic protagonists who act out their personal drama in the arena of their eyrie, through light and dark, sunshine and rain, in movement and stillness. We are silent witnesses, unseen and unnoticed. A marvelling audience of an eternal epos, repeated a thousand times, outside of time, outside of space.

The scientist scrutinizes, counts and evaluates the bird following its genetic coding and animal instinct. The bird, however, is a border crosser. Just as it moves with ease between the ground, the sky and the water, so does it drag us with it between actuality and myth, dream and wakefulness, human and animal. The burning lens of the camera reveals archetypes of human behaviour seen through the metaphor of natural law. Another metamorphosis is now taking place : sheltering becomes unquestioned loyalty, feeding- unconditional love and independence- grief, pride and gratefulness. The zone of indiscernibility between man and animal is not only in flesh and spirit

but also in patterns of behaviour. What is left in the empty nest ? The residues of the Ur-bond, the deeply personal experience of parental care which moulded the very core of our being.

Michel Le Belhomme

about *Cahier de doléances* (extract of *Chiens de fusil*)

written for DerGrief magazine,

Paris, May 2014

# Courtships rituals

Lea Habourdin doesn't care much for the conventions of photography, her series mix black and white as well as colors; her realism hugs the curves of blurred over-closeness and of nervous proximity. Her work is similar to an encyclopaedic process, her museum of (very) natural histories is of fragmentation and harshness. Lea Habourdin observes, dissects, and applies the scalpel to her everyday life, adventures and encounters. However, this is nothing like a simple personal diary; she focuses on and confronts disparate bodies. In *Cahier de Doléances*, a sort of comprehensive diorama, flesh comes together with flesh, without hierarchy, and they engage almost by mimetism on a contradictory dialogue about their conditions, whether animal or human. Sensuality is elsewhere, far beyond our usual habits. On the one hand, there is the beauty of this polar bear whose raw energy is liberated in a suspended swim; on the other, a person's back marked with an H as a sign of ownership: convulsing, squirming, bundled up. Even her landscapes are a form of reversal; vital energy converses with inertia. These photographs constantly shift us between an enhanced lifelessness and a floating presence. There is a recurring idea of escape, exhausted desire and curiosity. Her nocturnal wanderings exude loneliness, especially in the series *Preuves Objectives 01 : Notes sur l'attraction*. Even in photos taken during « entertainment » parties, excitement is firstly about sweat and eclipse. The ecstatic sensuality of those close-up parading bodies documents curves that appear caressable but have the power to burn. Lea Habourdin bites into the raw night and extracts precious intuitive moments from this overdose of ugliness and usual shadows. This



ordinary life, seen from the focal distance of extreme proximity, becomes an epic saga à la PAOLO UCELLO. This parading, between the attraction for singularity and the rejection of the boredom of an everlasting new beginning, takes place in something that is more than mere erotic seduction. It materializes in the drifting and violence towards this frozen time. This porous immediacy and this unavoidable refusal create thus a documentary that is both hybrid and fantastical.

translation Ramona Bourhis

Katharina Günther

for Preuves objectives I : Notes sur l'attraction

London, March 2013

# To Succumb

*Notes sur l'Attraction* (Notes about attraction) establishes a visual narrative of references, associations and allusions around the points of contact between the underlying rules of nature and highly personal principles of human behaviour. Images of pure emotion correlate, complement and question each other like lovers do. They reveal the subtle force of touch, look, feel as well as the interplay of distance and intimacy, ecstasy and romance, coqueting and seduction. In the right constellation they can lead to the closest proximity (of two people). As physical objects, we are subjected to the elemental laws of nature. As human beings, gravitational attraction draws us to each other. Just as the journey of the heavenly bodies is determined by forces mightier than themselves, we follow the unwritten rules of desire and conquest.

Flying is a transitory experience and weightlessness an illusion. We gravitate around our counterpart and as certain as the apple falls, we fall for each other. In the end, we all succumb.

**Dominique Savariau**

about *Cahier de doléances* (extract of *Chiens de fusil*)

written for *Échos*, at the Immix Gallery,

Paris, April 2013

# In the heart of things unfinished (extract)

This *Cahier de doléances* comprises a series of 16 photos organised into a discursive sequence. A tight frame around the main figure prevents it from integrating the background, at the same time as placing it very close to the viewer's eye, removing the physical and metaphorical distance inherent to interpretation. In addition, the anti-logical system of the images functioning according to a dual polarity - empty/full, high/low, opacity (of an adjusted black stocking)/transparency (of this same stocking through tension), life/taxidermy (mise en abyme of the photo), predation/display, texture and folds of a fabric/grain of the stone and undulating stony corals... etc. - results in the viewer's inability to make an interpretative, paradigmatic choice. The viewer is invited to meditate on this perceptual confusion while identities go haywire and everything changes. It is not a matter of illusion or reality: the reality is illusion and vice versa. The world retreats cloaked in light and shadow, the latter masking more than it reveals, petrifying the fruits that it leaves us (the childish tattoo on the bare arm). When the organ for sight is contradictorily exactly that of its impossibility, the dream of an impossible simultaneity of positive and negative belongs to the fantasy of alchemical transmutation. So? Continue to photograph. Present this list of grievances so that 'For sorrow's eye, glazed with blinding tears, Divides one thing entire to many objects,' (Shakespeare). Present a list of grievances to invent ourselves thanks to the mediation of art, to conquer our individuality bearing our desire to be, to see and to create, at the horizon of striving

towards this third term that R. Barthes calls Neutral. Discover the truth in movement and perpetual renewal, winding between hope and despair, being and not being, in the world of metamorphoses, 'somewhere in the heart of things unfinished' (Rilke).

Translated by L. Jablonowska