

Félix Nadar, *When I Was a Photographer*, trans. Eduardo Cadava and Liana Theodoratou. Cambridge, MA, and London, UK: MIT Press, 2015. 336 pp., \$ 25.95 cloth ISBN 9780262029452 \$ 18.95 eBook ISBN 9780262330701

Charles Reeve

Volume 42, Number 1, 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1040852ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040852ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Reeve, C. (2017). Review of [Félix Nadar, *When I Was a Photographer*, trans. Eduardo Cadava and Liana Theodoratou. Cambridge, MA, and London, UK: MIT Press, 2015. 336 pp., \$ 25.95 cloth ISBN 9780262029452 \$ 18.95 eBook ISBN 9780262330701]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 42(1), 101–103. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040852ar>

even re-awakening, of historical-mindedness in the context of public institutions. If historical consciousness is to play a significant role in productive or meaningful museum practice then any discussion of how it might be possible to change the historical sensibilities of museum goers through exhibition practices, programming initiatives, and other related institutional activities must be premised on a more aggressive and critical assessment of the decline of the importance of history across contemporary society. While there is no question about the validity of this collection of essays considering museums and historical consciousness—whether in Canada or elsewhere—the fact remains that the subject is too complex and too unstable to be potentially captured in a volume of this type, no matter how individually thoughtful the contributions or how deftly gathered and thematically organized.

These things said, the volume does invite reconsideration of the institutionally imbedded operations of public culture. Collective memory is vital to national (and arguably post-national) identity, civic mindedness, and the conscientious critically aware functioning of any society. The volume by Gosselin and Livingstone will encourage interested scholars, professionals, and citizen heroes to think about the place of history inside the museum walls and, it can be hoped, beyond them. ¶

Michael J. Prokopow is a cultural historian and curator. He teaches at OCAD University.
—mprokopow@faculty.ocadu.ca

1. G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, ed. H. Glockner (Stuttgart, 1928), 97–98; English translation in Amos Funkenstein, "Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness," *History and Memory* 1, 1 (1989), 5.

2. *History and Memory*, www.indiana.edu/~rcapub/v17n1/17sb.html, quoted by the editors in their introduction, p. 5.

3. The volume is the fifth in the distinguished THEN/HiER Historical Consciousness and History Education Series. The History Education Network / Histoire et éducation en réseau is "the first pan-Canadian organization devoted to promoting and improving history teaching

by bringing together various constituencies involved in history education" (<http://ce.educ.ubc.ca/history-education-network/>). Other titles include *New Directions in Assessing Historical Thinking*, ed. Kadriye Erickson and Peter Seixas (New York, 2015), *Becoming a History Teacher in Canada: Sustaining Practices in Historical Thinking and Knowing*, ed. Ruth Sandwell and Amy von Heyking (Toronto, 2014), and *New Possibilities for the Past: Shaping History Education in Canada*, ed. Penney Clark (Vancouver, 2011).

Félix Nadar

When I Was a Photographer

trans. Eduardo Cadava and Liana Theodoratou. Cambridge, MA, and London, UK: MIT Press, 2015.

336 pp.

\$25.95 cloth ISBN 9780262029452

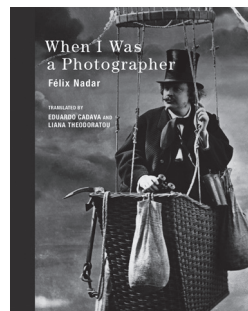
\$18.95 eBook ISBN 9780262330701

Charles Reeve

As the nineteenth century ended, the same seemed to happen to Félix Nadar's life in photography. Having sold his Marseilles studio in 1899, he published *Quand j'étais photographe* ("When I Was a Photographer") in Paris the following year, and an image from 1909 reinforces the sense that he has quit photography.¹ It shows him seated at a large table, pen in hand, examining us deliberately if not unkindly, with no camera in sight. Apparently, his work has shifted from photography to literature. However, since Nadar took the picture himself, it unsettles the pastness of the book's title. As Eduardo Cadava notes in his introduction to this lively rendering—the book's first complete translation into English—Nadar never stopped taking pictures, so the title "figures his death by anticipating it" (xiii). Or, as Rosalind Krauss suggests in "Tracing Nadar," a sensitive account of the awkward amalgam of science and spiritualism that influenced Nadar, maybe this "curious" title signals that photographers, like photography, had morphed from astonishing to unremarkable.² Perhaps Nadar wants to recover the "universal stupefaction" provoked only fifty years before by what he called that era's

"most astonishing and disturbing discovery—photography!" (2–3).

