COMPENDIUM
Journal of Comparative Studies
Revista de Estudos Comparatistas

# "A dream, dictating its own course"

## On Ralph Gibson's Photobook Trilogy, 1970-1974

**Anton Lee**
University of Houston, School of Art
alee001@uh.edu
ORCiD: 0000-0002-3301-3612

**ABSTRACT:**

This paper scrutinizes American photographer Ralph Gibson's photobook trilogy published by his own company Lustrum Press: *The Somnambulist* (1970), *Déjà-vu* (1973), and *Days at Sea* (1974). The success of the trilogy verified a sizable market for highly personal photobooks, which would become a defining trend in contemporary art photography. Focusing on the structure of visual signification in each volume, the paper performs for the first time a close analysis of Gibson's sequencing method materialized in the book form. The inner logic of each publication is further elucidated in relation to the major sources of reference in 20th-century art, photography, and literature, such as the fictions of Jorge Luis Borges, the cloud photographs of Alfred Stieglitz, and the *Nouveau Roman* of Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet. The paper argues that sequencing was an epistemological strategy for Gibson to prioritize arbitrary relations between two neighboring pictures, without impairing each photograph's truth claim to the perceptible reality. This was the photographer's tactic to reconcile the purported objectivity of the camera image and the subjective propensity for narrative and imagination in his photobooks. Gibson's avoidance of heavy-handed manipulation and shocking subject matter led his work to the "surrealism of the perception", which can be situated in the tradition of Surrealist photography advocated by André Bazin and Brassaï.

COMPENDIUM 2 (December/Dezembro, 2022): 102–124.
ISSN: 2975-8025 | DOI: 10.51427/com.jcs.2022.0015

**RESUMO:**

Este artigo oferece uma análise da trilogia de livros de fotografia do fotógrafo americano Ralph Gibson, publicada pela sua própria editora Lustrum Press, e composta por *The Somnambulist* (1970), *Déjà-vu* (1973) e *Days at Sea* (1974). O sucesso da trilogia tornou visível um mercado considerável para livros de fotografia altamente pessoais, no que viria a transformar-se uma tendência na fotografia artística contemporânea. Iluminando a estrutura de significação visual de cada volume, este artigo oferece, pela primeira vez, uma análise aproximada do método de sequenciação aplicado por Gibson à forma do livro. A lógica interna de cada publicação é, também, informada por aproximações a referências importantes dos domínios da arte, da fotografia e da literatura do século XX, como, por exemplo, as ficções de Jorge Luis Borges, as fotografias de nuvens de Alfred Stieglitz, e o *Nouveau Roman* de Marguerite Duras e Alain Robbe-Grillet. Este artigo argumenta que a sequenciação de imagens foi uma estratégia epistemológica usada por Gibson para dar prioridade a relações arbitrárias entre duas imagens vizinhas, sem pôr em causa a fidelidade de cada fotografia à verdade do real perceptível. Ao empregar esta táctica, o fotógrafo conciliava, nos seus livros, a objectividade da imagem com uma propensão subjectiva para a narrativa e a imaginação. A recusa da manipulação ostensiva e de assuntos chocantes conduziu o seu trabalho a um "surrealismo da percepção", que é possível situar na tradição da fotografia surrealista preconizada por André Bazin ou Brassaï.

**KEYWORDS**:

Alfred Stieglitz; Jorge Luis Borges; Lustrum Press; nouveau roman; photobook; Ralph Gibson; surrealism

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**:

Alfred Stieglitz; Jorge Luis Borges; livro de fotografia; Lustrum Press; nouveau roman; Ralph Gibson; surrealismo

Date of submission: 31/07/2022
Date of acceptance: 17/11/2022

During the first half of the 1970s, American photographer Ralph Gibson (b. 1939) completed three photobooks — *The Somnambulist* (1970), *Déjà-vu* (1973), and *Days at Sea* (1974) — all of which were published by his own publishing company, Lustrum Press, established in 1970 at 331 West Broadway in New York City. The three books have often been called the "black trilogy," a moniker derived from the black covers and quarto size (approximately 12.0 x 8.5 x 0.3 inches). It was with this trilogy that Gibson embarked on a career-long search for "syntax" proper to the photographic image, which in turn contributed to his meteoric rise to a spokesperson for self-publishing in contemporary American photography (Deschin, 1972: 32).[1] By 1973, Lustrum Press would establish its name as an influential independent publisher of contemporary photobooks.[2] The Lustrum titles were more venturesome than the monographic collections produced by Aperture Foundation, and more subjective and personal than the exhibition catalogs from the Photography Department at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (Parr and Badger, 2004: 215–220; 2006: 12). In 1971, David Vestal wrote: "Lustrum Press is to the conventional photo press what the *Salon des Indépendents* was to the Paris Salon in early-twentieth-century painting" (Vestal, 1971: BR42).

Gibson was one of the American photographers who arranged multiple photographs in sequential order beginning in the late 1960s. These practitioners, including Duane Michals, Stephen Shore, and Nathan Lyons, butted against the idea of singularity that undergirded the fetish of final prints in the art market and museum collections, on the one hand, and the hunt for the "decisive moment" by practitioners, both documentary and artistic, on the other.[3] Expanding the potentials of sequencing explored by their immediate predecessor Minor White, they presented photographs in a structure that allowed "one image to follow another by an order of succession or arrangement which is not apparently thematic or systematic" (Lyons, 2012: 199). The lack of predictable rules in organization distinguished these 1970s photographers from their contemporary artists who utilized photographic series for the systematic aesthetics of Conceptual Art, such as Ed Ruscha, Sol LeWitt, and Douglas Huebler.[4]

The rediscovery of the sequential form proved a boon for narrative impulses in 1970s photography, which undermined the modernist campaign for the specificity of

[1] In linguistics, syntax refers to the order in which words and morphemes are arranged to form larger units of signification, such as phrases and sentences. My use of syntax remains mainly metaphorical in this paper, acknowledging Ralph Gibson's own adaptation of the term in his book *Syntax* (1983) and Gilles Mora's examination of the syntactic structures in Gibson's sequencing in 2017. That said, the legitimacy of this analogy between photography and language awaits a rigorous scrutiny in a future project, along the influences of structuralism and poststructuralism in a much larger arena of art and visual culture from the 1950s to the 1990s. I thank an anonymous reviewer for the insightful comment on this matter.

[2] Immediately after *The Somnambulist,* Lustrum Press published *Tulsa* by Larry Clark, *A Loud Song* by Daniel Seymour, and *Portugal* by Neal Slavin in 1971. The following year, the American edition of Robert Frank's *The Lines of My Hand* was edited by Gibson and released by Lustrum Press.

