

# In memory of Édouard Levé

## ON DREAMS

Jean-Max Colard

*I do not interpret dreams.*<sup>1</sup>

It is not only his first, matricial and foundational series of “reconstituted dreams”, a sequence of enigmatic scenes indirectly borrowed from the artist’s oneiric activity, but, at certain moments, the whole of Édouard Levé’s photographic output that appears to me as something dreamlike. Right down to these words from his *Autoportrait*, which have the ring of both an initial idea and a culmination of all his work: “I have had the idea of a Museum of Dreams.”<sup>2</sup> Obviously, this extension, this prolongation of dream to all his images, is an unwarranted analogy on my part, for except that first series of “reconstituted dreams”, none of his future visions takes dream as its raw material, but then I like the idea of practising art criticism less as a science than as an admittedly rather fluctuating operation, a mental mongrelisation, a mixture of basic emotions and reflections on art, of sensations filtered through and tested by conceptualisation.

They are then dreams, in the broad sense, these clothed bodies in sexual positions, in *Pornographie*, a paradoxical, un-logical fantasy image that is erotic in the way it imposes deviance on raw porn imagery. Or these other clothed bodies of rugby players frozen in mid-game, in scrums, tackles, touches, passes – the emblematic actions but also capital scenes in a series of contact sheets that the artist meticulously recomposes in a studio, a camera obscura, based on standard images excerpted from the sporting press. Then there is the dream of anxiety, this white nightmare of a ghostly walk in the little village of Angoisse (Anxiety). And then the dream of the bourgeois dinner held on the Nuit Blanche in a shop window, in front of amazed passers-by<sup>3</sup>. Finally, there was that other displacement of reality that proposes a play on homonyms, a shifting of the terrain between word and things, the poetic procedure of derivation (*mer* [sea]-*mère* [mother]) which, like the Freudian slip, belongs to the realm of the unconscious. The *Homonymes* series, in which Yves Klein becomes anonymous, is thus a dream of language, as is the travel journal written by Levé in an “other” *America* where the names of towns are homonyms of European towns. Indeed, do we not find in *OEuvres* this

---

<sup>1</sup> *Autoportrait*, (P.O.L., 2005), 96.

<sup>2</sup> *Autoportrait*, 9. Already, in 2000, *OEuvres* (Paris: P.O.L., 2000) contained a variant of this idea in a description that is very close to the first series of *Rêves reconstitués*: “5. An exhibition presents that differ in spirit, style and technique, but have a common origin: the author saw them in a dream” (8). Or again, in this confidence in *Autoportrait*: “I remember my dreams better when they are useful for my work” (96).

<sup>3</sup> *Vivarium*, Paris, Nuit Blanche, 7 October 2006. Nuit Blanche is a Parisian art event held in October in which art happenings and events are put on all through the night around the city. – *Trans*.

fragment numbered 356: “In a room, with no apparent logic, different objects are laid out, all bearing the same name “sommier”: a stuffed pack horse, a traveller’s trunk; a mattress with springs in ...”<sup>4</sup> Homonymy is deployed within sleep.

Without attenuating the marked differences that there may be between these works, and without forgetting, either, that apart from the reconstituted dreams, many of the images in Reconstitutions are the result, not of dream, but of a critical, semiological distance in relation, notably, to press images<sup>5</sup>, the fact remains that the ensemble is steeped in an “oneiric atmosphere”, which Quentin Bajac very much picked up on. This is directly related to the artist’s aesthetic and technical options: “Frontality, empty space, use of colour, inexpressive figures... This highly coherent practical and conceptual set-up endows the reconstitutions with formal homogeneity: a single oneiric climate, like Nerval’s ‘spreading of dream into real life’.”<sup>6</sup>