Given the competition—Freud, Darwin, steam, electricity, anaesthesia—privileging photography in this way might seem excessive. But one purpose of *When I Was a Photographer*, which comprises thirteen anecdotes



rather than a single autobiographical narrative, is to highlight photography's psychological impact. By freezing the world, photography captures things that our eyes miss. The camera trumps the eye, with effects that explode in Nadar's fourth chapter, "Homicidal Photography:" a young woman dies because "PHOTOGRAPHY wanted it..." (53). The incident concerns a wife who, having betrayed her husband, is dragged into abetting her lover's murder. However, instead of the acquittal usually produced by such cases, this one ends with the crowd demanding the wife's death and the judge, in what Nadar calls stupefying intellectual poverty, agreeing. The difference, Nadar argues, is photography's intervention:

[T]he service of the Prefecture has photographed the horror [of the battered corpse pulled from the water], and a devil of a journalist, always on the lookout, gets hold of the first print: since yesterday, people have been swarming the newsroom of *Le Figaro*, and all of Paris will pass by there. (51)

Photography, as Nadar says, pronounced "the sentence without appeal: DEATH!" (51).

And herein lies photography's interest for Nadar, elucidated slightly

differently by each of this book's episodes. Though the advances of Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, and William Henry Fox Talbot captivated Nadar, the improvements, phenomena, and effects that encircled photography once it emerged fascinated him more, including aerial and subterranean photography, which he invented, and microfilm, which he helped advance. And the bizarre fantasies that photography prompted also gripped Nadar, such as Honoré de Balzac's notion that photography diminished one's physical being. Many nineteenth-century trends intersected at photography and thus, since he was one of that medium's most energetic adherents, at Nadar.

The self-portrait (c. 1865) on this book's cover nicely captures this position: Nadar floats in a balloon's gondola, looking into the distance (or the future), right hand clasping binoculars while his left clutches a rope for balance. Although staged in Nadar's studio,³ the picture stresses the value he put on photography's complicated intersection with flight: as he recounts in "The First Attempt at Aerostatic Photography," his efforts produced not even "the suspicion of an image" until he realized that balloon gas was spewing onto the photographic plate, interfering with the chemistry, and developed a work-around (64–67). So too in Paris's sewers and catacombs, or during the Franco-Prussian War, each new context requiring more ingenuity from Nadar, and each instance of ingeniousness getting its own delightful (there is no other word) treatment here.

Nor did Nadar limit his intercessions to science and engineering. He knew the landscape painter Charles-François Daubigny, buying two pictures from him in 1859. More famously, in April 1874, he hosted the first Impressionist exhibition in his rooms on the Boulevard des Capucines.⁴ Moreover, Nadar

illustrated, published caricatures, and wrote prolifically.⁵ By the time of *Quand j'étais photographe*, he had authored numerous books including, forty-five years earlier, another compendium of episodes, *Quand j'étais étudiant*.⁶ Thoroughly familiar with his epoch's literary world, he referenced Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat" in his account of photography as homicide (the perpetrators and accusers, Nadar says, need "to strike at the wall of Poe's cellar from where the denouncing meowing will come out" [50]) and channelled Poe in his use of overly formal prose to, paradoxically, energize his narrative. He knew Honoré Daumier and Charles Baudelaire, affectionately skewering the latter in an early caricature.⁷

Yet Nadar was not alone as a nineteenth-century artist-*cum*-literatus. In fact, life writing by visual artists specifically had a "moment" in the years just prior to *Quand j'étais photographe*, the diaries and autobiographies of Maria Bashkirtseff, Adrian Ludwig Richter, and William Powell Frith attracting considerable interest, and excerpts from what became Paul Gauguin's *Noa Noa* appearing in *La Revue blanche* in 1896.⁸ And while Nadar does not mention any of this literature, it is hard to imagine that he did not know of Bashkirtseff's book, and perhaps the others as well. He certainly knew of the interest in artists' life writing since he twice mentions (favourably) his association with Léopold Leclanché, both times identifying Leclanché as the translator of Benvenuto Cellini's *Vita* (13, 143). Given this pre-existing interest in artists' life writing, and Nadar's fame and story-telling verve, I am mystified that *Quand j'étais photographe*, as Krauss says, sank without a trace in 1900. Perhaps this edition will garner the attention Nadar's memoir deserves.

