

Rétrofictions / Re Fictions / Fictions

Collective Thinking, Archives & Fiction Panel

Thinking Allowed Fall Colloquium October 19-21, 2023

Elastic Spaces & 4th Space

Concordia University

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The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.

-- L.P. Hartley (from *The Go-Between*, 1953)

Objective

This presentation will look at *Rétrofictions / Re Fictions / Fictions* (2012-2019) as a collaborative artists' publication and as a creative space made possible by the erasure of history.

Outline

- Background context
- *Rétrofictions* as a collaborative, single-volume publication (2012)
- *Re Fictions* (v. 2) and *Fictions* (v. 3)
- Thinking thoughts

Modified found photographs 2007 -



*Young girl in white sitting on
a tricycle*

2007

Found photograph, acrylic paint

15.3 x 10.2 cm



*Young woman in long skirt
(white) with black buttons*

2007

Found photograph, acrylic paint

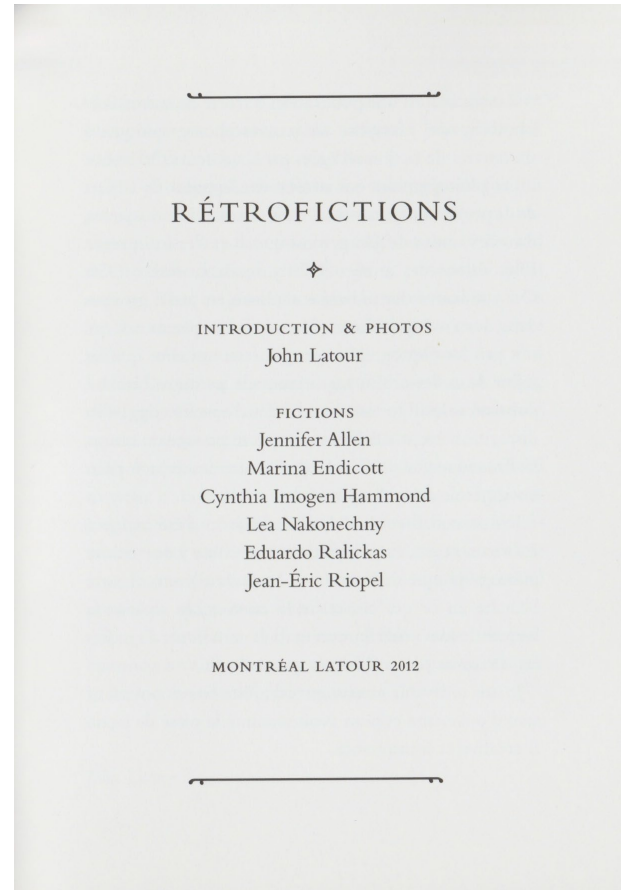
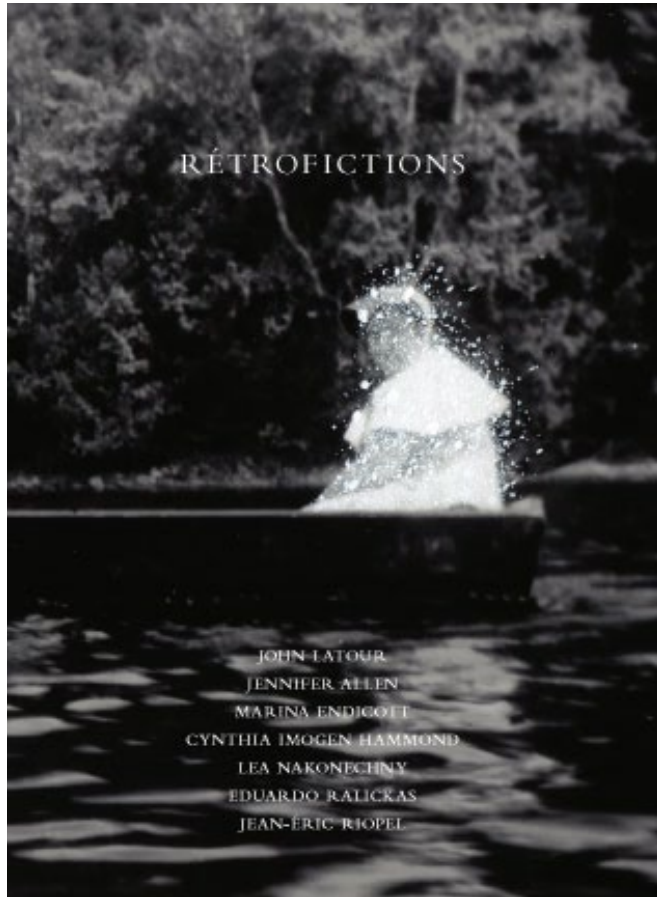
9.7 x 7 cm



*Two men holding unknown items
2008*

Found photograph, acrylic paint

12.8 x 8.9 cm



Rétrofictions

John Latour, introduction & photos

fiction:

Jennifer Allen

Marina Endicott

Cynthia Imogen Hammond

Lea Nakonechny

Eduardo Ralickas

Jean-Éric Riopel

Jeff Kulak, design collaboration

Montréal: Latour, 2012

Personal effects, by Lea Nakonechny

PERSONAL EFFECTS

Jessica writes a catalogue number on the bottom of a porcelain cup and blows on the ink to speed the drying. After testing it with her finger, she paints over the mark with clear nail polish and sets the cup aside. Dragged down by mid-afternoon drowsiness, she yawns.