[3] The idea of the "decisive moment" was originally coined by Henri Cartier-Bresson in his publication *The Decisive Moment* (1952).

[4] The term "sequence" has frequently been used interchangeably with series, set, and suite. Its definition is an important yet complicated matter, which is beside the point of this paper. Consult my first book in preparation, preliminarily titled *New Wave of American Photography: The Rise of Photographic Sequence in the United States and France, 1968–1989*.

photography as a visual medium. According to the influential distinction between poetry and painting by the eighteenth-century art critic Gotthold Lessing, the visual and plastic image is naturally devoid of a temporal dimension, which is reserved exclusively for the chronological and sequential experience of literature (Mitchell, 1986: 95–115). In this respect, a transmedial intent inheres in the act of joining many pictures in a row. Gibson's early sequences conveyed a strong literary appeal, in that they were lengthy — often exceeding forty photographs — and always published as books. In fact, Gibson's sequence work received the first major exposure in October 1970 when the trilingual Swiss magazine *Camera* devoted a special issue to the theme "Photography as a Literary Art". There, the magazine's editor Allan Porter compared Ernst Haas's photographs to poem, Eikoh Hosoe's to novel, Burk Uzzle's to essay, and finally, Gibson's to prose. In his introduction, Porter called attention to the psychological drama that transformed Gibson's sequence into a journey to subconsciousness or fantasy equivalent to Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way* (Porter, 1970: 48).

The literary penchant for fantasy, presciently identified by Porter, is also central to my interpretation of Gibson's trilogy in this paper. This is a characteristic, as I will show, originating from Gibson's interest in such artistic movements as Surrealism, Magical Realism, the *Nouveau Roman*, and the *Nouvelle Vague*. What is overlooked by Porter, however, is the deliberate mechanism of Gibson's sequencing, which enables his photographs to conjure up the experience of the imaginary without ever forcing them to stop being photographs *per se*. In other words, Gibson's photographs remain straight without being doctored, but they, when strung together, offer an experience of the otherworldly, far from shoring up the empirical reality. "Otherworldly" is an apt term to describe Gibson's work in this regard, because his pictures mirror the physical world in a reliable manner, only to parlay their objectivity into suggesting a world other than this one.[5] This separates Gibson from his American contemporaries, including Michals, Leslie Krims, Arthur Tress, and Jerry Uelsmann, whose photographs garnered recognition between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s for evoking dreams, fantasy, and the unconscious. Unlike them, Gibson eschewed the "heavy-handed" distortion of the medium's representational transparency, such as motion blur, multiple exposure, negative sandwiching, and the use of props, make-up, and prosthetics.

It is my argument that, for Gibson, sequencing was an epistemological strategy to prioritize immediate and arbitrary relations between neighboring pictures, without completely forfeiting the axiomatic message of an otherwise standalone photograph, i.e., its status as a truthful record of the perceptible reality. In his sequences, allusive yet consistent impressions suggest fictitious storylines, which come in conflict with, but do not stamp out, the habitual search for a photograph's indexical truth. The seemingly incommensurable modes of looking coexist in Gibson's sequences, thanks to the spatiotemporal continuum unique to the book form. The viewer of a photobook is at once inevitably bound by the succession of pages, and free to examine one page as long and often as needed. The book, following Hubert Damisch, is "a double-entry dispositif" that works "both in diachrony (the

[5] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to the significance of the word.

succession of pages) and in synchrony (their reunion as a single ensemble that can be opened at whatever page)" (Damisch, 2001: 130). This paper aims to clarify such an idiosyncratic inner logic of the photobook through the example of Gibson's trilogy. In the rest of the paper, I will closely analyze the visual and narrative structures of *The Somnambulist*, *Déjà-Vu*, and *Days at Sea*.

## *The Somnambulist* and the Self-referentiality of Borges's Fiction

*The Somnambulist* was published in December 1970 as the inaugural title of Lustrum Press in an edition of 3,000 softbound copies with glossy black covers (priced at $4.00). The book consisted of forty-eight black and white photographs individually printed on each page without captions or page numbers. *The Somnambulist* does not follow a smooth line of development from cover to cover. Rather, the book establishes a basic unit of visual communication in every double-page spread, which puts forward a face-to-face dialogue between a pair of photographs. Each spread connects with following pages through the leitmotifs of cryptic forms and items, rather than a recurring cast of models or the causality of events. Reviewing *The Somnambulist*, critic A.D. Coleman wrote in 1971: "I'd call it a narrative except that the plot has little to do with the continuity of events and much to do with symbolic evolution and subconscious moods" (1973: 16).

**Figure 1.** A double-page spread in Ralph Gibson, *The Somnambulist* (1970).

One of the spreads from *The Somnambulist*, for example, puts together two interior shots featuring a same door (fig. 1). On the right page, the door is photographed from a hallway, as it is ajar into a room. A hand is placed in midair near the doorknob, while the rest of the body is hidden in the room. On the left page,

the other photograph portrays the room from inside, showing the same door wide open in the background and a blurred person sitting in a couch near the camera with one hand erected from the armrest. The pairing insinuates the photographer's entry into the room upon invitation from the unknown figure. The imagined movement is choreographed from the right page to the left in harmony with Gibson's discovery that "when you opened a book your eye went to the right-hand page first and then back over to the left" (*Ralph Gibson* 6:25–29). In the meantime, other spreads of *The Somnambulist* operate through the conflicts between juxtaposed photographs in lieu of their synthesis. This is exemplified in a spread, where a vertical photograph of a burning beauty parlor appears to the right of a horizontal portrait of a woman, who turns out to be American photographer Mary Ellen Mark (fig. 2). The fire devours the building with such an intensity that the viewer cannot help but recoil from the picture. The woman, in opposition, puts her fingers against the photographer's hand jutting into the photographic frame and, by extension, advances a tactile experience for the viewer. This spread explores two contradictory vectors of perception: repulsive and attractive. In addition, the pair maintains visual communication with the interior shots analyzed above by playing up the subject of hand, which is the most conspicuous visual trope employed in *The Somnambulist*.

**Figure 2.** A double-page spread in Ralph Gibson, *The Somnambulist* (1970).

The faltering quality of visual storytelling situates Gibson's photobook somewhere in between the total absence of narrativity in randomly chosen pictures and the tightly woven plots of reportage photo-story standardized by illustrated magazines like *Life* since the 1930s. The denotative information immediately legible in Gibson's photographs does not amount to a close-knit sketch of an event, punctuated with beginning, middle, and end phases. And yet, *The Somnambulist* offers a successive experience of its pages through bookbinding, despite the paucity

of narrational adhesion among the pictures. That said, if one can still classify *The Somnambulist* as a narrative sequence, it is due in the largest measure to a typed letter addressed to the "Gentle Reader" in the second spread:

> A Dream Sequence in which all things are real. Perhaps even more so. While sleeping a dreamer reappears elsewhere on the planet, becoming at least two men. His sleeping dreams provide the substance of that reality while his waking dreams become what he thought was his Life… Called by himself, that other man (The Sleeper) to return to a vaster world of light and greater believability, he accepts without hesitation… Passing from one dimension through another he feels that nothing is left behind, rather always with him in the moment. His life is no more a myth than any other man's… Clarity is all any man seeks, this Somnambulist merely finds his on the Other Side.