Not that others have not tried. Krauss's article was an afterword of sorts for Thomas Repensek's translation of the book's first three chapters in *October* (which raises another mystery: why stop there?).⁹ More

recently, Stephen Bann's "'When I Was a Photographer': Nadar and History" nicely frames the way Nadar's writing positions photography within an awareness of the impact this invention would have—Bann's point being that one only can take account of Nadar's photography by considering how Nadar himself took account of photography.¹⁰ But for the most part, discussions of Nadar's work at best mention his writing only in passing, thus distorting our picture of his cultural contribution. This book's corrective fits into broader patterns of recovering not only the active literary lives of nineteenth-century artists but also photography's trajectory during that time from miraculous to commonplace. It fleshes out our understanding of Nadar, of the astonishment that greeted photography's birth, and of the vigour with which visual artists participated in the late nineteenth century's literary culture.

In general, this book performs these functions well, which is not surprising given that Eduardo Cadava, a Professor of English at Princeton, has written two books on photography, and New York University's Liana Theodoratou has extensive experience rendering complex French texts into other languages. However, a few disconcerting slips do appear. One concerns Nadar's description of the academic system as "this St. Helena," which a footnote oddly claims alludes to the site of Napoleon's exile (yes) and to his "role in creating a Salon des Refusés...in 1863" (uh, no) (256). And a later footnote again elides uncle and nephew, stating that "Napoleon" granted composer Jacques Offenbach French citizenship (258). These slip-ups make me wonder if further problems mar this generally engaging, useful project. Still, the overall level of care that Theodoratou and Cadava accord Nadar's exploits and writerly verve makes *When I Was a Photographer* valuable for anyone interested in photography or nineteenth-century French culture—or, in fact, just a great read. ¶

Charles Reeve is an art historian at OCAD University in Toronto and president of UAAC/AAUC —creeve@ocadu.ca

1. Félix Nadar, *Quand j'étais photographe* (Paris, 1900).
2. Rosalind Krauss, "Tracing Nadar." *October* 5 (Summer 1978): 29–47.
3. Maria Morris Hambourg et al., *Nadar* (New York, 1995), 110.
4. *Ibid.*, 237, 254.
5. *Ibid.*, 10–14.
6. Félix Nadar, *Quand j'étais étudiant* (Paris, 1856).
7. Hambourg, *Nadar*, 60.
8. See Wayne Andersen's introduction to Paul Gauguin *The Writings of a Savage*, trans. Eleanor Levieux (New York, 1996), xi.
9. Félix Nadar, "My Life as a Photographer," trans. Thomas Repensek, *October* 5 (Summer 1978): 6–28.
10. Stephen Bann, "My Life as a Photographer": Nadar and History," *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 48: Photography and Historical Interpretation (December 2009): 95–111.

Jacques Des Rochers et Brian Foss
(sous la dir. de)

***Une modernité des années 1920 à
Montréal: le groupe de Beaver Hall***

Montréal: Musée des beaux-arts de
Montréal; Londres, RU: Black dog
Publishing, 2015

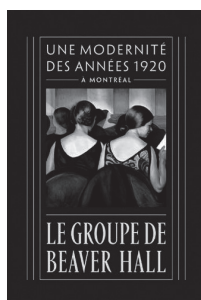
351 pp. illustrations principalement en couleur
\$ 49.95 relié ISBN 9782891923903 (MBAM).

