Alain Jacquet
Double-Dealing Images, Cannibal Paintings

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In the 1950s and 60s, abstract painting was subjected to a whole variety of strategies designed to steer it clear of the impasse of the idealism that had overseen its birth half a century earlier and give it a new topicality in a world that had very different concerns—above all, the image and the masses, and, ultimately, the mass of images. Restrictive programs, complex conceptual systems, deductive or process-based methods, gestural or chromatic stances, and spiritualist or materialist diversions of the notion itself—an endless inventory of formulae was developed on both sides of the Atlantic. To escape academicism without totally rejecting the modern project, and to innovate without resorting to either the illusion of progress or derision, this remit left precious little space for (self–) persuasion as to the genre's relevance. The most sophisticated theoretical apparatus, which remained vulnerable to the fiction of an end of painting, sometimes left abstraction bereft of its intuitive, suggestive powers, as manifested in the US in the painting of Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning. On occasions it gave only the dull sound of a dead language, hemmed in and wholly dependent on its own logic, reducing the painter to the unrewarding role of executant.

When he started out, in 1960, Alain Jacquet explored with both energy and fluency the resources of gesture in a harmoniously dissonant range of colours. These works, in which the forms that pile up appear to be pulled vertically by an irresistible attraction, show him to be conversant with abstract expressionism—the opportunity to take an interest had come at an early age. However, a painting titled *Les Coquelicots* (Poppies), with its hint of landscape, betrays a degree of impatience with the vocabulary and conventions of abstraction: for Jacquet, there could be no question of confinement or self-repetition. The *Cylindres* (displayed edge-to-edge as a kind of wall in his first solo show at Galerie Breteau, in 1961) effected a shift from plane to volume, from the frame to real space, from the regularity of painting to the incongruity of almost anthropomorphic *tubes* of paint. A degree of casualness, as handmaid to sensation and intelligence, was surely the best gambit in a period disoriented by the end of the avant-garde idea and deceived by a historicism that denatured the present. In his *Jeu de Jacquet*[1] series (1961), Jacquet simultaneously foregrounded and withdrew his own name, overstepping in a single act the prescribed limits of abstraction and profoundly changing its frontiers with figurative language. By associating painting with his own name—name as game—and by

spraying the image on the plane (the fine arrows of the Jacquet table seem to have been transferred from a curved surface, which could well be that of the *Cylindres*) only to produce it in the form of an abstraction, he had performed a disconcerting short-circuit: there is painting only in (proper) name, including within it the interstices of history and the indeterminate present. While its application cannot be exactly ascertained, the act of contraband is candidly owned, flouting the tacit law whereby a painting must be either purely speculative or descriptive, either inscribed in the prescriptive history of art, or desperately naïve. The dissimulation is overt, and shows its hand, but the deck has been reshuffled.

The biographical, historical, pictorial and conceptual levels are mixed and, as on a Möbius strip (which would later become one of his recurrent motifs), contradictions slide along continuously on a single, identical surface: inside, we are already outside, history is lodged in the now, nonsense already has a sense, shadow is pellicular, and comedy is the most serious expression of the world. Of course, the question of the name speaks primarily of the construction of a subject (Jacquet was twenty-two when he concocted this series), but it is even more effective insofar as it occasions an ambiguous game: in showing himself, Jacquet hides, and in presenting the obvious as a deception the rift deepens. Jacquet would constantly and diversely apply this attitude towards painting, right up to the variations on the image of Earth that he began in 1972. Here, our planet is a speck in the universe and the whole universe is contained in the fragmentation of that dot.

Observing the same principle of juxtaposing colours (one stops exactly at the frontier of the other), Jacquet used Olde France popular imagery (*images d'Épinal*) as a way of making fresh reversals. The stereotypes of the post-war economic miracle are at the heart of the Pop project, which spurned the assumptions of the avant-gardes. In Great Britain, first of all, with the sociological approach of Richard Hamilton, who analytically dissected the forms of mass culture (especially in the group show that he orchestrated in 1956, *This is Tomorrow*), synthesising these in the emblematic collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* The whole of society—what it possesses, what it demands, what it will never give back—ends up in the modern, transparent interior of a generic and caricatural individual. From his Duchampian point of view, the target was not painting itself—whereas it was for the Americans, who freighted pictorial form with the clichés of Yankee civilisation. The *Flag* by Jasper Johns (which Jacquet would later take up for himself), the *Combine Paintings* of Robert Rauschenberg, and then the cartoon vignettes of Roy Lichtenstein (whose *Hot Dog* he broke down into jigsaw form in 1963) and Andy Warhol's bottles of Coca-Cola, to mention only the best-known examples, quickly became classic pictorial motifs by virtue of their omnipresence around the city and in the media. Imitating or appropriating mechanical reproduction technologies (Lichtenstein, Warhol, Rauschenberg), painting critically and sometimes dramatically heightened their visibility.[2] What Jacquet was doing with his *Images d'Épinal* was quite different (the singularities of old

