

# DONIGAN

DIVERTING THE IMAGE | DÉTOURNEMENTS DE L'IMAGE

# CUMMING



## DISQUIETING POSES

### SOUND, VOICE, TEXT – PHOTOGRAPHIC STRATEGIES

*Man is a hard subject to place and turn around on the palm of your hand. It is difficult to get around him and get the necessary distance. The difficulty lies in stepping back, and in accommodating the gaze, the*

*focus. It is not very easy to approach the objective.<sup>1</sup>*

In 1983, Donigan Cumming became aware of 500 pages of letters addressed to Elvis Presley by an American woman named Betty- The letters showed the loneliness and anguish of a suffering woman and the influence that Elvis Presley had on her life: she thought that Elvis was still alive and that he was trying to keep in touch with her. Donigan Cumming developed the third part of *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* from this written material along with songs by Elvis Presley, either taken from his records or sung by the models shown in the pictures. The work as a whole quickly takes on the appearance of a public archives itemizing the various attitudes of Elvis Presley fans. The third section concludes an impressive image cycle that illustrates the codes of documentary photography which the photographer stages and revisits while mapping out a critical discourse of the photographic approach.

Several years later in 1987, Donigan Cumming once again came into contact with personal archives. This time he used the diary of a friend, Harry Strong, who had just died at the age of fifty-five. Harry's life was marked by disappointment and repeated betrayals. These autobiographical texts serve as a backdrop to *Pretty Ribbons*, an immense fresco created around Nettie Harris, the sole female character. Nettie Harris, a familiar figure in Donigan Cumming's work, gives her body, voice and her story to Harry Strong's. A desire to seduce, solitude, aging, memory and sexuality are all depicted here.

Between these two bodies of work is an immense human mosaic, *The Mirror, The Hammer and The Stage*, a work in two parts. The mosaic relies on the laws of editing and mimetism, and traces the amazing complexity and depth of the reality from which it takes its inspiration. Only *The Stage* is accompanied by a sound track. The visitor will recognize it as an extract from *The Ten Commandments* by Cecil B. de Mille. This recitation from memory is a true performance, the performer playing along with the storytelling in the oral tradition. Placed alongside a 250-picture mural, the text, a theatrical background, adds a timeless dimension to the work and produces the reactualization of a familiar 'story'.

A different territory becomes apparent in each installation. From curiosity challenged by an anecdotal world, richly tinged with popular culture, to bombastic ranting with biblical overtones, viewers progressively confronted in a disquieting encounter with intimacy and vulnerability. Although Betty remains unknown and off-screen (the photographer keeps his distance from her and they never meet), we are slowly tamed by the mob that the artist has photographed and the web of the respective voices. We are able to recognize the same characters from one project to another; some of them become more familiar and endearing. Held by Nettie Harris's magnetism and Harry "Strong's account of his life, interspersed with comments by Donigan Cumming, *Pretty Ribbons* succeeds in progressively getting closer to these daily dramas that form our existence through an environment of intimacy.

*At times I feel that your voice is reaching me from far away, while I am prisoner of a gaudy and unlivable present, where all forms of human society have reached an extreme in their cycle and there is no imagining what new/ forms they may assume. And I hear, from your voice, the invisible reasons which make cities live, through which perhaps, once dead, they will come to life again.<sup>2</sup>*

In Donigan Cumming's work, the sound dimension plays an essential role: on a narrative plane revealing meaning and anecdote and on a structural plane through the use of repetition, loops and sound superimpositions. Sound draws attention to what remains off-screen from the picture; it activates fiction and allows it to be approached from a completely different viewpoint: "It isn't the voice that commands the story; it is the ear".<sup>3</sup> Sound offers a mobile space for the imaginary and sometimes blurs the most obvious tracks. It extends the frame to bring photography closer to cinema.