The preface lays out Gibson's view of dreams, which he believed to constitute another reality that would manifest itself in a chain of clear perceptions. This is the belief in the "otherworldly," expressed by the photographer in his unpublished journal prior to completing the photobook. There, Gibson recounted a complete abolishment of his identity as a documentary photographer, upon realizing that what was defined as real entirely relied upon one's perspective. In the entry dated September 11, 1968, Gibson wrote that his photographs evolved into a sequence, which continued to "modulate and convolute" like "a dream, dictating its own course" (AG 37:39).

This preface, however, seems incompatible with the journal entries, due to the former's approximation to the literary genre of fiction furnished with a narrator and a protagonist. Whereas the unpublished note takes the form of diary written by "me," the preface to *The Somnambulist* instates the voice of an omniscient narrator, which is a rhetorical device inscribed in a narrative text by the author. Furthermore, the protagonist prompts a magical understanding of the self irrevocably embroiled with its dreaming double. One of the finest illuminations of such an idea can be found in Jorge Louis Borges's short fiction "The Circular Ruins" (1940), which was also the source of the Latin word "lustrum" incorporated in the name of Gibson's publishing house (AG 1:2:1:25).[6] "The Circular Ruins" tells a story of a "magician" who created a man by dreaming him into existence, only to realize that "he too was a mere appearance, dreamt by another" (Borges, 1962: 61). Toward the end of the story, the magician's "son" began his own dreaming of another man, thereby locking up the narrative in an intergenerational loop. The fable culminates in a vertiginous conflation between the two dimensions where a man is a corporeal being, on the one hand, and a mere image, on the other.

[6] In ancient Rome, lustrum meant a ceremonial purification of the entire Roman people after each census was taken every five years. Salvesen discloses that Gibson took the word "lustrum" from Borges's writings, without specifying the exact source. After an expansive rummage through Borges's complete oeuvre, I have discovered that the Latin word appears only in "The Circular Ruins" in its plural form "lustra" (*lustros* in the original Spanish text).

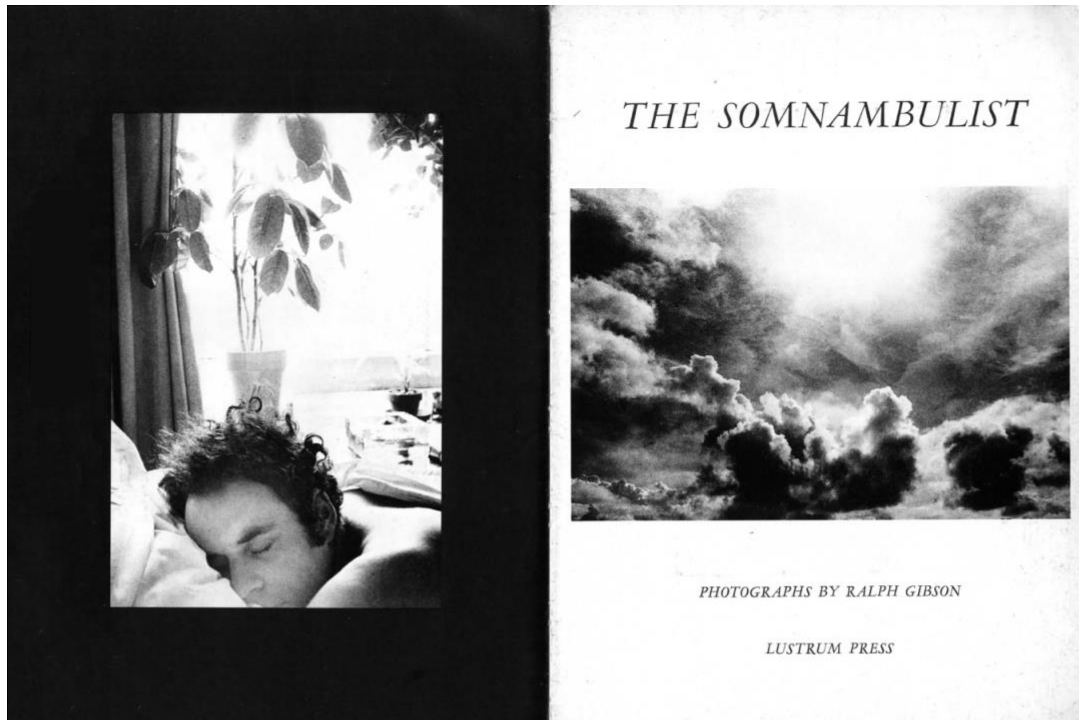



**Figure 3.** Opening spread of Ralph Gibson, *The Somnambulist* (1970).

Gibson's preface envelops the muddled sequence of *The Somnambulist* in an acute sense of narrational cohesion. In keeping with the story delineated in the preface, the first spread introduces a slumbering protagonist, who will eventually realize his true identity as an illusory being in the last spread. The highly fractured photographic sequence partly analyzed earlier sits in the book's main body, where the protagonist begins sleepwalking across the dream world without an organized itinerary. Interestingly, *The Somnambulist* visualizes all of the above by taking advantage of Gibson's lived identity. First of all, *The Somnambulist* opens with Gibson's somnolent face photographed on the flipside of its front cover (fig. 3). Gibson's unpublished journal entry dated March 2, 1969 attests to the fictional intent of the self-portrait: "I have wanted the front part of my face to be included in the photograph. This would seem to be… the presence of a 'third person' or force… the medium or vector through personality, (a very limiting screen) into deeper areas of Subconscious, dreamlike worlds" (AG 37:39). In Gibson's own words, his face becomes a window to the subliminal depth of an invented character, far from corroborating the photographer's own existence. And then, throughout the main body of *The Somnambulist*, the protagonist's agency is dramatically staged by the anthropomorphized gaze of the camera. Here, Gibson's hands frequently invade the photographic frame and interact with the subjects photographed, just like in the aforementioned picture of Mark. This first-person viewpoint borrowed from Cinema Vérité enables Gibson's photographs to display the fictive eyesight of the somnambulist wandering around the dream world (Gibson, 2006: 23). Finally in the closing photograph of *The Somnambulist*, the sleepwalker witnesses the emergence of a mysterious being, whose hands arise from the dark water and grab the bow of a rowboat (fig. 4). The same photograph is mounted on the front cover of the book (fig.