clichés were destined to disappear) and could within certain limits be compared to what Lichtenstein was doing throughout the 1950s, abandoning this only in favour of a short, non-figurative spell: reprising both popular illustrations and icons of American culture, and transforming them into a language derived from Cubism. *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1951) reduced the eponymous bravura piece by Emanuel Leutze (1851) to a play of coloured layers against which a few deliberately gauche-looking figures stood out.

Jacquet takes into account but is careful not to overplay the narrative or symbolic dimensions of any given image. He is interested, above all, in the cliché of the cliché, the commonplace *par excellence* that is the *image d'Épinal*, those crude popular prints which can be considered as one of the first mass media, at once for their themes, their form, and their modes of production and distribution.[3] If the productions of the Imprimerie Pellerin, which was active in Épinal, capital of the Vosges, from 1796 onwards, remain the benchmark where clichés are concerned, this is not so much for their archaic content as for their nature as propaganda instruments and their structural simplicity, their early adroitness in targeting a pre-defined public. Today, the term *image d'Épinal* is still used in French to designate any representation that is (falsely) naïve in its manner and wields a power of fascination and persuasion that can sometimes verge on the Machiavellian. Like other forms of French expression, its old-fashioned quality is actually a strength. Jacquet appropriates a number of these (the hand is firm, putting chance on its mettle): *Bonne Sainte Fainéante protectrice des paresseux* (Good Saint Idler Protecting the Indolent), *Mort et convoi de l'invincible Marlborough* (Death and Convoy of the Invincible Marlborough), *Cantique Spirituel à la louange du très saint sacrement de l'autel* (Spiritual Canticle in Praise of the Very Holy Sacrament of the Altar), *Apothéose de Napoléon* (Apotheosis of Napoleon), or again *L'union entre la France et l'Autriche* (The Union of France and Austria), and in many of the preparatory drawings the details are worked through exhaustively in order to bring out the broad lines: the pared-down cliché gains in conceptual vigour, in general scope. Often, the original format is abandoned in favour of a square or false square. Sometimes, it is easy to make out the evocation of this or that motif (Napoleon's bicorn, a pyramid, the prows of Venetian gondolas). The paintings, with titles echoing their sources, set up a play of forms that may seem all the more gratuitous in that their rhythm is classically elegant and nothing impinges on their decorative effect. What predominates, in fact, is the voluptuous pleasure of painting, nourished by echoes of early Kandinsky, of the German expressionists, of Morgan Russell, champion of synchronism and, in the amplitude and generosity of certain impulses, of Henri Matisse.

In this summation whose brutality is a taste we must be ready to acquire, we are given "abstract" painting founded on clichés. There can be no ignoring or underestimating the irony presiding over this association. Far from being devastating or self-satisfied, and applied both to the sketches and to the abstraction

beneath which they disappear, it is the dynamic principle whereby art can call itself into question, but without the tedium of those auto-critiques that oblige the bachelors to grind their own chocolate. You could say that Jacquet answered the dramatic question of "What to paint?" which haunted the post-war generations with the "I am painting my own name" of his first series and, here, with an "Everything can be painted, even anonymous insignificance." In fact, no true painter has ever looked for a *subject*; they understand, rather, that, if subject there is, it is inherent in the act of painting, in all its complexity, and that it is sometimes present unwittingly: the work of painting being to render it in forms that are apt.—Who or what could replace defunct religion as the inexhaustible source of art, if not the universal cliché, the ubiquitarian majesty of democratic times, the cult of which only grows and grows? That said, one must know how to approach it and be free of it—that is to say, to see its despotic side and be ready to cast it off like rags.

