

## Photography by Default<sup>1</sup>

Clément Chéroux

Translated by Garnet C. Butchart

*Just as any literature should take into account its typos, photography needs to address its mistakes.*  
— Denis Roche<sup>2</sup>



There are authors haunted by the *erratum*. Jorge Luis Borges, for whom the taste for literary pranks is legendary, hardly worried about typographic misprints, errors of transcription or of translation; he thought on the contrary that the *errata* would come to enrich the books.<sup>3</sup>

As he so greatly appreciated the small dysfunctions of writing, the hiatus of literature, Borges would no doubt have been keen to learn about the existence and function of the Brautigan Library. Founded by Todd Lockwood in 1990, and today located in Burlington, Vermont (USA), this institution contains, in all the appearances of a traditional library, collections of manuscripts that were rejected by their editors, unpublished books, and for the most part, works that are unpublishable: Anonymous literary objects, bizarre and chatterbox works, Sunday literature, compilations of weird and obsolete hypotheses, confessions of prophecies written in purple ink, incoherent epistolary written by an adolescent in love with a pop star, treaty point of the cross on

---

**Clément Chéroux** is a historian of photography and curator of Cabinet de la photographie at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. **Garnet C. Butchart** is Assistant Professor of Communication and Affiliate Faculty in Humanities and Cultural Studies at the University of South Florida.

a school book, collections of extravagant recipes with defective orthography, memoirs of a retired policeman “who for all literary culture, never had business other than with a fistful of law texts, a great quantity of circulars, and as much municipal orders,” etc.<sup>4</sup> And beyond the *errata* dear to Borges, are, in sum, literary accidents, complete fiascos, works aborted or renounced by the publishing industry, of the ovens or of the lamentable failures—according to Samuel Beckett’s expression<sup>5</sup>—that thereby come to amass upon the shelves of this library. The principle and the name of this curious institution have, by the way, been conceived as tributes to the writer Richard Brautigan and to his book entitled, *L’Avortement*, a book in which a similar museum of errors was described.<sup>6</sup>

As in all collections of this type, the library contains a few pearls; and it is of no surprise that an important editor decided to publish “a selection of texts from the Brautigan Library”: The best of the not so good, in short, the *chefs d’oeuvres des hors-d’oeuvres*, you’d have to say. In the beautiful pages that he has devoted to the Brautigan Library, Jean-Ives Jouannais doesn’t miss emphasizing the incoherence of the exasperating contradiction of critiquing the reversal of a cultural economy that suddenly restores what it had previously subjected to public humiliation: “The volte-face of an insidious system of recognition that bites its own tail, spilling over and then caught by its own waste, fascinated by what is beyond the margin which he himself instituted and which he knows cannot be justified. This editorial project, obscene in the sense that it is constituted only by the confession of its own blindness—a confession not even disenchanted—arises from its televised stupidities which, in bad taste of a space motivated by the Spectacle, splash about in the putrid toxic smell of their mistakes [*dérappages*] and the vulgarity of their slips of the tongue [*lapsus*]. What had been judged uninteresting or catastrophic was thus edited out, as though the action of failure did not actually exist, as though only a shifting border cowardly separates it from what has officially the right to existence, as though there was no room for acting out the failure or, even more, as though it had become impossible today for anyone to take responsibility for this decision of banishment, of veto [...], of the inflicted shame, the infamy of fiasco.”<sup>7</sup>

These paradoxical enterprises are legion in literary history as in the history of painting: Dictionaries of stupidity, encyclopedias of failures or mistakes,<sup>8</sup> those which seem to be rejoinders to the Salons of the rejected, or to George Courteline’s *Musée des horreurs*.<sup>9</sup> But the occurrence of these anomalies in literary or pictorial chronology is accompanied invariably by heated controversy or even by the questioning of their very foundation. The error is always problematic. Its apology or, simply its interpretation, seems to rarely escape the controversy.<sup>10</sup>

This applies also to photography. So, in 1991, a large “game-competition,” called *Fautographie*, was organized throughout France with the aim of collecting from amateur photographers the best of their failed pictures. Heavily promoted by way of the press and supported by a few important sponsors, the contest collected nearly ten thousand images sent in by some three thousand participants<sup>11</sup>—all happy to have been able to clear off the rubbish from their family albums. Despite the apparent

levity of the subject matter, the organizers sought to rally the required proof of seriousness of such an enterprise: A jury composed of personalities from the world of photography was invited to select the winning submission and award the subsequent prize.<sup>12</sup> Then, considering the success of the project, the organizers decided to prolong the event by organizing an exposition and a symposium. But alas, over the course of the project, one of the organizers came to recognize, to his embarrassment, that these events had carried him “much farther than he could have believed” and that he had “fallen into his own trap.”<sup>13</sup> Surprised by the public success and media coverage of the event, and probably offended that the traditional exhibitions of established artists which he had previously organized did not receive such attention,<sup>14</sup> he came to minimize the interest in the failed photographs and to render relative the importance of that which was, in its inspiration, and according to its own terms, nothing more than a “sympathetic hoax.”<sup>15</sup> The sprinkler sprinkled; passing himself off as the devil's advocate, he doesn't hesitate to declare, despite the contradiction that, “one should after all not mix things up, and that the best image by the best amateurs would never be worth the same as the worst work of the worst artists.”<sup>16</sup> Frightened by the monster to which he had given birth, he had no doubt understood that these few anomalies of amateurs came to disturb the classic understanding of artistic photography. But, rather than letting himself be dragged down the path where his first intuition had led him, he would rather retrace his steps and find himself in the paradoxical situation of having to criticize what he had just promoted by a contest, an exposition, and a symposium.