5), which in turn leads to Gibson’s face presented as the protagonist on the flipside. The boat photograph marries the volume’s end to its beginning, thereby transforming *The Somnambulist* into a recursive sequence. In that reiterative structure, the protagonist is identified anew as an illusory being born in the dream world.

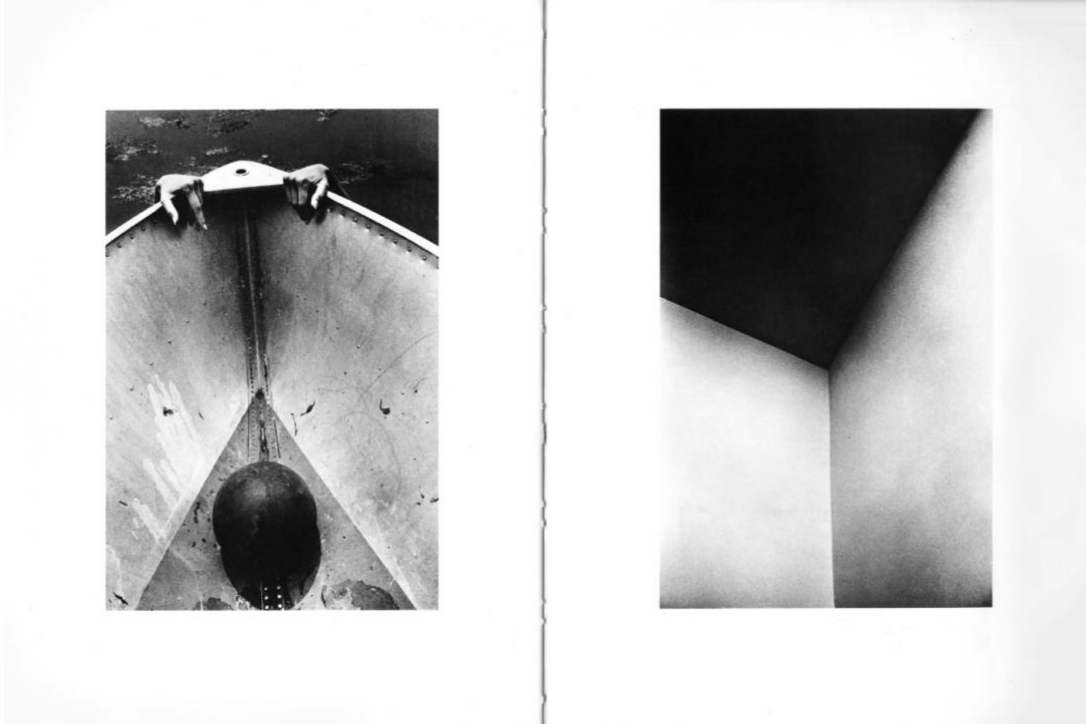
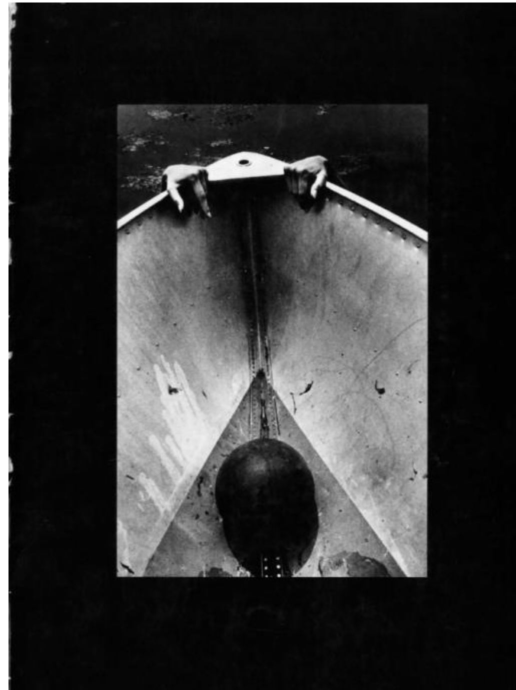


**Figure 4.** Closing spread of Ralph Gibson, *The Somnambulist* (1970).
**Figure 5.** Front cover of Ralph Gibson, *The Somnambulist* (1970).



It is paramount to note that the circular organization enfolds *The Somnambulist* in a self-confined phantasmagoria. When viewed repeatedly, the book

coils its narrative sequence inward, referencing its own unfolding: the sleeper walks into the dream world, where he watches the birth of his new self, who then embarks on his own somnambulism and so on. There is no place for the external reality in this labyrinthine involution of *mise en abyme*. Although *The Somnambulist* exploits Gibson's face, his hands, and his eyesight that spawned the photographs, these tokens of his existence do not drag the external world into the photobook's meaning making. Instead, they give life to the sleepwalker inhabiting the photobook, which nestles in its fictional reality so self-sufficiently that it barely turns to the outer world for an endorsement of its narrative. This epitomizes the self-referential architecture prototypical of the Borgesian literature, which can be summed up as a "representation" pushed to the extreme that it becomes coterminous to its "object" in a bid to efface "all remaining traces of reference, or of any externality," according to Frederick Jameson (1984: 197). In like manner, *The Somnambulist* renders the referential reality auxiliary or even superfluous to its interpretation.[7] In 1975, Gibson remarked on the autonomy of *The Somnambulist* that surpasses its creator and his world: "As a work, it seems to have a great deal of its own presence, it lives its own life that way. It doesn't have anything to do with me now, that's what's so amazing about books" (Gibson, 1979: 60).

## ***Déjà-Vu*, the "Already Seen," and Visual Analogy**

*Déjà-Vu*, the second volume of Gibson's trilogy, looks almost identical to its predecessor from the outside. Its back cover carries an impish photograph of Gibson wearing a top hat, which reminds of the dreaming magician in Borges's "The Circular Ruins" and, in so doing, moors *Déjà-Vu* to the importance of fictional reality successfully established in *The Somnambulist*. *Déjà-Vu* also emulates, if perfunctorily, the previous volume's circular structure by repeating its title three times at the inception and conclusion of its main body, plus on the front cover. However, the differences between the two books outweigh their affinities. Most prominently, *Déjà-Vu* does not have a lengthy text like Gibson's preface to *The Somnambulist*. Consequently, *Déjà-Vu* also lacks such literary contraptions as a narrator or a protagonist, whose third-person voice or first-person viewpoint were indispensable for the viewer's empathic investment in *The Somnambulist*. *Déjà-Vu* envisions a different mode of cohesion solely based on the visual rapports between photographs at the expense of the somewhat didactic continuity bolstered by written words.

