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Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu
A substantial overview of the work of Canadian artist Luis Jacob has long been desired. Seeing and Believing, a hefty bilingual catalogue recently published by the British company Black Dog Publishing, proposes to fill this void. Produced in conjunction with a set of three distinct yet interconnected exhibitions organized by the Darling Foundry in Montreal (Tableaux vivants, 2010), the Museum of Canadian Contemporary Art in Toronto (Pictures at an Exhibition, 2011), and the McCord Museum in Montreal (The Eye, the Hole, the Picture / l’œil, la brèche, l’image, 2012), it provides high-quality visual documentation of Jacob’s creative practice mediated by three erudite curatorial essays and a fascinating text written by the artist himself. Carefully organized, cleanly designed, and beautifully written (although not always perfectly translated), it is an attractive, well-realized exhibition catalogue.

Seeing and Believing is undoubtedly an important visual-arts document – a must-have for anyone with an interest in Canadian contemporary conceptual art. And yet, as one reads carefully through each of its essays and examines each image, it becomes increasingly difficult to quell a growing feeling of disjuncture – a nagging sense that something is slightly amiss. This feeling reaches a sort of peak with the artist’s essay, “Groundless in the Museum: Anarchism and the Living Work of Art,” which has been reprinted at the end of the catalogue. Originally presented at the Second North American Anarchist Studies Network Conference, and later published in the journal Anarchist Development in Cultural Studies, this well-crafted text offers an accessible, nuanced introduction to the anarchist ideals that inform Jacob’s practice.

As a political philosophy, anarchism rejects hierarchical social organizations reinforced by ideals of mastery, and instead emphasizes cooperation, common ownership, mutual aid, and the intellectual fruit of messy, lived experience. In his essay, Jacob articulates this ideology on the artist’s creative strategies that fit cleanly into contemporary discourses concerning these issues. But this is part of the problem. Jacob’s work is ill served by the language of permission and revelation that so often characterizes these discourses, which position “the viewer” as a passive entity that is “invited” to participate in an institutionalized process of “being shown” or “made aware” of some predetermined “secret” – some aspect of our culture that the work of art is supposed to “make visible.” Indeed, the very notion of this mythical viewer is a cliché in the sense that Jacob gives it: a canned version of a viewer who always follows the prescribed route to some “new” realization, obediently becoming conscious of his or her own gaze, of his or her role as an aesthetic object, or of the hitherto hidden institutional apparatuses seeking to shape his or her perceptions. There is no room in this totalizing vision for “the paths that remain to be created by each of us.”

It may seem unfair to be so critical of what is, for all intents and purposes, an excellent publication. A greater unfairness would be to disregard or flee from the anarchist aspect of Jacob’s work. An exhibition catalogue that adheres so closely to the hierarchies and conventions of museum and publishing practices cannot help but betray the heart of Jacob’s politics. There are ways to address this problem – which, like so many problems, is actually an opportunity – but they have been set aside in favour of producing a slick, predictable commodity.

Translated by Käthe Roth

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