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suzanne lafont

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". . . in actuality speech does not abide in man, but man takes his stand in speech and talks from there; so with every word and every spirit. Spirit is not in the I, but between I *and* thou. *It is not like the blood that circulates in you, but like the air in which you breathe."*

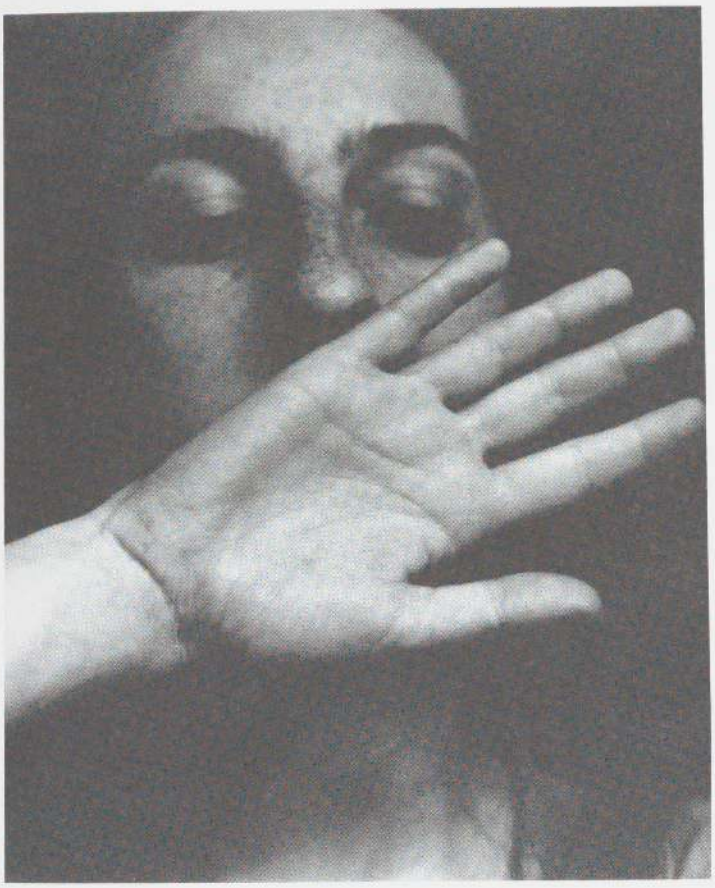
— Martin Buber[1]

What kind of pictures are these? The most obvious response is that they are portraits, since they are close-up images of human beings. Yet, they say nothing specific about their subjects. The faces are either eerily blank or so intensely emotional that they seem to illustrate, rather than experience, particular feelings. Clearly, these photographs have little to do with the exploration of character. Perhaps, then, they could have a commercial application: the saturated hues of some of Suzanne Lafont's color pictures and the sleek compositions and seductive tones of her black-and-whites suggest advertising. But the models neither sell a product nor embody ideals of glamour or sexuality.

Lafont deliberately avoids standard photographic categories, such as portraiture and commercial art, which are central to the way the medium defines itself. Indeed, she seems to resist categories of all kinds. She picks and chooses between art photographers' established concerns, shunning enough of them that she might better be identified with that group of artists who use the medium but feel little commitment to its history or conventions. The size and filmic quality of her work suggest a relationship to the practice of photo-appropriation, which has been prominent in the mainstream art world of the past ten or fifteen years. But Lafont—like a traditional photographer—makes her own beautifully crafted black-and-white prints and works closely with the lab that produces her color images. In addition, her pictures manifest a sensitivity to light, and to the photographic moment, that is rarely evident in the work of appropriationists.

Quandaries and contradictions are essential to Lafont's enterprise. Underscoring the paradoxical nature of her work, she tells us, "these photographs have nothing modern about them; they belong to the literary genre of the fable," and then immediately shifts position: "They are a fabulation of *modern* tragedy . . ."[2] Hers is an art that embraces dichotomies: modernism and archaism; nature and culture; formalism and expressionism are not seen as mutually exclusive terms. She employs oppositional concepts not as ends in themselves, but rather because they allow her to present an alternative vision unconcerned with the "truth" of a given approach. In Lafont's work, intellectual strategies are the means by which emotional realities are exposed; paradox is meant to generate in the viewer a sense of changing circumstances and evolving definitions that corresponds to, and makes immediate, day-to-day experience.