So why not signal the paradox and, indeed, the originality of this kind of neutral, blank dreamlike quality in Levé’s work – an “*onirisme blanc*” by analogy with the flat, bleached-out style of writing known as *écriture blanche*. Here the “dream atmosphere” works not by arbitrary associations or the leaps of a reckless narrative, not by a Lynch-like haziness of the plot and red-velvet-curtain decorum, but by the cold operations of neutralisation. Take the (computer-like) background against which the images are built: first it is very white, in the *Rêves reconstitués*, then it greys over in the *Actualités* series, becoming a dull, tertiary beige in *Pornographie*, and then the black of night, of the studio or stage, that comes through in all the latest series of *Reconstitutions*, and that we find again in *Fictions*, 2006. For these are again dreams, these highly composed mise-en-scènes, these arrangements of persons, these obscure ceremonies with very off, distanced commentaries that are the short texts in the middle of the book, incomplete, visual and post-Surrealist texts whose style evokes dream narrative: “From a distance, I observe burial clowns demonstrating in front of a living statue. Unless it is a silent conductor conducting a performance without music.”<sup>7</sup> In his first experiment with black-and-white, Levé takes the process and its contrasts to the very limits where the positive print is almost like a negative – a “transfer”, in sum, a term defining a particular operation of the unconscious, and a word that is also the title of a series of narrative images, contemporary and therefore highly divergent revisitings of several old master paintings at the fine arts museum in Tours.<sup>8</sup>

But of all these characteristics, it is no doubt the inexpressiveness of the figures that is the most disconcerting and the most conducive to a dreamlike atmosphere: at once absorbed and impassive, inexpressive and somehow inwardly absent from the actions in which they are

---

<sup>4</sup> *Oeuvres*, 139.

<sup>5</sup> This semiological critique can play against advertising, as can be seen in the description: “Advertising photographs are replayed by inexpressive models. The absence of slogan makes the message incomprehensible” (*Oeuvres*, 136). There is the same critical relation to the postcards, this time in fragment 271: “Postcards reconstitute French folklore, but the traditional referents are neutralised. The people are dressed in grey, the décor is grey” (113).

<sup>6</sup> Quentin Bajac, “Le trouble du spectateur”, in Édouard Levé, *Reconstitutions* (Paris: Phileas Fogg, 2003), 90.

<sup>7</sup> *Fictions*, (P.O.L., 2006), unpaginated.

<sup>8</sup> *Transferts*, 2004, series produced for the exhibition *Images au centre 04*, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours, France.

taking part, the players in these tableaux vivants are like sleepwalkers, not so much actors in the dream as dreamers themselves, impassively engaged in their own mental constructions. Thus it is not in the old, traditional form of a constituted, reconstituted person with a clearly established civic identity that the subject returns to the visual narrative here: rather, this individual is hollowed and holed by the twentieth century with its psychoanalysis and deconstruction of narrative, and takes the indecisive form of the sleepwalker. The subject in flux.

Clearly, these somnambular figures are strangely like us, with that appearance they sometimes have, in their jeans and T-shirts and earbuds, of a dazed mix of absorption and detachment, like people watching a film or TV: “frozen in their minimum position of emptiness”<sup>9</sup>. Dream is a modality of critique, the fictional and “out-of-world” mask of a social satire returning into the present. Seen from this viewpoint, the *Fictions* and the *Quotidien* series, which replay scenes from the press whose meaning or raison d’être we no longer know, but also *Pornographie* and *Rugby*, by the manipulation of bodies that they imply, are closer than others to a session of collective hypnosis: whether they are miming a political demonstration or an accident, whether upright or lying on the ground, whether engaging in some mysterious and obscure ceremony, these figures have the presence/absence of directed consciousness. “The sentimental hypnotist urges me to be stiff. I help his flat-woman show. My body is plastic, my will, elastic,” says one of the texts in *Fictions*. Then there is this other tableau vivant: “Settled brothers, black cousins, cold friends: seated sleepwalker, hypnotised and upright, gestural consoler.” For often, these collective dreams institute a somnambulistic society or sociality. Personally, what I see here is a form of critique of our numbed relation to the spectacle and the consumption of images. Like this fragment of *Fictions* which describes both hypnotism and the beginning of a film: “The music empties the place of its reality, dictates the loss of self, and facilitates my rocking on a chair.”

---

<sup>9</sup> *OEuvres*, 89