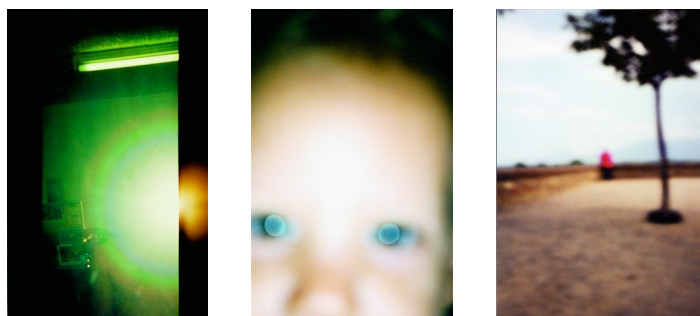
Such is failure. Its complex, supple, or twisted nature makes it a difficult subject to master. It often escapes analysis and turns sometimes against those who tempt to release it from its purgatory by attributing to it some unfathomable virtues. These are some of the difficulties that are inherent in this subject, from which the present work will, after all, perhaps not escape.



Failure is therefore the problem. But this may be precisely where its interest resides. In *la Formation de l'esprit scientifique*, Gaston Bachelard demonstrates precisely

that, “it is in terms of obstacles that we need to pose the problem of scientific knowledge.”<sup>17</sup> Usually, an obstacle collides with understanding; it is what blocks the progress of comprehension. According to Bachelard, the obstacle can, on the contrary, reveal itself to be a precious indicator of the processes in play within the cognitive experience. Knowledge is “a light which always casts shadows somewhere,”<sup>18</sup> but is never fully perceived by them. Bachelard’s hypothesis, largely reinforced by cognitive psychology with its psychoanalytic research on failure and missing acts, has shown that a form of cognition exists via error and by orientation towards shadows and obstacles.<sup>19</sup> It is within this epistemological model that the following essay is prepared. It looks to the shadows, for it is there that the failures, accidents and mistakes that photography offers can best be analyzed. In short, it argues for the photographic error as a cognitive tool.

In this case, it will not be a matter of taking interest in failed photographs, as Rimbaud could love the “idiotic paintings,”<sup>20</sup> neither to defend, by taste of using exactly the opposite, or by simple pretty things, that which is shameful for others. It would neither be a question of yielding to a literary tradition of the paradoxical apology (which Anicet Le Pors recalls, a while ago, the proliferate) by praising *fantographie* after *L’Éloge de la folie*, *l’Éloge de l’échec*, *l’Éloge de la défaite*, *l’Éloge de la fadeur*, *l’Éloge de la bêtise*, *l’Éloge de l’arbitraire* or most recently, *l’Éloge de al vache folle*<sup>21</sup>. Far from a simple museum of horrors or of errors collating and aligning freak specimens, at the permanent risk of *teratology*†, this short treatise of photographic “*ratologie*,” presented here for the aesthete and the curious, asks us to consider carefully the slips of the tongue of the photographic medium in order to better understanding just what they reveal.



---

† *L'étude "des monstres,"* the science of malformation. In the context of failed photographs, a science of “malformation” or of monstrosity plays on the idea of “showing” or of “demonstrating”: de-monstration—trans.

Clément Chéroux

## Image Credits

Page 1: Francky Stadelmann. Timed group portrait. Image submitted to the “Fautographique” competition, 1991 (National Library of France, Paris).

Page 3 (left): Anonymous professional photographer, “Veiled Nude,” cir. 1890. (Christophe Gœury collection, Paris)

Page 3 (right): Anonymous amateur photographer, “Double Exposure,” image from an album, 1899 (Fotomuseum, Munich).

Page 4: Anonymous, various subjects, experimental discards (amateur photographs discarded because of defects), 1990 (Private collection, Paris).

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> “Photography by Default” is the first English translation of the introductory chapter of “La photographie par default,” by Clément Chéroux, *Fautographie: Petite histoire de l'erreur photographique* (Paris: Éditions Yellow Now, 2003), pp. 13-17. This translation has been approved by M. Chéroux.

<sup>2</sup> Denis Roche, “Quelques involontaires (du lapsus en photographie),” *les Cahiers de la Photographie*, 10, 1983, p.5.