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[7] In *The Somnambulist*, a sentence inserted under the publication information explicitly cites Borges's "The Aleph" (1945): "Aleph is a point in space where all points coincide." In "The Aleph," which is exemplary of Borges's self-enclosed writing style, a narrator also named "Borges" describes a small sphere that contains the entire universe, including "the earth and in the earth the Aleph and in the Aleph the earth" (Borges, 1970: 14).

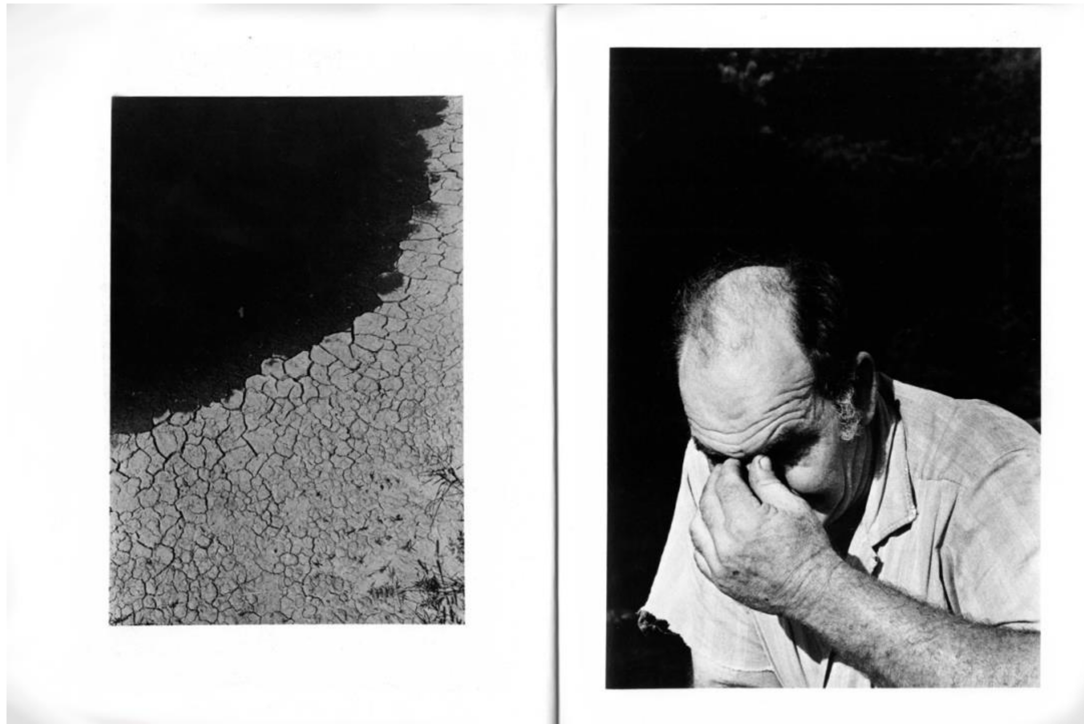


**Figure 6.** A double-page spread in Ralph Gibson, *Déjà-Vu* (1973).

*Déjà-Vu* consists of forty-five black and white photographs separately mounted on each page, adhering to the layout previously tested out in *The Somnambulist*. Unlike the preceding volume, however, the size of the photographic image becomes an important variable in *Déjà-Vu*. The difference in scale creates an imbalance of visual potency between two photographs facing each other, so as to set their viewing in order, either from the right page to the left or the other way around. For example, a spread in *Déjà-Vu* carries a photograph of an old man's receding hairline on the right side and the cracked soil surface on the left (fig. 6). The former, bigger than the latter, grabs the beholder's attention first. When the viewer's eyes proceed to the opposite page, the cracking pattern of the ground emanates an elusive sense of resemblance to the dry skin of the man's head. The same phenomenon occurs on every spread of *Déjà-Vu*, whatever direction of viewing. To look at another spread, the left page shows the back of a young girl running away from the camera, while the right page displays a cloud afloat in the sky (fig. 7). The girl's picture preponderates over the cloud photograph in size and meets the viewer's gaze first. Even after the viewer moves onto the opposite page, the shape of the cloud keeps stirring up the girl's tousled hair in his mind. Eventually, if one considers more than one spread of *Déjà-Vu* in succession, there arises a cadenced movement of the gaze that sweeps each photographic diptych to the right or to the left rhythmically. While each spread comes up with different "overtones" as their themes, such as aridity or buoyancy in the aforementioned examples, the zigzag motion of the gaze produces a sense of development running through the entire sequence.

**Figure 7.** A double-page spread in Ralph Gibson, *Déjà-Vu* (1973).

The pages analyzed above delineate a formula for visual analogy that warrants the title of *Déjà-Vu*, translated to "already seen" in English. The notion of déjà vu clarifies that each photograph of *Déjà-Vu* refers less to the subject matter captured within its frame, than to another picture "already seen" in the book. Moreover, the habitual motion of the eyes gliding from one page to the next makes that inter-photographic déjà vu instantaneous and virtually inescapable. In his review published in 1973, A.D. Coleman commented that every pairing of photographs in *Déjà-Vu* were "inevitable," in that seeing the first image immediately entailed not only the unconscious anticipation for the second image, but also the subsequent inability to separate the second image from the first one (1973: D34). To rephrase, the layout of *Déjà-Vu* combines every two photographs into a single unit of signification, where the second picture's purpose is to refresh the first picture's afterimage in the viewer's mind. If the viewer looks back at the first photograph again, it will now remind him of the second photograph. Here, the visual memory of each photograph becomes the other photograph's ultimate message, that is, its signified. To go back to my previous example, there is no denying that the cloud photograph mentioned above is a visual record of a real cloud observed by the photographer. Nevertheless, the page layout instills a more pressing layer of codification into the photograph, so that it hints at the neighboring picture of the girl glimpsed right before. As such, the photographs of *Déjà-Vu* stand for, or "connote," something other than what they show. On that account, Gibson's interest in the mechanism of déjà vu finds a predecessor in the concept of "equivalents" coined by Alfred Stieglitz for his cloud photographs taken between 1922 and 1934.

Stieglitz considered his cloud pictures equivalent to his inner feelings, his sentiments about friends or places, or his life philosophy (Stieglitz, 1966: 110–112).

