A DIFFERENT TAKE

A subgenre of *art brut* focusses on photos that have been discarded, rediscovered, and brought back to life as "photomachinées"

ASTRID BERGLUND

The exhibition poster shows a black-and-white photograph with a jagged border **(fig 1)**. In a desert landscape dotted with cacti, two little girls, dressed in light dresses, squint under the glaring sun. Behind them, a woman wearing a long dress rests her arm on the shoulder of a man in a shirt and braces. He holds the youngest child by the shoulder and she returns his embrace. Described in this way, the image seems innocuous, a common cliché of family heritage. But, in the very centre of the image, the faces of the two adults are gone, roughly cut out, leaving behind two holes. The viewer absorbs the absence of the two protagonists, and the voids left by the severed heads.

This photograph was not destroyed – it was discarded, voluntarily or involuntarily. The emotional bond between the item and the person who possessed it, just like the faces of the adults, has gone. Found and kept by a junk dealer, awaiting a new owner, the photo got lost in the piles of old images and papers at a flea market. Rediscovered in Mexico, it was bought and repatriated to France for two bargain-hunter-collectors. What is the story of this disowned, anonymous, stateless image?

Our cultural heritage suggests that it is probably a portrait of a family, taken in an arid country – in the 1940s, if we consider the clothes and the nature of the print. That is where the clues end.

The photograph is one of a selection of 452 photo-engineered images – the result of a ten-year or so collaboration between collectors Antoine Gentil and Lucas Reitalov – which they donated to the Collection de l'Art Brut, in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 2021. From several thousand anonymous photographs that they had amassed, the pair whittled the images down to create a coherent collection. The nomenclature that they coined for these photo-engineered items – "photomachinées" – is also the title of the resulting exhibition which, curated by Gentil, opened at the Collection de l'Art Brut at the end of March and will run until September 24, 2023.

Existing on the margins of the history of photography – and paid little attention by scholars in that field – the photomachinées images in the exhibition are presented as straddling vernacular photography, popular art and *art brut*. Produced by anonymous people, the images come from a variety of periods and sources. What they have in

all artworks shown: anonymous, untitled, n.d., Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne, unless otherwise stated

opposite page: (1), silver print on paper, cut out, 2.5 x 3.5 in. / 6 x 8.5 cm

above: (3), silver print and collage on cardboard, 9.5 x 7 in. / 24.5 x 18.5 cm

right: (2), silver print on paper, cut out, 2 x 1.75 in. / 5.5 x 4.5 cm

common is that they are all victims of a plot, intervention or incident that has modified their initial appearance and also their primary meaning. They have been subjected to cutting, collage, drawing or painting (by the photographer or a third party), or else are the result of an accident or the ravages of time. Thus, four distinct groups are subdivided into 20 categories, given new names invented by the two collectors, which help the viewer understand these peculiar, often poetic artefacts.

Little paper puppets – "photosamples" or figures cut out from other photographs – float, no longer anchored (**fig 2**). Taken out of context, these cut-outs will find their way to being the basis within several other categories: "photorecompositions" (**fig 3**), "photomergers" (**fig 4**), "photomugs" (**fig 5**) and "photoabsorptions" (**fig 6**). They all use the photosample, and together form a first group that is made "in two acts": that of the cutting, then that of the insertion of these silhouettes onto another medium – paper or another photograph – sometimes supplemented by a drawing or a painting.

