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# Luis Jacob, *Seeing and Believing / Tromper l'oeil*, London, UK, Black Dog Publishing, 2013

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Number 96, Winter 2014

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/71013ac

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Publisher(s)

Les Productions Ciel variable

ISSN

1711-7682 (print)
1923-8932 (digital)

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Cite this review

Falvey, E. (2014). Review of [Luis Jacob, *Seeing and Believing / Tromper l'oeil*, London, UK, Black Dog Publishing, 2013]. *Ciel variable*, (96), 95–95.

# Luis Jacob
## Seeing and Believing / Tromper l'œil

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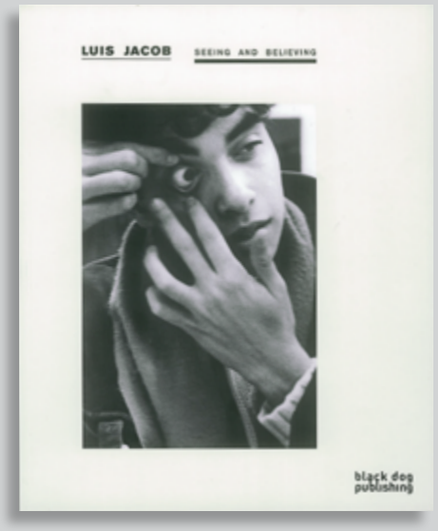


A substantial overview of the work of Canadian artist Luis Jacob has long been desired. *Seeing and Believing*, a hefty bilingual catalogue recently published by the British company Black Dog Publishing, proposes to fill this void. Produced in conjunction with a set of three distinct yet interconnected 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 disjunction – 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 Developments 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 through discussion of a variety of subjects, including the limitations of voting as a form of democracy, a disagreement between Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson concerning the role of the museum, and two paintings by nineteenth-century French academic painter Jean-Léon Gérôme. One of the most effective passages concerns the use of clichés. Jacob writes,

> The problem with clichés, from an anarchist perspective, is not that they are necessarily wrong ideas, so much as they are the dead version of ideas. Clichés are readymade thoughts, thoughts performed automatically – thinking performed in a "default setting," if you will. Clichés are thoughts inherited unthinkingly from others, rather than thought digested by us through the filter of our own experiences. Thinking in clichés, then, is the canned form of thinking in action, and is as far removed from actual thinking as the canned laughter in a television comedy is from real, joyous laughter. Clichés are the dead version of ideas – ideas lacking the spark of life.
>
> Differentiating between the dead and living versions of things is the central theme of the essay – and, it's fair to assume, Jacob's entire artistic practice. In his words, "Artists have ceaselessly tried to invent images that allow us to perceive the difference between the dead version of things and the living version of things. Some of these images are better than others, of course; but I believe that this is what all artists are endeavouring to do when they are involved in making Art." Jacob likens the moment in which this distinction is made to glimpsing a hole in our reality, what he calls a manifestation of groundlessness. This implies not some limitless fantasy without a social or historical context, but the ever-changing open question that is life. 'Groundless' is the idea that, from the viewpoint of Life as I live it, the meaning of these facts of my situation and of my having taken this path instead of another – the significance of these things is never written in stone, and never ceases to be an open question."
>
> One of Jacob's preferred routes to groundlessness is by reconfiguring found images, archival photographs, museum artefacts, and works of art according to intuitive connections that are palpable yet sometimes difficult to articulate. The resulting exhibitions play with and distort museological conventions, institutional apparatuses, and visual regimes that propose to govern the creation of "collective meaning" by structuring the reception of material and visual culture. For Jacob, the notion that viewers are the masters of their own experiences is central. As he writes in the final lines of his essay, "Museums connect with Life through paths that in every case remain to be created by each of us. 'Life' cannot be forced, and admits no shortcuts; it turns to ice if we try."

How, then, can this philosophy – and its expression in a multifaceted artistic practice – be reconciled with the cliché that is the exhibition catalogue? This question, which should have been the guiding principle of such a publication, doesn't seem to have been asked. Indeed, not only has Jacob's politics been reduced to a few throwaway lines concerning his anarchism and background in political science, but politics itself has been mostly avoided. It is telling that virtually the only work reproduced in the publication that is not discussed in the curatorial essays consists of a collection of photographs depicting evicted artists' studios. These were part of the exhibition at the Darling Foundry, a derelict industrial foundry reborn as a visual arts centre. A valuable opportunity to consider seismic shifts in our political economy – to say nothing of the role that art and artists have played in them – has been missed. In keeping with this oversight, little is said about Jacob's participation in changing modes of artistic production, which, as Nicolas Bourriaud has noted, have moved away from notions of appropriation and toward more collective ideals of authorship.

Instead, most of the textual space has been allocated to the favourite subjects of museum curators everywhere: the exhibition within an exhibition; the dialectic of the frame; modernist legacies; the white cube; and the blurring of bourgeois distinctions between real and imaginary, person and thing, art and life. While all of this is eminently fascinating in its own right, it somehow misses the spirit of Jacob's work. This is not to say that it has nothing to do with it. On the contrary, the curatorial essays in *Seeing and Believing* offer interesting perspectives 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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