The notion of a world in flux is related to the question of common ground: with meaning constantly shifting, how is it that there are shared understandings? How are they communicated? The child of classics scholars, who says she was "raised amid an obsession with Antiquity,"[3] Lafont has an academic rather than an art background, and the ideas that



Suzanne Lafont. *Le Bruit* (detail). 1990. Gelatin-silver print, 47 ¼ x 39 ⅜". Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, and Sylviane de Decker Heftler, Paris

are central to her work first began to occupy her when she was a student of literature and philosophy. Her interest in the commonality of thought, for example, was sparked by her research on the nineteenth-century French novelist Gustave Flaubert, whose characters frequently relate to life through a filter of artificial and hackneyed popular forms, such as romance novels or commonplace religious imagery. Inquiry into Flaubert's quotations from such materials led to Lafont's interest in another source and type of quotation: Marcel Duchamp and the idea of the "ready-made" (or found) art object. From there it was a short intellectual jog to Pop art and the notion of the mechanically-reproduced image. Her attraction to photography has been reinforced by what she sees as an underlying contradiction: "Photography . . . as a technique . . . is associated with nature . . . the light that produces photographic images is one of the forces necessary to life. . . . At the same time, photography . . . results from the industrial revolution."[4]

Although Lafont came to the field relatively late, at age thirty-three, she moved rapidly through various phases: she questioned the relationship between abstraction and realism in a group of low-angled shots of architecture meant to "apply the rules of the naturalistic gaze to the visual conventions of the 1930s"[5]; in her images of children in gardens, she utilized the snapshot form to explore the concept of space; and she made portraits that attempted to reveal the nature of identity.

The organizing metaphor in Lafont's recent work is the acquisition and development of language. Her black-and-white series, such as *L'Argent* ("Money"), included in this exhibition, represent a highly elaborated form of discourse. *Les Souffleurs* ("The Blowers"), which is in color, but has an essentially neutral palette, is involved with the

breath as a prerequisite for speech, the notion of the "pre-linguistic." In *Choeur des Grimaces* ("Chorus of Grimaces"), also shown here, vibrant colors communicate the vitality of the word in action, its day-to-day employment. As each type of usage is partially defined by the existence of the others, and the development of language can involve all three, Lafont does not treat them hierarchically. Rather, she examines the relationships among the three, contrasting formally constructed works with ones that proffer an almost chaotic level of expression. Ultimately, the point is not to juxtapose these extremes, but to have them coexist and interact, the way they do in life.

Dorothea Lange. *Migratory Cotton Picker, Eloy, Arizona*. 1940. Gelatin-silver print, 10 ½ x 13 ½". The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the photographer

The black-and-white narratives, done in 1990 and 1991, consist of large, individual panels. Fully installed, the works can be up to twenty-eight feet long. The models' stylized, dramatic gestures flow into each other, creating the effect of a unified, sweeping movement. References from art and popular culture abound. In *Le Bruit* ("The Noise"), Lafont abuts eight photographs, each a close-up image of a man or woman. In five of the panels, the figures cover their ears; all are clearly in distress. A post-war German poster for a campaign against noise pollution, by Joseph Muller Brockmann, served as one inspiration for this work.[6] Another was Dorothea Lange's *Migratory Cotton Picker, Eloy, Arizona*, of 1940. Two of the subjects in *Le Bruit* cover their mouths with their hands in a gesture that recalls the worker in that picture. Lange, who recorded the Depression as part of the group of photographers employed by the United States Farm Security Administration, has been an important influence for Lafont, who sees in the theatricality of the gestures Lange captured in her images a transformation of documentary reality into something essentially abstract.