What unites the next group is a double temporality. These objects are also made "in two stages": a shot,

above, left: (11), colour photographic print on paper, 3.5 x 3.5 in. / 9 x 9 cm

above, middle: (10), photographic print and ink on paper, 3.5 x 4.5 in. / 9 x 14 cm

above, right: (9), photographic print on paper, 3 x 3.5 in. / 8.5 x 8.75 cm

top: (7), hand-coloured photographic print on paper, 3.5 x 2.5 in. / 8.5 x 6.5 cm

right: (8), 1923, photographic print with tracing paper overlay, 4.5 x 3.5 in. / 14 x 9 cm

chosen and desired, is embellished with an anterior or posterior addition that completes the meaning of the image or, conversely, makes it more obscure: highlights of acid colours for the "photocolourisations" **(fig 7)**, of text for the "photocaptions" **(fig 8)**, or of a brushstroke – sometimes directly on the model – for the "photohighlights" **(fig 9** and **fig 10)**. In the case of the "Sunday-best-photos" **(fig 11)**, it is before the darkroom or during the development that the engineering takes place. The "photoadaptations" **(fig 12** and **13)** blur the lines. Was the drawing done before or after the shot? Finally, the stair-like composition of the "photo-panoramas" **(fig 14**, see over**)** tells the story of two exploits: that of the photographer who climbed to take the pictures and that of the person who assembled the pictures to create the continuous horizon.

In all of these disowned images, the links are broken, the stories lost. The next group – of the "between-times" – evokes the emotional attachment between the photographer, the holder of the image, and the face represented. There is the highlighting of the loved one in the "photoframings" **(fig 15)**, of talisman-objects that are the "photofetishises" **(fig 16)**, and of the assumed love of the "photo-idols" **(fig 17** and **18)** which shines out via

above, left: (17) (recto), 1943, silver print on paper, 3.5 x 5.5 in. / 9 x 13.5 cm; above, top: (18) (verso), 1943, ink and lipstick on the photograph's reverse
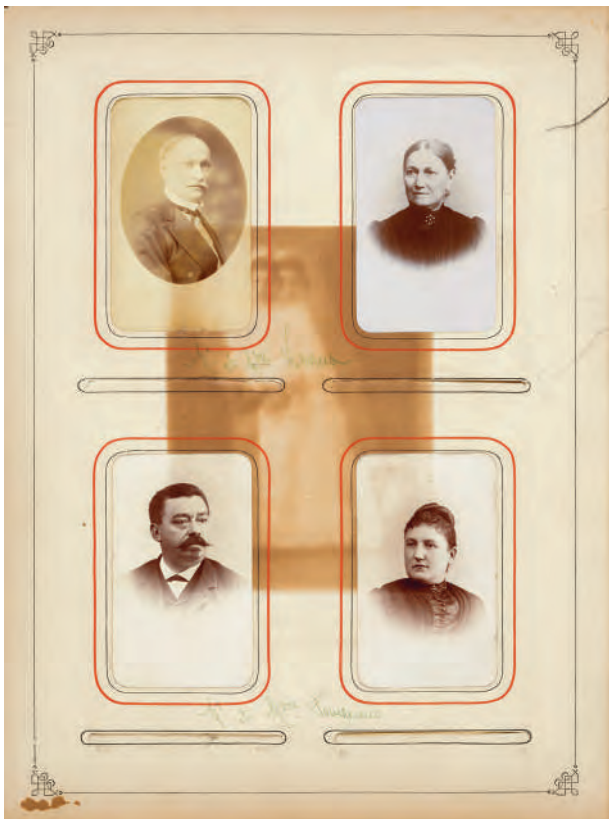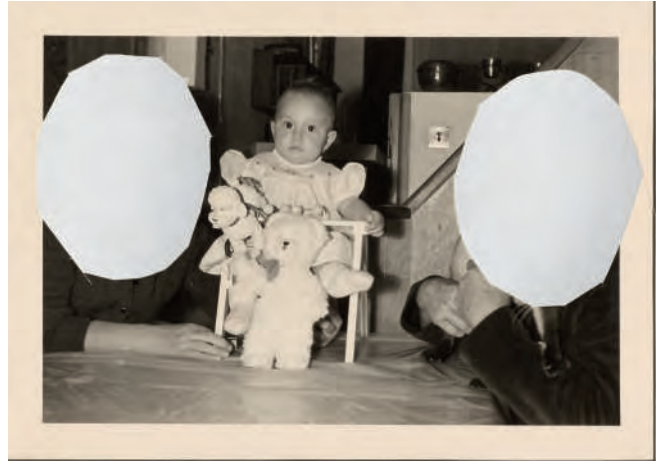
above, right: (15), silver print on paper, and cardboard enhanced with cotton threads, 3 x 3 x 0.25 in. / 7 x 7 x 0.5 cm