As Jacquet himself explained, the *Camouflages* come directly from this series: "The spirit of the *Camouflage* began in 1962 with the *Images d'Épinal*."[4] Some paintings (which reused Michelangelo's *Ignudi* and *Jonah* from the Sistine Chapel, as well as *La Joie de vivre* by Matisse, and bits of drawings from Walt Disney, notably) still proceed by juxtaposing colours, albeit with the significant difference that the structure and certain details of these master paintings remain identifiable. And, as the palette has been enriched with new tones, the effect of fragmentation of the source image is manifest. The *image d'Épinal* had, so to speak, every means of disappearing beneath the web of colours whereas, even if photographic reproduction has turned them into simple illustrations, the masterpieces of Michelangelo, Matisse, Bronzino or de Chirico put up a fight. Beneath the camouflage daubed over them they still vibrate and the eye quickly digests the chromatic disorder and recovers, here, the outlines of curtains, and there, the tree of knowledge with the snake winding round it, or again, the *sotto-in-su* of one of the *Ignudi* in the Sistine Chapel. The ground so fully contains the figure that this emerges only intermittently, and in the end the distinction between figure and ground is annulled. Who can see this human figure lying in the countryside? The camouflage uniform or sheet merge soldier and tank in the theatre of battle. The pilot flies over but does not see the enemy figures lost in the density of the vegetation or in the mud of the countryside.

Like the word itself, which entered the French language in 1821, the science of camouflage is a recent invention.[5] As long as armies met face to face on open terrain, their honour bound to their sabre or bayonet, troops had to be recognisable for their general, for their adversary, and for the people, who would see them marching back along the boulevards when victory or defeat had been pronounced. In Napoleonic armies, French soldiers wore their red with pride, but after the defeat of 1870 the general staff wondered about the drawbacks of such flattering ostentation, at a time when modern weaponry was thoroughly changing both strategies and tactics were bestowing a new importance on concealment, which sat ill with patriotic

honour and exaltation. France's neighbouring belligerents soon adopted khaki and green, while her enemy opted for *feldgrau*, that is, country grey. But the revolutionary proposition submitted to the minister by the Nancy-based artist and decorator Louis Gingot in 1914 was rejected: having studied the behaviour of his pet chameleon, he had painted a military-type canvas jacket with blotches and thick lines, limiting his colours to a meadow green, a red-brown and a dark blue.[6] Guingot's jacket was inspired both by pointillist painting technique and the ability of certain animals to merge into their environment, but he called it "Leopard" in order to express its combative virtues. The idea was adopted by another artist mobilised on the front, Guirand de Scévola, and eventually gained traction in 1915. A number of artists inspired by Cubism—Charles Dufresne, Roger de La Fresnaye and Louis Marcoussis –, along with decorators and illustrators such as Jean-Louis Forain, put their talents to work in the military workshops originally set up in Amiens, thereby justifying Picasso's remark, as reported by Gertrude Stein: "I very well remember at the beginning of the war being with Picasso on the boulevard Raspail when the first camouflage truck passed. It was at night, we had heard of camouflage but we had not seen it yet and Picasso amazed looked at it and then cried out, yes it is we who made it, that is cubism."[7]

An optical device remotely inspired by the art of showing the world by fragmenting it into multiple facets, reappropriated by painters sensitive to bellicose values (victory was a matter of intelligence), camouflage was designed to make the wearer go unnoticed so that he could lie in waiting, ready to burst forth and take the enemy by surprise, since his position remained secret until the decisive moment, when the signal to attack was given.[8] Jacquet manifested a theoretical and artistic interest in the subject as a specifically military phenomenon, specifying that he had even made plans "to cover the walls of the Breteau gallery with camouflage colours and to hang on them paintings made with camouflage canvas mounted on stretchers."[9] Painting and the painter would thus disappear from the world's eyes while the disappearance itself was made manifest.[10] This idea remained in the air during the decades that followed. In 1966 Alighiero e Boetti produced a series of ready-mades, the *Mimetico*, works of varying format and motifs made by hanging military fabric on stretchers. These were one product of Boetti's interest in the conditions of representation, which hides as much as it shows and lays claim to truth while being constructed as deceit. Before the technological age, trompe-l'oeil aimed to make people believe that they were really seeing the curtain or fruit represented in two dimensions (Zeuxis found it easy to paint grapes for birds). At a time when the eye was constantly being solicited and deceived by a realism that gradually took the place of reality itself, *Mimetico* made apparent the reversibility of display and dissimulation[11] and the true, as Guy Debord wrote, was a moment of the false. Twenty years later, Andy Warhol, the painter of the *Marilyn* series, took up the army's camouflage design in a chromatic range that went from colours close to the original to much brighter shades which, coming after the *Oxidation Paintings*, the *Shadows*,

the *Yarns* and the *Rorschach Paintings*, enriched his dialogue with the tradition of abstract expressionism.[12]