More than an affinity on the level of conception brings the images and the sound track together in Donigan Cumming's work. Sound seems to have a role similar to that held by the photographic series: both are formed and developed through repetition and superimposition. From one body of work to another, we find different models in the same poses (citation is at work). The image series is read as multiples of one reality; the succession of words on the sound tracks of each installation form a loop, generating a text which is endlessly repeated. This text unfolds and acts as a support for the mirror-

effect present in the image mosaics. In this barrage of images and speech, interchangeable photographs and sounds participate equally in the fiction<sup>4</sup>.

Although it is rarely associated with the fixed image, sound can be studied in this context as a photographic element. Defining the photographic is an attempt to express a mode of perception and reception, a mode of associations operating through impression<sup>5</sup>. A possibility exists of being impressed by images and the surrounding sounds, of letting them settle in layers in order to bring them back later on. Sound doesn't add anything in this work; it doesn't compensate for the silence of the photograph in any way. It does, however, take part in the logic of the photographic image: it supports, in fact it greatly increases, the paradoxical character of the photograph which is defined by the elusiveness of a registered message that resists disclosure. There are words which are described in the instant: they bring images directly to mind. Others require duration and take on some of the characteristics of the atmosphere. Having the viewer oscillate back and forth between the qualities of time and space inherent in the snapshot and the pose, Donigan Cumming offers some clues to understanding the very essence of photography in the image/sound conjunction.

In Donigan Cumming's work there are not only music and the noises associated with the shots, but voices. Voice is an element that each of us is familiar with, yet it only receives our distracted attention. It is in fact quite easy to disregard it altogether. And yet, it reveals a very complex and shifting nature. Voice defines its own space. By its range and its various registers, it is shaped according to its obstacles. It is always a direct reflection of the body: it speaks of the body.

A discussion of the voice in Donigan Cumming's work is important as it concerns a complex apparatus that hesitates between evanescence and corporeity. There is something disquieting and even frightening about these bodyless voices that reminds us of the issue of division, or the separation that is called into question in photography between the models and the images produced of them or between the stage and staging. It is, therefore, around and through the voice that this idea of the photographic is developed.

*The human voice is, as a matter of fact, a privileged (eidetic) site of difference: a site which escapes science, for there is no science (physiology, history, aesthetics, psychoanalysis) which exhausts the voice: no matter how/ much you classify and comment on the music historically, sociologically, aesthetically, or technically, there will always be a remainder, a supplement, a lapse, something unspoken which designates itself: the voice. (...) There is no human voice which is not the object of desire — or repulsion: there is no neutral voice — and if on occasion neutrality, that whiteness of the voice occurs, it terrifies us, as if we were to discover a frozen world, one in which desire was dead.*<sup>6</sup>

## **VOICE AND BODY**

Every voice conveys the image of a body and reveals its different stories to us. Donigan Cumming's characters remember and forget only with difficulty; old wounds resurface but they are only fleetingly touched upon, viewed again with both weariness and surprise. A wave of nostalgia punctually invades this richly contrasted world. The voice speaks of the body, it evokes the body; it is a relic of the past, the persistence of the past in the memory. If forgetting is to be seen as a survival technique which causes various obscure zones of the daily landscape to emerge, then everything encourages remembering.

The voice is the body's memory. To recite stories from memory — the excerpt from the Cecil B. de Mille film that is repeated in *The Stage*, for example — shows the power that words hold over the memory of a man who remembers. The same apparatus is at work in *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography, Part 3*: the male and female voices falter several times, revealing the implied theatre and the tragedy of illusion. Each voice carries the image of a separate body; and each background sound contributes to the reconstruction of a space that is known, familiar and imaginary all at once. Stories, some more anecdotal, others quite traumatizing, follow one another and are often repeated without our knowledge.