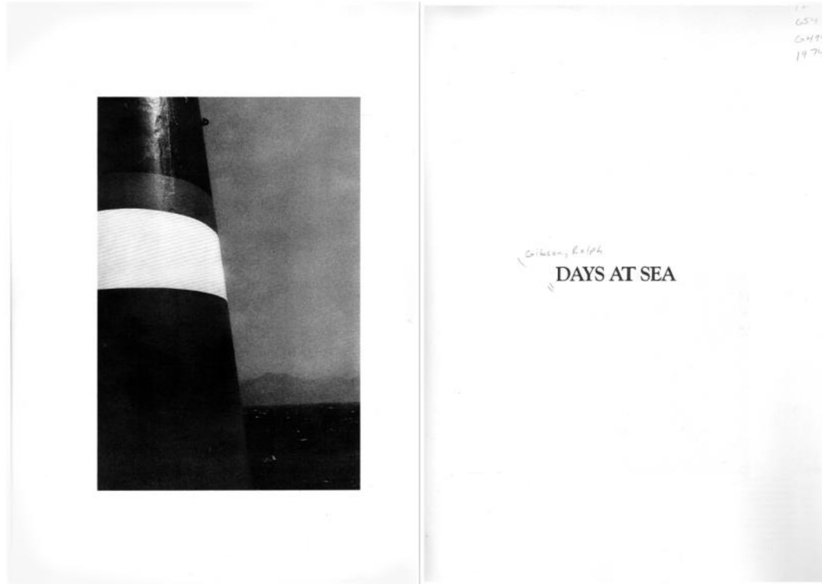
For him, the cloud photographs did not concern the external world, since they were not meant to be representations: “The true meaning of the *Equivalents* comes through without any extraneous pictorial factors intervening between those who look at the pictures and the pictures themselves” (qtd. in Norman, 1973: 161). He believed that, by treating the clouds as pure forms, his photographs could achieve the kind of emotive expressiveness formerly sought after by the European Symbolists at the end of the nineteenth century (Greenough, 1984: 24–29). After the World War II, Minor White further developed Stieglitz’s understanding of the equivalents into a theory of the photographic experience at large. White contended that any photograph could be an equivalent, when its elementary properties, like forms and shapes, aroused a known feeling that corresponded to emotions, memories, or intellectual speculations the beholder already had in himself. In his formulation, the photograph became a “spontaneous symbol,” which produced an *ad hoc* image “to fill the need of the moment” in response to the beholder’s state of mind (White, 1966: 169).

The idea of the equivalents seems highly compatible with Gibson’s adaptation of the déjà vu experience in his photobook. Both argue for an evocative correspondence between a photograph and a feeling or a mental image provoked by the formal elements, not the referent, of the given photograph. This speaks to Gibson’s continued pursuit for the pictures that are received from the world yet nonrepresentational. And the simultaneously transparent and abstract treatment of photography was part and parcel of Stieglitz’s experiment with the cloud pictures, which have been dubbed “the first truly abstract photographs” (Enns, 2013: 188). Gibson surely knew about “the theory of equivalence,” which he discussed in workshops during the 1970s (AG 37:29 “Fotoworkshop” 1).[8] Having said that, the strategy of sequencing in *Déjà-Vu* does not allow as much leeway to the viewer as Stieglitz’s equivalents perhaps could. To elaborate, the visual impression evoked by a photograph in *Déjà-Vu* originates from the other picture in the same spread, not from a life experience the viewer had before opening the book. Hence, an integral experience of *Déjà-Vu* as a sequence hardly exceeds the physical limits of the book. This precept pares down the degree of arbitrariness involved in the interpretation of the photobook. While *Déjà-Vu* encourages the beholder to see beyond what the photographs show on their surface, this invitation to an imaginative looking is only valid within the structure of the photobook prearranged by Gibson. This continues to hold true for the third and final volume of the photographer’s trilogy, *Days at Sea*, published by Lustrum Press in 1974.

## *Days at Sea* and the Abstracting Gaze of the *Nouveau Roman*

Although *Days at Sea* appears similar to *The Somnambulist* and *Déjà-Vu* in format, its inner content radically differs from the two. *Days at Sea* has a reduced number of thirty-four black and white photographs, which are homogeneous in size,

[8] Gibson was also familiar with White’s approach to photography, which he learned about between 1956 and 1959 at the United States Naval School of Photography in Florida from a chief photographer who had studied under White (AG 19:2 Reel 2007:021).



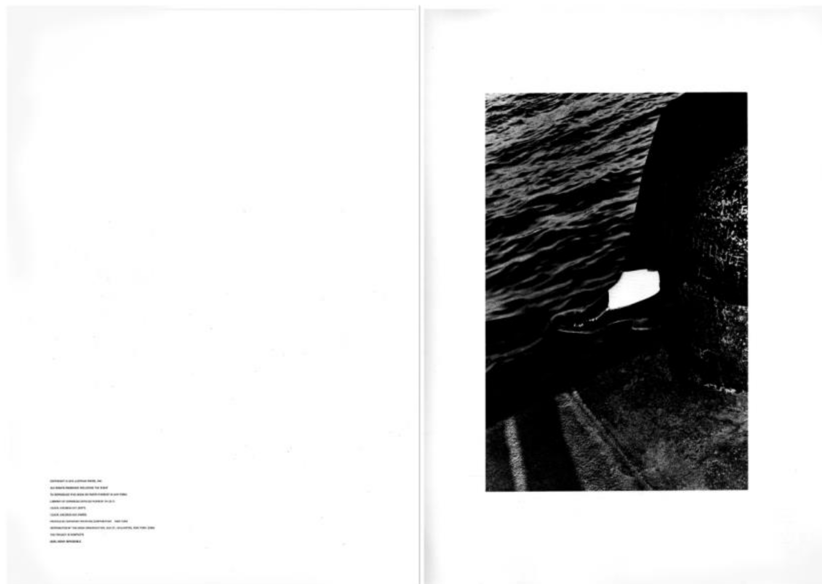


**Figure 8.** Opening sequence of twelve pages in Ralph Gibson, *Days at Sea* (1974).

unnumbered, and singly mounted on recto pages alone, except for the frontispiece placed to the left of the title page. This marks a departure from Gibson's previous use of photographic juxtaposition as the basic unit of sequencing. In *Days at Sea*, vacant verso pages provide each photograph with an increased sense of independence. Reviewing *Days at Sea* in 1975, Henry Turner underlined the predominant atmosphere of "stasis" emitted by the "autonomous images" (1975: 5). However, the reduced density would engender a new type of transaction between the constituent photographs of *Days at Sea*, far from impairing their sequential association.