Anne-Élisabeth Vallée

D'entrée de jeu, il faut saluer l'heureuse initiative du Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal (MBAM) qui a mis sur pied et présenté, du 24 octobre 2015 au 31 janvier 2016, une exposition sur le Groupe de Beaver Hall, regroupement d'artistes montréalais du début du xx^e siècle méconnu du grand public. Organisée par Jacques Des Rochers, conservateur de l'art québécois et canadien (avant 1945) au MBAM, et par Brian Foss, directeur de la School for Studies in Art and Culture à Carleton University (Ottawa), l'exposition intitulée *Une modernité des années 1920 à Montréal: le Groupe de Beaver Hall*, en tournée canadienne en 2016–2017, a d'ailleurs obtenu le Prix d'excellence de l'Association des musées canadiens dans la catégorie Expositions—Art. Les deux co-commissaires

ont également dirigé la publication de l'impressionnant catalogue qui accompagne l'exposition, qui leur a aussi valu le prix Melva J. Dwyer 2016 décerné par l'Art Libraries Society of North America. Et pour cause, l'ouvrage d'érudition propose non seulement une mise à jour, devenue nécessaire, des informations disponibles sur le Groupe de Beaver Hall, mais également un point de vue renouvelé sur l'apport de ces artistes à la modernité canadienne.

Comme le fait remarquer avec justesse Jacques Des Rochers dans son avant-propos, on attendait depuis longtemps, parmi les spécialistes de l'histoire de l'art canadien comme dans le marché de l'art, un ouvrage



d'envergure sur le Groupe de Beaver Hall, souvent présenté comme le pendant montréalais du célèbre Groupe des Sept de Toronto. Il faut bien reconnaître que le regroupement montréalais a fait l'objet par le passé d'un certain nombre de publications et de mémoires de maîtrise, lesquels ont souvent pris le parti de se concentrer uniquement sur les femmes du groupe, composant un peu plus de la moitié de ses membres. Il en va ainsi du premier ouvrage sur le sujet, le catalogue d'exposition de Norah McCullough intitulé simplement *The Beaver Hall Hill Group* (Galerie nationale du Canada, 1966), comme du dernier en date, *Painting Friends: The Beaver Hall Women Painters* (Véhicule Press, 1999) de Barbara Meadowcroft, tous deux portant sur les mêmes dix

artistes féminines, donnant l'impression que le groupe n'était composé que de femmes.

C'est notamment à cette perception erronée répandue dans l'historiographie du groupe que Des Rochers et Foss souhaitent s'attaquer dans leur ouvrage, précisant vouloir «rétablir les faits et révéler avec conviction la mixité au sein du groupe, démontrant comment celle-ci est plus riche et fructueuse en tant qu'affirmation complexe mais véritable de notre modernité» (28). Afin d'y parvenir, les co-commissaires ont privilégié une approche inclusive dans l'identification des membres de ce regroupement informel, dénombrant un total de vingt-neuf artistes y ayant été associés de près ou de loin. Allant au-delà de l'existence officielle plutôt éphémère du Groupe de Beaver Hall (1920–1923), le catalogue se concentre sur la production de ces artistes s'étendant de sa fondation en 1920 jusqu'à la formation du Groupe des peintres canadiens en 1933, auquel se rallieront la plupart de ses membres. Outre les notices biographiques des artistes et quelques tableaux rassemblés à la fin de l'ouvrage, le catalogue se compose pour l'essentiel de six essais signés par les codirecteurs ainsi que par trois spécialistes de la modernité artistique au Canada, soit Hélène Sicotte, Esther Trépanier et Kristina Huneault.

Le catalogue s'ouvre sur un texte de Jacques Des Rochers qui permet au lecteur de replonger dans le contexte immédiat ayant favorisé la naissance du Groupe de Beaver Hall. Au lendemain de la Grande Guerre, l'apparition simultanée de la formation montréalaise et du Groupe des Sept témoigne de la nécessité ressentie par les jeunes artistes progressistes de se regrouper et de présenter leur travail en marge des institutions officielles. Cette nécessité sera le moteur commun aux nombreux adhérents du groupe montréalais, qui ne chercheront pas à atteindre la cohésion stylistique et idéologique qui fera la renommée de leurs confrères torontois. Réunis autour de locaux leur servant d'ateliers