This was a dialogue with a double meaning, since these paintings were, like nearly all his painted works, photo-serigraphs, and once again presented mechanical images in the guise of a painting. Leonardo da Vinci's observations about the stains on a peeling wall[13] went beyond questions of imagination and inspiration; in the twentieth century, they were a reminder that a non-figurative intention on the part of the painter can always be subjected to an interpretative gaze. Jacquet and Warhol were playing with the fact that the gaze has grown used to not looking, to not seeing (in fact: has grown used to avoiding seeing) figures when they are not explicitly produced and framed as images by the invisible but no less emphatic cornices of television or magazines.

In a distinct subset within this series, the camouflage principle is formally distanced from its common use, while displacing its conceptual scope. Instead of a total covering, we see the superimposition of heterogeneous images, coming once again from the Renaissance (Paolo Uccello, Sandro Botticelli, etc.), modern (Piet Mondrian, Pablo Picasso...) or contemporary (Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Gary Indiana) periods, combined with bits of mundane quotidian culture (Shell advertisements, His Master's Voice, Michelin, images from children's albums, signage, the Statue of Liberty). The most emblematic painting is the *Camouflage Botticelli, Naissance de Vénus*, of which Jacquet painted three versions in 1963 and 1964: in the first, the motifs of the Shell petrol pump and Venus are depicted frontally, in the second the pump is twisted slightly, and in the third the two motifs are subjected to a zoom effect and are compacted to the point of deformation. The oft-invoked comparison to Francis Picabia's *Transparences* is in fact devoid of significance here in that the "Rastadada" painter was concerned mainly with a play of outlines in an almost liquid space whose ground remained purely conventional. In contrast, everything about Jacquet's work suggests an effort to dissociate the unconscious from dream, and to construct a ground. In *Camouflage Botticelli, Naissance de Vénus*, *Camouflage Uccello San Romano* and *Camouflage Picasso Michelin,* the interlocking of the two images is highly studied (the colours of the Venus are scrupulously changed in keeping with the angles of the pump that they cover), making them inseparable and complicating their interpretation. They blur and crisscross over each other, under and over, in an endless meshing. This imbrication demands multiple description which in turn open onto as many interpretations in which sexual connotations play a dominant role. These are direct in a certain number of paintings, like *Camouflage Joker* (1963), based on lewd reinterpretations of playing cards, and in *Camouflage Rank Xerox*, 1964, with its piquant hint of castration, and in *Camouflage La Vénus de Cnide*, in which we once again come across the perverse little girl from the colouring books, armed with a big knife. This would also be the case with the paintings recomposed from views of Earth. The aim is less to divert images than to move to another mode of apprehending its forms and meanings.

One image—the duck-rabbit (1892) being one of the most famous—can hide another (as Jean-Hubert Martin and Dario Gamboni have demonstrated),[14] by using all the subtleties of illusionism, and thus give rise to "potential images" which offer the pleasures of perception discovering itself in the blink of an eye. Even when it is not expressly constructed as "double," an image never comes singly but, whatever the period or circumstances, as part of an infinite network. Psychoanalysis has described the mechanisms of its associations and Surrealism has speculated on the ghosts that haunt all iconic production, while in the twentieth century collage emerged as the technique for harnessing it to immediate effect. Jacquet's work takes on board in a very obvious way this condition which, in the age of media, has become crucial: "When Botticellis sell Revlon, P&T or Palmolive, why not close the loop and put the shill Venus in a Shell shell?"[15] If we judge only from this quotation, we might conclude that the idea was simply to play on the coexistence of images, constructing and unpicking codes and using twofold images to produce a third image for the discerning appreciation of the iconologist.