*His voice sketched out his mouth, eyes, face, his whole portrait, both interior and exterior, more than if he were right in front of me.*<sup>7</sup>

Voice wanders in space. As a defence mechanism against surprise, a voice allows us to bring troubled territories under control. A voice can be seductive and hypnotizing. It can hide or mask something that we might hesitate revealing; and it distracts. Uneasiness can be detected: the modulations, pauses, its rhythm, accent and the way that certain syllables are stressed, make the voice a personalized

instrument. A voice is also able to demonstrate something that words and text may have difficulty revealing: a voice transmits speech. Like the words in a diary, speech isn't sent out with a once and for all finality, but develops through twists and turns, hesitations and contradictions: a surface in „ motion that the observer deciphers at the same time as the narrator is becoming part of the present. "A voice follows its path all alone and reacts only with delay".<sup>8</sup>

A voice halts, hesitates and sinks into silences — a necessary pose for the listener and essential for the images so that they can be better fixed. A voice leaves tracks. It challenges the pathos in an image and shakes it out of its inertia. It gives us access to the illusion of thinking we know a particular man or woman: Betty, Harry Strong, Nettie Harris and perhaps even Donigan Cumming himself.

## VOICES, NOISES AND LITANIES

*Listening to someone, hearing their voice, demands attention from the listener, (...) a floating attention, that is open to an intervention somewhere between body and discourse, without strain, neither in the impression of the voice nor the expression of the discourse. What is then given to hear is exactly what the subject doesn't say: the unconscious thread of existence which associates their body as the location of the discourse. This active thread reactualizes the totality of the subject's story in their speech.*<sup>9</sup>

Voice, by definition, informs; it can step back from the discourse that it carries with it only with difficulty. If the viewer lingers a moment on the text, he/she will note that in Donigan Cumming's work since *Reality and Motive ... , Part 3*, the complex strategies set in place define the traumatic nature of the photographic. The photographer may not traumatize the photographed or interviewed subject, but he does succeed in traumatizing the listener (as a number of critics have proven). From an extremely stratified sound track that starts by demonstrating the anecdotal (the series on Elvis Presley in *Reality and Motive ... , Part 3*) to a sound track whose strange effect stems primarily from the counterpoint that it exerts on the image (*The Stage*) and finally a trajectory between confidence and detachment (*Pretty Ribbons*), we recognize Donigan Cumming's fascination with the oral transmission of the 'underlying story'. A complex network of effects is implemented in each instance. The photographic is registered after the event, resulting in a delayed action effect; action only slowly takes effect in the viewer (the amazing power of the imaginary on fiction).

The nature of the text and its hold over the image vary from one text to another. In the first installation, the text constructed with pathos is transformed into litany. This effect is produced partly through the loop and partly through Betty's devotion to Presley; it is also found in the character of a text which accentuates the circularity of existence. A sound space, chaotic and cacophonous, is present. It enriches the photographic decor with elements of fiction, it exerts a thickening effect; the single photographic image plays the role of a condenser in this way. In the second installation, the linearity of the intentionally bombastic tone is opposed to the fragmentation of the mosaic: a surface voice in the distance skims across this image formed from 250 reflections or mirrors. The third installation reminds us of the principle in *Reality and Motive ... , Part 3*, which is also developed around a single character, the ghostlike figure of Elvis Presley. It is intimate and playful, and it stresses duration (different instants following one another, many voices taking part in the development of a figure).

Returning to *Reality and Motive ... , Part 3*, we see that it anticipates the creation of *Pretty Ribbons*. The songs of Elvis Presley are sung by Presley himself, then in turn by the characters photographed by Donigan Cumming who mimic Presley's style. These songs are also used by the same characters as dialogue between Elvis and Betty. The text proves to be quite malleable. This fusion is troubling because of the levelling effect created by this kind of reappropriation of someone else's words. These same phrases, recycled by different voices, touch upon the nostalgia of an era and nurture fiction, raising issues of subjectivity, point of view, otherness and also the inevitable circularity of ideas. The protagonists chosen to be photographed loan their voices to Betty who, silent and absent from the images, haunts the whole dream-like image space. This catalogue of male and female voices shows us, through the various shifts in the different sound tracks, the emotive vulnerability of an incredible character. The principle of a portrait of a doubly phantom character is repeated several years later in *Pretty Ribbons*.

The voice may inform, but it is engulfed in words. It slowly gives up its informative properties and becomes music. This music is nurtured by the rhythm of elocution, the barrage of speech and the intertwined voices. It can lead us to the boredom that is generally set off by a regular and monotone babelogue. From this paradoxical and troubling position, it once again joins the image to its own mobile status.