*Days at Sea* starts with a photograph of a ship's dark funnel with a white band around its trunk (fig. 8). That white band resonates with a bright ankle sock exposed between a black shoe and a black pant in the second picture. The black-white-black composition evolves into the alternate lines of black and white on a boat in the third photograph. In the fourth, the pattern is repeated in the striped shirt of a woman, whose hair is spread over someone else's legs. The shape of the legs is mimicked by two baguettes in the fifth photograph and then by a swimmer's lower body on a beach in the sixth. In this way, *Days at Sea* showcases a voyage of forms and shapes slithering along the stream of photographs mostly taken in a waterfront town. Near the end of the book, a photograph shows a white dickey carved into the shape of a triangle by the lapels of a black tuxedo jacket. In the next photograph, that triangle turns into a long feather caressing the naked buttocks of a woman, whose fingernails are painted in dark color. A thumb with the similarly painted nail presses down on an empty notebook page in the last photograph of *Days at Sea*.

The photobook is quite erratic in terms of the subject matter. Even though seascapes and female nudes are frequent throughout the entire volume, the allure of seafaring and eroticism is not undergirded by the sequential association of the photographs. The sparse layout of *Days at Sea* also makes it harder to detect a signifying bond between successive photographs. In *Déjà-Vu*, the way in which a photograph stirs the afterimage of another photograph could be compared to the visible form and the conceptual meaning of a sign, or simply, the signifier and the signified. In *Days at Sea*, by contrast, the negative space wedged between every two photographs makes the viewer leery of paring off pictures. Instead, the thirty-four photographs of *Days at Sea* chip in for the relay of formal elements on equal terms, without one being another's undercurrent. There, geometric shapes, lines, and color blocks suggest an arc of gradual evolvement, running parallel to the raw content of the photobook. *Days at Sea* presents itself as a consistent sequence to that abstracting vision.

Meanwhile, a phrase inserted below the publication information in *Days at Sea* discloses the influence of the French novelist, playwright, and filmmaker Marguerite Duras: "Quel désir impossible".[9] According to Gibson, the phrase ("What an impossible desire") was Duras's response to the American photographer's ambitious plan for the trilogy (Gibson, 1974b: 56). It is little known, however, that the same

[9] Gibson became well acquainted with Duras in the early 1970s and gave her his photobooks (Gibson, 1973b: 96). Later in 1990, Duras wrote the introduction to Gibson's photobook *L'Histoire de France* (Duras, 1991: 1–2).

phrase is also a line from the voice-over in Duras's film *Woman of the Ganges* (*La Femme du Gange*, 1974), which was screened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1973. The film had a fractured dialogue between two female lovers, who remained off-screen, added on top of a relatively conventional narrative film shot in a seaside resort in Normandy, France. The film initiated Duras's experimental use of the cinematic screen as an "echo chamber", in which the voices reverberated as they were unfastened from the acting bodies and therefore, from representation (Duras, 1976: 49). In *Woman of the Ganges*, the acousmatic voices murmured truncated phrases and abstract words that were related to what was being shown so tangentially as to foster an autonomous dimension of anti-representational experience. As Duras explained, *Woman of the Ganges* was in fact two films: "the film of the image" and "the film of the voices" (Duras, 1973: 103).

Duras's twofold filmmaking allows us to dissect *Days at Sea* into a book of photographic representations, on the one hand, and an undulating flow of formal elements, on the other. And it is with the latter that Gibson's photobook shies away from signification, which was central to the previous installments of his trilogy. The sequential association of fragmented forms in *Days at Sea* is unconcerned with matching the visual content with namable subject matter, similar to the nonsensical mutterings in *Woman of the Ganges*. A white quadrilateral, for example, is too abstract to signify a "sock," although the viewer can see in the given photograph that the block of white is part of a sock. Those forms, in other words, are too myopic in scope to harbor meaningful gestalts. The relation between Duras's cinema and *Days at Sea* has been noticed and further expanded by Max Kozloff, who defined Gibson's work as "a kind of chamber photography," in which fragmented motifs would "harmonize with an almost conversational nonchalance" (1998: 30). Such an indifference to meaningfulness broaches Gibson's more direct affiliation with the distinctively French aesthetics of the *Nouveau Roman*, the founding figures of which included Nathalie Sarraute, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Duras. The *Nouveau Roman*, often tabbed as the "*École du regard*" or "Objective Novel," advocated the non-signifying observation, which would simply describe things without insinuating hidden meanings (Robbe-Grillet, 1965: 9).

Gibson's trilogy circumvented three different kinds of semiotic functions typically performed by the photographic image. This, more to my point, was achieved by Gibson's methods of sequencing that had modified from one volume after another along the discernable line of inquiry. First of all, the photographs of *The Somnambulist* referred less to certain incidents in external reality, than to a fictional reality constructed inside the photobook. Secondly in *Déjà-Vu*, the photographs ceased to stand for what they visualized. Instead, they conjured up the visual memory of the neighboring pictures through formal similarities. Lastly, *Days at Sea* forged a sequential interplay of abstract forms, whose capacity for signification was too limited to indicate the things photographed by their names. It was to catch the "life of forms" transmogrifying throughout the sequence, to borrow the theory of forms professed by Henri Focillon, who wrote: "Whereas an image implies the representation of an object, and a sign signifies an object, form signifies only *itself*" (1992: 34). At this point, Gibson's experiment was heading toward a reticent terrain of visualization, where the photographic image would not call up anything precisely

effable in the viewer's mind. In a way, Gibson's photographs ceased to be pictures *of something*. This move can be assessed as abstraction, only if "abstract" means to photograph the world of appearances vibrating below the threshold of enunciability, or, in Gibson's words, to show "a low frequency hum" emanating from "an image or an object" (AG 19:3 2–3).

The growing antipathy against signification in Gibson's photographs was congruous with the philosophy of the *Nouveau Roman* elucidated by Robbe-Grillet. Gibson was enamored with Robbe-Grillet's novels and his screenplay for the film *Last Year at Marienbad* (*L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, 1961), before making the acquaintance of the French novelist and filmmaker in the early 1970s (Gibson, 1973b: 96). In *For a New Novel* (1963), Robbe-Grillet asserted that the *Nouveau Roman* authors learned from the mechanics of the camera how to restore the reality of objects and gestures, which would plainly be "*there"* before being "*something*" (1965: 21). According to him, one could "see" an empty chair in a film, whereas the same chair would automatically "mean" absence in a traditional novel. As he summarized, the examples of the *Nouveau Roman* often described trivial fragments, which would accomplish nothing but the image of the object devoid of meaningful depth. Robbe-Grillet argued that such an observational technique of writing was essentially photographic, in that the camera's perception suspended the inertial force of "ready-made signification" (1965: 140).