left: (16), photo album page, and cat fur, whiskers and claws, 12.5 x 10 in. / 31.5 x 25 cm

below, left: (13), photographic print and paint on paper, 7 x 4.5 in. / 17.5 x 11.5 cm
below, right: (12), photographic print on cardboard, 6.5 x 4 in. / 16.5 x 10 cm

above: (23), albumen prints in a cardboard
album page, 9 x 11.5 in. / 22.5 x 29.5 cm

right: (24), silver print and collage on paper,
3.5 x 5.5 in. / 8.5 x 14 cm

In all of these disowned images, the links are broken, the stories lost.

above: (14), glued silver prints, 11.5 x 5.5 in. / 29 x 14.5 cm

opposite page: top, left: (20), silver print on paper, cut out, 2 x 3 in. / 5 x 8 cm; top, right: (19), 1959, silver print on paper, cut out, 3.5 x 3 in. / 9 x 8 cm; middle: (21), silver print and ink on paper, 2 x 3 in. / 5.5 x 7.5 cm; middle, right: (22), silver print on paper, 3.5 x 4.5 in. / 8.5 x 11.5 cm

the fiery application of a red-hot lipstick kisses on the back of the photograph.

The last group, "between-two", evokes a certain form of violence. In the "photorejections" **(fig 19)**, only the rejected character remains in the image – the one who was not chosen to be used elsewhere. The sometimes angry cut-out of the "photomiracles" **(fig 20)** evokes the story of a falling out of love or the end of a friendship: the portrait removed from the image leaving only a jagged hole and an incomplete image that was miraculously saved. Echoing this, the "photo-erasures" **(fig 21)** bear faces smeared with ink, or covered with plasters or vigorous scratches. Loss of love is followed by love, the "photoworns" **(fig 22)** are faded to the point of disappearance, by dint of having been carried in a wallet or purse. The "photodamages" **(fig 23)** have suffered the ravages of inadequate conservation: water, fire or the breakage of the frame's glass. To conclude, the "photoreconstitutions" **(fig 24)** manifest the emotional rupture – the tear is visible, but the cautious attempts at reconstruction avert the fragility of the relationship that has been patched up.

This corpus of photomachinées has been integrated into a separate subgenre of *art brut* that was born in the early 1960s, when Jean Dubuffet returned to collecting. He reviewed the works in his inventory and decided to create an additional collection that allowed him to focus on a tighter definition of *art brut*, without getting rid of works previously collected. Thus, children's drawings, the works of anonymous people, and even objects relating to popular art were reclassified. Named "*neuve invention*" by Michel Thévoz in 1982, this subgenre continues to grow, and makes it possible to acquire singular works in which the creators do not make such a radical break with "cultural" art or artistic circuits as the creators of *art brut.* It also makes it possible to include creations by anonymous people whose life course can no longer be traced and whose aesthetic perception of the work alone does not allow them to be classified as *art brut*.

The photomachinées are part of a domestic and self-taught practice, that of the common man dear to Jean Dubuffet. As with works of *art brut*, their creation results from the sphere of the intimate together with a destiny which is not that of the exhibition. With their collection, Antoine Gentil and Lucas Reitalov make us change our gaze. We look at objects hitherto "invisible" to our eyes, we discover that the anomaly carries meaning and we regret not having been more attentive previously to the anonymous images that surround us. Photomachinées provide a new story of art on the margins, that of treasures that exist where we least expect to find them.

Astrid Berglund is a curator at the Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne, Switzerland, and coordinator of "Photomachinées". The exhibition will run until September 24, 2023.