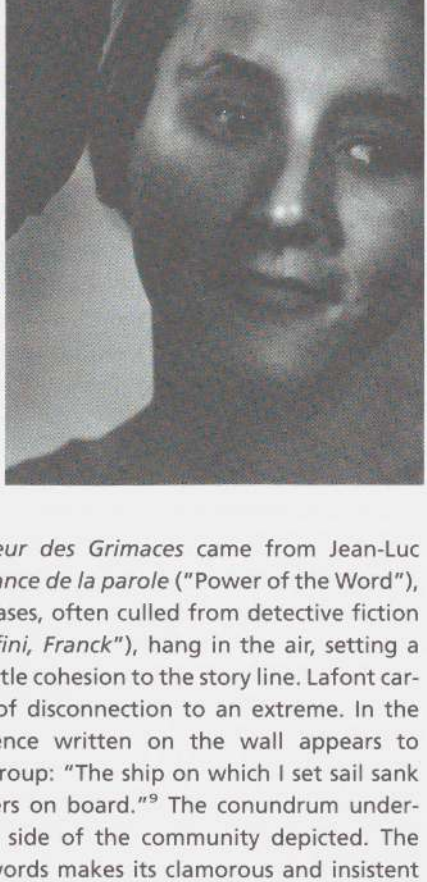
Lafont's *L'Argent* takes its title from a 1983 film by French director Robert Bresson, but it is closer in look and feel to Bresson's 1959 classic, *Pickpocket*. In the 1983 film, the director purged much of the sensuous beauty from his imagery. During the late fifties, however, his austere style still allowed for rich black-and-white tones and exquisitely composed frames. As in Bresson's morality play, the figures in *L'Argent* pass a 200-franc note from person to person. And like Bresson, Lafont focuses on the hands, which are employed both to advance action and transmit feeling. Bresson works with non-actors, chosen for their physical appearance; he refers to them as "models." They keep their eyes down and recite their lines inertly, serving only as "vessels of spiritual experience."[7] In contrast, Lafont calls her models "actors," because they play parts. However, like Bresson, she has used mostly non-professionals, eliciting from them a performance dependent on physical gesture, rather than emotive ability.

Art historical sources for Lafont's work include Renaissance annunciation iconography.[8] Myriad paintings of that period show the holy spirit entering Mary's body while an angel whispers that the virgin will bear the son of God. Lafont clearly had this conversation in mind when she staged the third panel of *L'Argent*, in which one woman passes money to another. Cash, virtually a universal form of exchange, is a means by which power is transmitted; here, it becomes a substitute for transcendence in the modern world.

Similarly, in *Les Souffleurs*, her first color works, Lafont transforms Renaissance religious imagery into a symbol of communication. She takes, as a point of departure, the horn blower in Piero della Francesca's Arezzo cycle, which depicts the story of the cross. Set against a powerful geometric background, akin to the architecture represented in Piero's mural, Lafont's characters struggle to give shape to their breath; the artist seems to imply that the acquisition of language, essential to the formation of relationship and community, is the road to a secular version of salvation.

Choeur des Grimaces includes Lafont's most disturbing images. As formal constructs, these photographs are somewhat "unfinished"; they feel uncontrolled in a manner at odds with the elegantly composed black-and-white series as well as with *Les Souffleurs*. Lafont chose the vivid oranges, greens, and blues of the backgrounds for their ability to evoke powerful emotions; leaves that appear at the edges of the frames, reminders of the natural world, create a suitable environment for characters who seem to represent human nature "in the raw."

Suzanne Lafont. Image from the series *Les Souffleurs*. 1992. Cibachrome, 47 ¼ x 39 ⅜". Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, and Sylviane de Decker Heftler, Paris



Suzanne Lafont. Two images from the series *Choeur des Grimaces*. 1992. Cibachrome, 47 ¼ x 39 ⅜". Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, and Sylviane de Decker Heftler, Paris

Inspiration for *Choeur des Grimaces* came from Jean-Luc Godard's video *Puissance de la parole* ("Power of the Word"), in which clichéd phrases, often culled from detective fiction or film noir (*"C'est fini, Franck"*), hang in the air, setting a mood, but lending little cohesion to the story line. Lafont carries Godard's sense of disconnection to an extreme. In the installation, a sentence written on the wall appears to emanate from this group: "The ship on which I set sail sank with all its passengers on board."[9] The conundrum underscores the irrational side of the community depicted. The presence of actual words makes its clamorous and insistent spirit that much more immediate and emphasizes its difference from the relatively removed world of abstraction and symbolism embodied in *L'Argent*.

The aggressive subjects of *Choeur des Grimaces* seem mad. They incessantly demand our attention. Their expressions recall photographs by the nineteenth-century psychiatrist Duchenne de Boulogne, who administered electric shocks to mentally ill patients in order to arrive at "an alphabet of passions."[10] He believed that, through obsessively detailed study, he would be able to associate particular muscular reactions with different facial expressions, manifestations of the human soul.[11] Like Duchenne's harshly manipulated subjects, the members of Lafont's chorus are grotesque. There is an oddness and an unnaturalness to their expressions that is difficult to define. They seem to reside at the margins of our consciousness and to call into question our methods of organizing and understanding the world.[12]

Like the rest of Lafont's recent work, *Choeur des Grimaces* intensifies and even exaggerates emotion. It is melodramatic. Although the same adjective applies to Bresson's films and the Godard video, it fits work by certain prominent women artists as well. For example, Dorothea Lange has, at times, been criticized for the theatricality of her images, which have seemed