Robbe-Grillet's objection to the hackneyed signification targeted the anthropocentric consciousness, which had projected meaningful order onto the world with itself at the center. That said, Robbe-Grillet separated his attack on the Enlightenment notion of man from a naïve equation of objectivity to utter impersonality. Robbe-Grillet clarified that the new novels still needed a person who observed, who nonetheless failed to synthesize his experiences into a meaningful whole and therefore remained an anonymous voyeur in the world of things (1965: 18). In his novels, the seer's lack of self-assuredness often wrought the most obsessive kind of "imagining close to delirium," so that the objectivity of observation would be fused with "a total subjectivity" (1965: 138). Robbe-Grillet identified this ironic coexistence of objectivity and subjectivity with the very definition of Surrealism by citing André Breton: "Surrealism is the point where insoluble contradictions, such as objective and subjective, true and false, dream and reality, no longer are perceived as being contradictory" (Robbe-Grillet, 1992: 106).

Robbe-Grillet's understanding of Surrealism can be likened to Gibson's "surrealism of the perception", which had emerged on the pages of his trilogy and continued to guide his work after the mid-1970s (Mora, 2017: 18). In 1976, Gibson defined Surrealism as "more of a philosophy than a movement in art," for it had less to do with the way one would "*make* images" than how one would "*perceive* the nature of reality" (qtd. in Goldsmith, 1976: 139). To reiterate, Gibson's Surrealism concerns how the world apprehended in a photograph looks extraordinary to himself and others, rather than how an artist artificially materializes his vision of the otherworldly in the photographic image. Here, Gibson accepts the objectivity of the photographic image on his part as an image-maker, while trying to invoke a subjective way of looking at that image at the viewer's end. The same idea also sits at the heart of Gibson's inclination to the *Nouveau Roman*, which reassured his

conviction that the “only valid question” was “how to perceive reality” (Gibson, 1984: 9). And just like that, Gibson’s experiment with sequence has come full circle with the Surrealist understanding of the photographic reality, which was first materialized in *The Somnambulist*.

## The Straightness of Photography and the Surrealism of Perception

In this paper, I have demonstrated a close analysis of Gibson’s photobook trilogy: *The Somnambulist*, *Déjà-Vu,* and *Days at Sea*. I paid greater attention to the mechanism of visual signification in each publication in relation to major theories of 20th-century art, photography, and literature, developed by such figures as Borges, Stieglitz, White, Duras, and Robbe-Grillet. As it has become clear, at the heart of the trilogy lies an aspiration to loosen the photographic image’s indexical ties with the referential reality, so that the photographs can be experienced in the subjective and contemplative ways that intimate dreams, the unconscious, recollections, analogies, and the rhythm of pure forms. By all means, Gibson was not the only image-maker who took such an issue with photography. However, to repeat the point emphasized at the beginning of this paper, it is thanks to his method of sequencing and its inventive application to the book form that Gibson’s trilogy has gained an unparalleled importance in the development of art photography and photobook publishing since the 1970s. His sequencing presents a durational arc of narrative — no matter how obscure and open-ended it may be — while respecting the relative autonomy of individual photographs that occupy single pages. Here, in the coexistence of individuality and collectivity of the pictures, the camera image’s objectivity reconciles with its inevitable consignment to “the subjectivity of seeing,” to borrow Susan Sontag’s words (Sontag, 1977: 136).

I will conclude this paper by corroborating the place of Gibson’s “surrealism of the perception” in the history of Surrealist thoughts on the photographic medium. The Surrealist purchase on photography has predominantly been associated with the darkroom manipulations, bizarre subject matter, and theatrical trickeries cultivated by the official Surrealists during the 1920s. This view was given the center stage in 1985, when a massive retrospective of Surrealist photography titled *L’Amour fou* was organized by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and traveled to the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris the following year. Although the exhibition included a number of unmanipulated photographs showing ordinary subjects, the curators placed greater emphasis on such works as the burned photographs (*brûlages*) by Raoul Ubac, the photograms and solarized prints by Man Ray, the photomontages by Georges Hugnet, and the pictures of deformed mannequins by Hans Bellmer. In so doing, the exhibition canonized a lineage of Surrealist photography hostile to straight photography or the “*photographie-vérité*”, as the *Le Monde* critic Patrick Roegiers reviewed (1986: 47). In other words, *L’Amour fou* was conceptually benefitted from a narrow, rather “American” understanding of photography’s objectivity, which was nothing but a myth of medium specificity that was debunked most powerfully by the heavily distorted and often grotesque-looking examples (Walker, 2002: 2–3; Zalman,

2015: 150–157). By contrast, for Gibson, what was the most Surrealist about the photographic medium was its straightness and blatant realism.

It is fair to say that Gibson, who looked back to the original Surrealism from a historical vantage point, modernized the Surrealist interest in subjectivity by fusing it with the photographic medium's objective connection to material reality. As Sontag observed in 1977, the realization that photography was "natively surreal" became possible only after the techniques of manipulation and theatricalization adored by the official Surrealists had absorbed into the visual grammars of cultural industry in the 1930s (Sontag, 1977: 51). During the Postwar period, when the original Surrealist movement had already petered out in France, André Bazin noted: "Photography ranks high in the order of surrealist creativity because it produces an image that is a reality of nature, namely, a hallucination that is also a fact" (1967: 16). In 1963, the Hungarian-French photographer Brassaï argued for a "straight Surrealism," which located "Surreality" in banal things, in "the normality of the normal" (qtd. in Sanchez, 2010: 230). Brassaï, who disapproved of manipulations and trickeries, echoed Gibson when he stated that the Surrealism of his photographs was "nothing but the reality made fantastic through vision" (Brassaï, 1980: 14).

The great acclaim that Gibson's photographic work would earn in France after the early 1970s can be understood in this context. From the French perspective, Gibson's emphasis on perception was the latest addition to the continued updates of Surrealism undertaken by Bazin, Brassaï, and Robbe-Grillet. The main impetus for this revision was the critical understanding of photography's straightness, the photographic image's seamless connection to the perceived reality. It is, in other words, the absence of human intentionality in the camera's optical mechanism, which Brassaï christened the "a-human" vision of photography in his study on Marcel Proust (2001: 120). By aligning with this line of revisionist endeavors, on the one hand, Gibson's work offered a modernized alternative to the more conspicuous canons of Surrealist photography that curtailed the medium's truth claim. As French photographer Claude Nori wrote in 1976, Gibson's work was the progenitor of "a new Surrealist photography," which discovered "a specifically photographic originality" by refusing "manipulation and montage" in favor of "the ordinary". On the other hand, Gibson's aversion to the monstrous or the pathological as subject matter was refreshing to French photographers and critics, who were shocked by the bizarre and even violent snapshots by Diane Arbus and Gary Winogrand, shown as part of the exhibition "Photographie nouvelle des États Unis" at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris in 1971. It was owing to the "elegant sophistication" enlivened by Gibson's focus on banal objects and quotidian scenes, that his sequences and photobooks would become a desirable headliner of contemporary American photography throughout the following decades in Europe (Mora, 2008: 30).

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