Listening this way, moments are related: density is produced by the superimposition of many sound sources. This creates an equalizing that is equivalent to the levelling produced through the accumulation of accessories in an image. *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography, Part 3* and *Pretty Ribbons* are both based on the principle of strata and thickening of sound whereas *The Stage* depends more on its linearity and its sparking, surface effect. The superimposition of different sound material forces the viewers to listen. It prompts them to focus on one voice rather than another if they want to understand the meaning. Otherwise they are invaded by a sound mass, and invited to let themselves be fascinated by the musicality of the elements. The abundance created by the surge of words or the superimposition of voices recalls the duplication of photographed "models" embodying different decors and poses, either alone or surrounded by friends and relatives. Unique and interchangeable at the same time, they are different yet always the same. The compulsion associated with language, the pleasure of speaking, displaying and the bursting forth of words or speech is juxtaposed with the photographer's frenzy and generosity in exhibiting so many facets of humankind. An infinite series of characters is exhibited simultaneously. Imposed on the viewer, it relates to the pleasure of seeing, hearing and speaking.

*Language, so total that its noise could prove to be enough. It remains an instinct. There is always a compulsion to pursue it.*<sup>10</sup>

However, repetition by definition leads to difference: a continuous barrage, we can only perceive its modulations and its meaning by registering changes of pursue it.<sup>10</sup> rhythm. Remember the leitmotif repetition of the Elvis Presley songs or Harry Strong's monologue superimposed over Nettie Harris's voice repeatedly reciting a poem. Repetition is read as a form of echo processing. The viewer is found at the core of an unsolvable enigma: is this the same story that is being told, the same character incarnated in different models or different characters incarnated by the same model? The principle is similar in each installation. We are in an active listening mode: voices telling anecdotes, the music-voice which engulfs discourse, the voice which merges into breaks and hesitations, the voice without a story, the silent voice that we don't hear anymore. These different states of voices alternate and disturb our comfortable position as much too often deaf or blind observers.

## STAGING AND POSES

*They have no voices. They are quite close to paralytic. They can only attract attention through their poses. (...) despite their efforts for self-expression, they are only able to repeat the same expression over and over again, a million times (...). 'They can only express themselves through their poses'. Unable to move, they can only multiply their arms, hands and fingers — like Buddhas. It is in this way, as idlers, that they reach the limits of their thoughts. Their only possession is a will to express. They have nothing to keep hidden just for themselves, they can't keep a secret, they are on complete display, honestly and without restriction. (...) All they have at their disposal to attract attention are their poses, lines and sometimes an exceptional signal: an extraordinary visual appeal C...).*<sup>11</sup>

This is quite similar to the paradoxical oscillation between the distinct concepts of time and space which are the foundation of photography: troubling and troubled, mobile and mobilizing, Donigan Cumming's work is nurtured by this inexhaustable alternating between the two statements/statutes of image and sound. Contrasted to the gathered accounts (read, recited from memory, spontaneously narrated) is the documentary artificiality of Donigan Cumming's photographed stagings. Contrasted to the artificiality of the sound track — the result of editing, cuts and the superimposition of the same text in order to obtain a complex sound mass (from which the signifying elements could be extricated by someone who is able to make an 'auditive focus') — is the clarity of those moments of truth defined by characters who incarnate what is most alive in ourselves. What we have is a sharp or sharpened vision of the complexity of the human species. The pose, at the very core of Cumming's photographic work, gives an impressive acknowledgement of the roles that we play (on ourselves).

Gestures follow one another without any order; they are ordinary, related to our everyday lives; the characters are enigmatic and, at the same time, strangely familiar. The familiar rubs shoulders with the terrible, the horror of daily life, its erosive power and its fascinating hold over the individual. Look at daily life, scrutinize it, do its autopsy, strip away the banal; stumble into a body so as to create imaginary and photographic bodies: this is where Donigan Cumming's work, as well as the strength of the character inhabited by Nettie Harris, resides. Her repeated presence, always there, never the same but always herself in whatever role she succeeds in playing, is a confirmation that we only exist through contemplation.