Julia Margaret Cameron. *Venus Chiding Cupid and Removing His Wings*. 1872. Albumen-silver print from wet-collodion glass negative, 11 ⅗ x 11 ⅜". The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Paul F. Walter

too extreme to constitute objective reporting. To some, the aspect of her work particularly esteemed by Lafont made her appear less important than her male counterparts at the Farm Security Administration. Similarly, the nineteenth-century English photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, who inspired Lafont as she first contemplated treating the figure, was ridiculed for the melodrama of her images by the photo historian Helmut Gernsheim, who called the majority of her pictures "affected, ludicrous, and amateurish."[13]

Cameron evidences a relation to fiction that has been largely the province of women; she is part of a tradition tapped by Lafont: "Access to the ideal culture of the Greeks, such as it had been presented to me, was denied, clearly because I was a woman. In bourgeois culture since the nineteenth century, the domestic role assigned to woman has always limited the exercise of her power to private affairs. This explains, in particular, her recourse to the imaginary in the form of novelistic fiction. I am an heir to this history; I work with it. . . . I use as a reference existing images which constitute a substitute world, just as the belief in novels could be substituted for experience of the world."[14]

Cindy Sherman. Untitled. 1981. Chromogenic color print, 23 7/8 x 48 1/8". The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Caryl D. Lobell

Lafont firmly states that she belongs to no artistic school,[15] and this is, in the strictest sense, the case. Nevertheless, she shares the tradition derived from the novel with a number of her contemporaries, among them, Cindy Sherman. True, Sherman makes work that comments more overtly on society's images of women than Lafont's, which employ quotation primarily to reflect the notion of a continuum of ideas. And Lafont's references often derive from more rarefied traditions than Sherman's. But the two have in common the use of the camera as a collector of cultural signs, an emphasis on the figure and gesture, an interest in the most primitive aspects of human behavior, the resurrection of the tableau form, and the unabashed engagement of melodrama. Both make art that underscores the role of women, and the legacy of the novel, in the

formation of a post-modern sensibility that has shed high modernism's purist approach.

Despite such similarities, Lafont remains, at base, an idiosyncratic artist. Her recent work, with its diverse narratives, is unusual in any context. In the United States, it may be especially unfamiliar in its particular combination of sources and its style of intellectualization. In addition, contemporary art that looks as sleek and cool as this does is most often extremely ironic. Lafont's work, although it references art history, is much less art about art than art about life, and it is direct and sincere at the core.

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Curatorial Assistant,
Department of Painting and Sculpture

1. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 39.

2. Jean-François Chevrier, "The Ruse, the Image," in *Suzanne Lafont* (Paris: Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1992), 71.

3. Jean-François Chevrier, "Suzanne Lafont: La Communaute Imaginaire," in *Galeries Magazine* (February 8, 1992), 80.

4. Ibid., 81.

5. Christian Milovanoff, "Interview with Suzanne Lafont," in *Une autre objectivité*, (Milan: Idea Books, 1989), 7.

6. Chevrier, "The Ruse, the Image," 14.

7. David Denby, *New York Magazine*, 23 April 1984.

8. Milovanoff, 8.

9. While still a student, Lafont found a related sentence in a book about logic and modified it to its current form. It was used to illustrate the idea of impossibility, expressed in the first person. She was interested in the "self-refutation" at the heart of its paradox, as well as in its imagery, which brings to mind allegorical references such as the Ship of Fools.

10. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'Hysterie: Charcot et l'Iconographique de la Salpêtrière* (Paris: Macula, 1982), 197.

11. Ibid.

12. Geoffrey Galt Harpham defines the grotesque in these terms on page 3 of his book *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982): "Grotesqueries both require and defeat definition: they are neither so regular and rhythmical that they settle easily into our categories, nor so unprecedented that we do not recognize them at all. They stand at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles."

13. Helmut Gernsheim, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Her Life and Work* (Millerton, New York: Aperture, 1975), 83.

14. Chevrier, "Suzanne Lafont: La Communaute Imaginaire," 126.

15. Ibid., 79.

Suzanne Lafont was born in 1949 in Nîmes, France, and now lives and works in Paris. She has been showing her work since 1986 and has been included in such exhibitions as *Passage de l'Image*, organized in 1990 by the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. In the spring of 1992, she was the subject of a one-person exhibition at the Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris. She was also included in last summer's Documenta X in Kassel, Germany.

cover: Suzanne Lafont, *L'Argent* (detail). 1991. Gelatin-silver print, 39⅜ x 47¼". Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, and Sylviane de Decker Heftler, Paris

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