She rises to collect the next batch of items, her legs stiff from too much sitting. She checks her watch. Another hour to go. Rory, her supervisor, chews thoughtfully on an apple while doing a Sudoku puzzle, his computer radio playing light rock. By now she knows almost every insipid song by heart and wishes just once he would turn it to something else. She can almost feel herself aging down here in the windowless basement, air conditioning making her throat sore while the day outside is hot. She looks forward to the end of summer and her return to school in the big city.

With a sigh, she takes a box of artifacts back to her work station and pulls the lamp over to see them better. According to the accession form, the items were donat-

ed by the estate of a First World War veteran. Canteen, gas mask, shaving kit—things the museum already has in triplicate. Vaguely annoyed, she takes out the metal shaving kit and gets a waft of old man smell as she opens it. The razor's knurled handle is suitably masculine; the blade, still fixed in place, predictably rusted.

She removes the little mirror from its ragged brown velvet pouch, catching her reflection for an instant. Turning it over, she finds a wallet-sized black and white snapshot nestled safely against it. In that moment she gets a flash of recognition across time and space, as bright as the light in the mirror. Goosebumps spring up on her arms.

The picture would have hardly been worth framing. Its subject, off-centre and soft-focused, is a woman holding her infant up with one hand, making his chubby arm wave at the camera with the other. The baby is motion-blurred and the woman's face is turned away. A piano anchors the background with upstanding hominess. The relaxed domesticity of the image is just the thing a soldier would have longed for while standing in a trench, knee-deep in mud, on the other side of the ocean. Her spine prickling, Jessica slips it into her backpack.

That night in her own familiar bedroom, she takes out the photograph and examines it once again.



She cannot shake the feeling of recognition it gives her. Before bed she hides it under a pile of old gym clothes in the bottom of a drawer, even though no one will miss it. She is the only one alive who knows of its existence.

Late that night the burden of her intrusion settles heavily on her chest. Near morning, after hours of lying awake, she burns the photograph over the toilet bowl. Feeling purged, she finally drifts towards sleep, comforted by the stirring of the birds. Summer is in full swing, and her whole life lies in wait.

Lea Nakonechny



Mother (or Woman?) Holding a Blurry Baby in Her Arms

2011

Found photograph, acrylic paint
9 x 12.7 cm

“... She removes the little mirror from its ragged brown velvet pouch, catching her reflection for an instant. Turning it over, she finds a wallet-sized black and white snapshot nestled safely in it. In that moment she gets a flash of recognition across time and space, as bright as the light in the mirror.”

Roland Barthes's "Reflexions on Two Women on a Canoe" (1934) by Eduardo Ralickas

"I stare at the two women on a boat. I look away. I look again. They're still looking at me: every time my eyes fall upon theirs, there is a flash of recognition: we glance at one another here and now."

ROLAND BARTHES'S "REFLEXIONS ON
TWO WOMEN ON A CANOE" (1934)

Translator's note

In 1933, Jean-Paul Sartre was sent to Berlin to replace Raymond Aron as the head of the *Institut français*. While in Prussia, he came into contact with an innovative type of philosophy that was later to influence much twentieth-century French theory, namely, phenomenology. Although he was never able to meet the founder of the phenomenological movement, Edmund Husserl, while in Berlin he attended the lectures of Eugene Fink, one of Husserl's most advanced students. The experience, Sartre later recounts in an interview published in *Espirit*, was "a revelation."

In the months that followed Sartre's 1934 return to France, he met a very keen young student with a bright future: Roland Barthes. Both men crossed paths by chance at *L'eau qui coule*, a popular *brasserie* on the Boulevard Montparnasse. According to Barthes's diary (entry dated June 23rd, 1934) they had an intense discussion in

which Sartre initiated the nineteen-year-old Barthes to the "secrets" of husserlian philosophy. In a gesture that was later echoed in Barthes's *Mythologies*, Sartre impressively performed a phenomenological analysis of a peach cocktail.¹

In a notebook he kept during his two years spent at the lycée Louis-le-Grand, (the so-called "green book"²), Barthes jotted down a series of reflections seemingly spurred by the encounter. Interspersed between drawings of a private nature, the green book in fact contains Barthes's earliest surviving analysis of a photograph. It is based on a close inspection of an image he had seen hanging behind the bar at the *Café des Écoles*, which he patronized regularly throughout the late 1930s. As such, it is of great historical interest, despite the text's fragmentary state. Aside from a passing mention of a "lost" green book in the *Œuvres complètes de Roland Barthes* (vol. 6, p. 462, note 4), Barthes's text has largely escaped critical scrutiny. The present translation is based on the author's transcript of folios 23–24 (BNF call number MS B.1934-gg4).