Nettie Harris is an ambivalent figure who is difficult to get a hold on, but she offers her body to our gaze. Detailed, seen in her different facets and poses, she is a body; at the same time however, she is

a character from a novel with an astonishing power to fascinate the viewer. In Donigan Cumming's previous work *Nettie Harris* was silent; in *Pretty Ribbons* she tells us stories<sup>12</sup> and offers us a suite of roles that she enjoys playing, contradicting and transforming. Nettie plays the roles of a child, the mother, a wife, a lover, an artist and an eccentric old lady who likes to dress up and wear make-up. These roles evoke different temporalities: from the search for lost territories to the conquest of new ones by way of yet others to be reconquered. As directed by Donigan Cumming, *Nettie Harris* is the key to the continuation of an episodic narrative that the photographer has been developing over several years. Look between the images and the sound, in the spaces reserved for the off-screen, and approach photography from the viewpoint of cinema. The role of the off-screen is revealed as a stimulator of fiction, and the power of sound as a support for the imaginary.

This inventory of aspirations, realities, compromises and roles played alternately and in succession presents us with a gigantic fresco. The interchangeable roles refer to, draw attention to and anticipate the different fragments of our stories. Donigan Cumming presents us with the facets of a "self in mutation"<sup>13</sup>, a metamorphosis which is, by definition, a purely photographic operation. All of Donigan Cumming's work owes its strength in this way to the body. The body creates sound with a double resonance: it generates sound but it also opens itself up to it. This precarious round-trip makes the body an astonishingly photographic object: we are the living proof of the endless recycling of stories, of an obsessive repetition of these stories (and this includes the images).

Like a voice that has become detached from its body and has become an 'object' in itself — an object that we listen to for the sole pleasure of having a story told to us, for the substance or perhaps the texture of the voice — which is defined in the present of listening, the images are detached from Nettie Harris and are shown for what they are. All that matters is what is said in the present of the instant. The characters appear and disappear colouring the images that we look at. The eye focuses, the ear isolates. Each of them succeeds in joining two modes of grasping the real: the instant and duration. "The idea that the reality could be a body ... is such a nuisance."<sup>14</sup>

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[translated from the French by Michael Bailey]

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#### Notes

1. Francis Ponge, *Le parti pris des choses*, Paris, Editions Gallimard, 1989, p.214.
2. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, Orlando, Florida, Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich Publishers, 1974, p. 135.
3. Italo Calvino. *Invisible Cities*, op.cit., p. 136.
4. Concept developed by Georges Bogardi in "In Camera: The Photography of Donigan Cumming", *Thirteen Essays on Photography*, Ottawa, Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1991. pp. 66-78.
5. Philippe Dubois, "Le regard photographique de Roland Barthes", *La Recherche photographique*, no. 12, juin 1992, p. 67.
6. Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms*, Toronto, Collins, 1985, pp. 279-280.
7. Robert Bresson, *Notes sur le cine-matographe*, Paris. Editions Gallimard. 1988, p. 18.
8. Jean-Loup Riviere, "Le vide de l'air", *Traverses*, no. 20, nov. 1980, p. 23.
9. Denis Vasse, *L'ombilic et la voix*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1974, pp. 184-185.
10. Michael Delisle, *Les changeurs de signes*, Montreal, Editions nbj, 1987, p. 25.
11. Francis Ponge, *Le parti pris des choses*, op.cit., pp. 81-82. Ponge is discussing plants that he has observed.
12. The texts vary in nature and tone: a poem in her own hand, a phrase that slipped out in an interview, a verse from a song, stories about her dog, Blackie. For the purpose of this work, they have a different but complementary narrative role.
13. Georges Bogardi, "In Camera: The Photography of Donigan Cumming", *Thirteen Essays on Photography*, op. cit., p. 73.
14. Michael Delisle, *Les changeurs de signes*, op. cit., p. 14.