<sup>3</sup> This is what Jean-Pierre Bernes affirmed on *France Culture* at the time when the second volume of his edited *Œuvres Complètes* by Borges came out in la Pleiade.

<sup>4</sup> This enumeration is freely inspired by the description that Jean-Yves Jouannais gave to some of the specimens conserved at the Brautigan Library. Cf. Jean-Yves Jouannais, *Artistes sans oeuvres. I would prefer not to* (Paris: Hazan, 1997), 112-113.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Samuel Beckett, *Pour finir encore et autres foirades* (Paris: Minuit, 1976).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Richard Brautigan, *l'Avortement. Une histoire romanesque en 1966* [1970] (traduit de l'américain par Georges Renard), Paris, Seuil, 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Yves Jouannais, *op.cit.*, 111-112.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Gustave Flaubert, “L'album (Sottisier) et le Dictionnaire des idées reçues,” *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Paris, Société des Belles Lettres, 1945, t.2, p.197-283; Jean-Jacques Barrère, Christian Roche, *le Bétisier des philosophes*, Paris, Seuil, 1997; Guy Bechtel, Jean-Claude Carrière, *Dictionnaire de la bêtise et des erreurs de jugement*, Paris, Rober Laffont, 1983; Anicet Le Pors, *Éloge de l'échec*, Pantin, le Temps de cerises, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Claire Margat, “Le “Musée des horreurs” de Georges Courteline,” *les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, no73, automne 2000, p. 87-101.

<sup>10</sup> In testimony against the critics of Pierre Bayard who, in *Comment améliorer les œuvres ratées?* (Paris, Minuit, 2000), have recently proposed a theory of literary failure. Cf. Pierre Lepape, “Rafistolages et bricolage,” *Le Monde*, 20 Octobre 2000, p. II; Eric Lorel, “Y a mon auteur qu'a des rates,” *Liberation*, 23 Novembre 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Patrick Boilet, “Entre le vouloir et le savoir montrer,” *Fautographie (prospectus de la manifestation)* (Poitiers: Maison des trois quartiers, 1991), n. p.

---

<sup>12</sup> The jury was composed of Alain Fleig, Patrick Boilet, Jean-Claude Lemagny, Riwan Tromeur, Michèle Debat, Christian Bouqueret, Mounira Khmir, Serge Tisseron, Jean Arrouye, Alex Laine, Serge Charton, Gérard Abonneau and Philippe Gindre.

<sup>13</sup> Alain Fleig, “Rebuts et ratages comme ex-voto aux murs du musée ou robots et tatouages, complexe loto au murmure de alizés,” in Jean Arrouye, Michèle Debat, Thierry Gontier, Mounira Khemir, Serge Tisseron, Riwan Tromeur, Alain Fleig, *Vision juste, vision fautive, l'accident, l'erreur, le repentir* (Actes du colloque, Espace Mendès-France de Poitiers, 9 et 10 novembre 1991), unpublished manuscript sent to the author, p.43.

<sup>14</sup> “Because, indeed for quality and creative photographic initiatives, we have never succeeded to obtain such contributions and such outcomes.” Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.44. For a critique of this competition, see Paul Demare, “Fautographies,” *le voyeur*, no5, p.12.

<sup>17</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *la Formation de l'esprit scientifique. Contribution à une psychanalyse de la connaissance* [1938] (Paris: Vrin, 1993), p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 13

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Jean-Pierre Astolfi, *l'Erreur, un outil pour enseigner*, Paris, ESF, 1997; Daniel Descamps, *la Dynamique de l'erreur dan les apprentissages*, Paris, Hachette, 1999; Sigmund Feud, *la Psychopathologie de la vie quotidienne. Sur l'oubli, le lapsus, le geste manqué* [1904] (traduit de l'allemand par Serge Jankélévitch), Paris Gallimard, 1997; Id., « Les actes manqués », *Introduction à la psychanalyse* [1916-1917] (translated from German by Serge Jankélévitch), Paris, Payot, 1961, p. 5-68; Jacque Oudot, Alain Morgon, Jean-Pierre Revillard (dir.), *l'Erreur*, Lyon, Pressis universitaires de Lyon, 1982; “L’erreur,” *le Temps de savoirs*, no2, octobre 2000.

<sup>20</sup> “J’amaï le peinture idiotes,” Arthur Rimbaud, cited by Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux, *Leçons de scandale*, Crisnée, Yellow Now, 2000, p.36.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Anicet Le Pors, *op.cit.*, p.7-8; Érasme, *Éloge de la folie* [1511], Paris, Flammarion, 1996; Frédéric Bon et Michel-Antoine Barnier, *Que le meilleur perde. Éloge de la fadeur*, Paris, Philippe Picquier, 1991; Jean-Paul, *Éloge de la bêtise*, Paris, José Corti, 1993; Henri-Pierre Jeudy, *Éloge de l'arbitraire*, Paris, Puf, 1993; Christophe Claro, *Éloge de la vache folle*, Paris, Fleuve noir, 1996.



*This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.*