Such interpretations are not without their use and value, but their weakness is that they make our reading of Jacquet's work narrational and relativize its specifically critical burden. As I stressed earlier, the *Camouflages* are a long way from any kind of transparency and its potentially emollient effects. On the contrary, they cultivate opacity by all available pictorial means: covering, hiding, filling every breach. The concept of camouflage that serves to title the series is itself a verbal sleight that tends to hide the true nature of the relation between images instituted by Jacquet. Their meticulous articulations, obtained by the patient work of painting, are not intended to make them peacefully coexist, but place them in a cannibalistic relation: Venus and Shell, Jasper Johns' flag and the dog of His Master's Voice, the Michelin (now "Micheline") Bibendum and a portrait of a woman by Picasso devour each other and dissolve into the false-bottom of painting. In *Camouflage Uccello, La Bataille de San Romano*, four motifs (the logo of a transport union, a fragment from *The Battle of San Romano*, the Statue of Liberty and a big horseshoe) all feed on each other.[16] From a different point of view, but with a similar understanding of the iconic regime, Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé revealed the paradoxical depth of modern epigraphic language, the stratification of images and signs that clash with and destroy each other. However, the self-cannibalism of immaterial representations is, by its very nature, a perpetual reboot: there are no losers or winners, their substance is constantly regenerated, and Jacquet consciously uses painting to maintains the permanent tension of that repetition.

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1 Jacquet is a game of the backgammon family. This title means both "Jacquet game" and "Jacquet's game"—*Trans*. **2** This has nothing to do with judgement or approval of the local content of images. This sociological viewpoint is not very relevant. **3** "The popular imagery of Épinal interested me because it corresponded to the origins of extensive communication. What I was looking for in images was, by the same logic, simple forms, like prefabricated elements." "Alain Jacquet: le chemin, la voie, la manière d'agir, entretien avec Sylvie Coudere," in *Alain Jacquet,* Œuvres de 1951 à 1998, Amiens: Musée de Picardie, 1998, p. 71. **4** *Ibid.*, p. 81. **5** Traditionally, etymology linked the word to the Italian *camuffare* (disguise, make unrecognisable). Today, however, it is thought to have developed from the radical of *camouflet*, which originally meant "a thick smoke mischievously blown into someone's face from a cornet of burning paper." *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, Paris: Éditions Le Robert, 1992. **6** See Frédéric Thiery, "La première veste de camouflage de guerre du monde est inventée par Louis Guingot," *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains,* 2007/3 (no. 227), p. 7–21. **7** Gertrude Stein, *Picasso*, [1938], Dover Publications, 1985, p. 11. **8** The French army now taught its recruits the principles fomec, an acronym of Forme, Ombre, Mouvement, Éclat, Couleur (form, shadow, movement, brightness, colour). **9** Catherine Millet, "Voyage à la surface de la Terre" (interview with Alain Jacquet), *artpress* 146, 1990, p. 16. **10** Jacquet had an elegant suit made for himself in parachute silk, which made him far from inconspicuous in the tense atmosphere of Paris and New York. Worn only a few years after the war in Algeria, it brought down its fair share insults. **11** In this sense, we would establish a relation between *Mimetico* and *Niente da vedere, niente da nascondere* [Nothing to see, nothing to hide], 1969–1986, a simple glass partition divided into twelve panes, leaned against a wall. **12** See *Andy Warhol, Abstracts*, Thomas Kellein ed., Munich/New York: Prestel, 1993.—Indeed, the camouflage motif covering the self-portraits and the portraits of Joseph Beuys gives the likenesses of the two artists a singular depth. See Alain Cueff (ed.), *Le Grand monde d'Andy Warhol*, Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2009, p. 210. **13** "...if you look at walls covered with many stains or made of stones of different colors, with the idea of imagining some scene, you will see in it a similarity to landscapes adorned with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, broad valleys, and hills of all kinds. You may also see in it battles and figures with lively gestures and strange faces and costumes and an infinity of things which you can reduce to separate and complete forms." Leonardo da Vinci, *Leonardo on Art and the Artist,* Dover, 2002, p. 205. **14** Jean-Hubert Martin (ed.), *Une image peut en cacher une autre. Arcimboldo, Dalí, Raetz*, Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2009. **15** Alain Jacquet in *Chefs-d'œuvre de l'art*, no. 72, Paris: Hachette, 1964. **16** See Guy Scarpetta's commentary on this work in *Alain Jacquet, Camouflages 1961-1964*, Paris: Éditions Cercle d'Art, 2002, pp. 64–65.