1. See Alain Renaut, *Sartre, le dernier des philosophes*, Paris, Grasset, 1993, p. 125.
2. The notebook was handed down to Barthes's then lover Henri Poulcel, who bequeathed it, along with his entire literary estate, to the Bibliothèque nationale de France in 2008.

[FOLIO 23r]³ Notes on the small picture depicting two women on a canoe (at the *estaminet*, rue des Écoles).⁴ Photography has two temporalities. The time of my looking, and the time of the photograph that looks back. How does it come about that I experience a backward glancing time while being conscious that my looking is always anchored in the continuous present? I stare at the two women on the boat. I look away. I look again. They're still looking at me: every time my eyes fall upon theirs, there is a flash of recognition: we glance at one another here and now. And yet their time is always already past. Thus, there must somehow be a special "phenomenological faculty" so to speak (a faculty of my consciousness) that produces the time of photography: [FOLIO 23v] the photographic thing [*la chose photographique*]⁵ appears; it is there now; it appears in the stream of my temporally oriented consciousness [*le flux temporellement orienté de ma conscience*], and yet as image it appears as past. Where does

3. Words underlined in Barthes's manuscript have been italicized.

4. *Estaminet* is an outmoded French word for a cafe in which one is allowed to smoke.

5. Barthes no doubt employs the word thing to emphasize the fact that the photograph is a kind of *objet* in the world.



(Provided I read actively, and read onwards.) They are apparatuses that compel my mind to creative agency [*ce sont des dispositifs qui font agir ma conscience*]. Unbeknownst to me, I become the sole author of the fiction they seemingly bear forth as evidence.

[FOLIO 24v] Ekphrasis of an invisible fiction then. [Illegible sentence] . . . preamble for an essay on the American photograph of the two women on a canoe (signed "J.L. for E.R."). Start with a quote from the English song "Row row row your boat". But on which stream do they gently flow? The stream of free association, of borrowed quotes and ideas, which has no beginning and no end,

the past come from in the instantaneous present (that Husserl calls *Jetztzeit*)? The answer: I *pro-ject* it outside of myself [*je l'extra-pose*]. Photography ultimately shows me that *the past cannot exist within subjectivity*—hence its externalization as foreign, as other. The photographic past is not bygone time; it is a contingent "now" that shows me the foreign face of the temporal continuum itself, the face without a face, as it were. Retro-presence.

What do I (the phenomenological "I") experience when I am facing the face of the past other (or the past face of the other)? My mind projects presence, whereas the photograph projects absence. If I were to abstract from all the concepts I project onto images, to perform "phenomenological bracketing," what is left? All that remains is a description—visual information—a *screen* for intentional projections [*visées intentionnelles*].

Photography is really a kind of *ekphrasis* then. Sartre speaks of photographs as constituting a kind of "quasi-experience": they don't provide the fullness of experience, but "arrest" [*fixent*] the objects they depict, and thereby merely show one of their potentially infinite "faces". [FOLIO 24r] It follows that what photographs do is literally *describe* an absent presence. *All photographs are thereby structured like literature*: they compel me to image forth what the text cannot—and would not—show.

but that produces pleasure and always ends up mirroring itself. The first paragraph of my essay should read as follows:

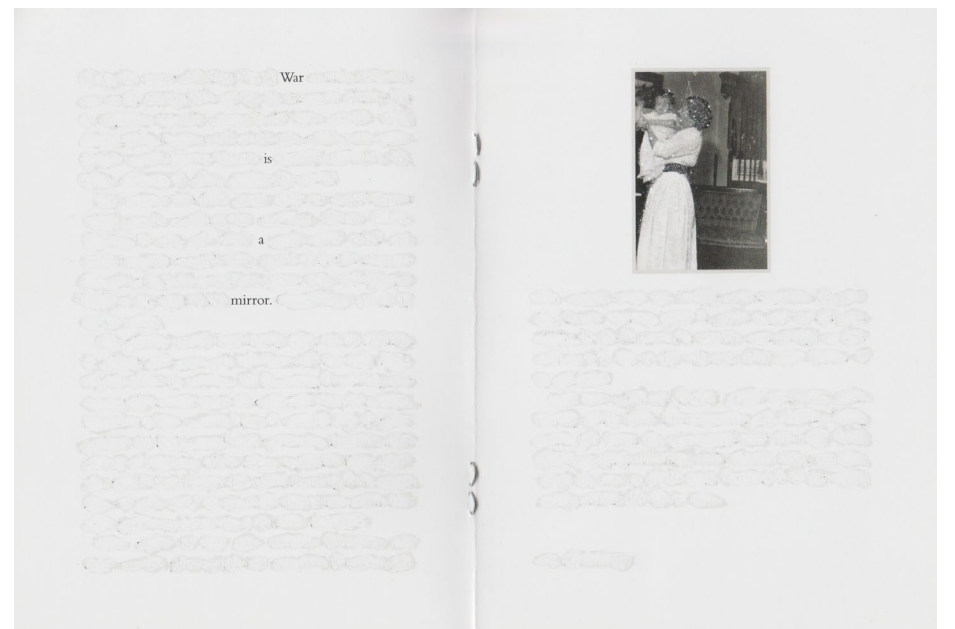
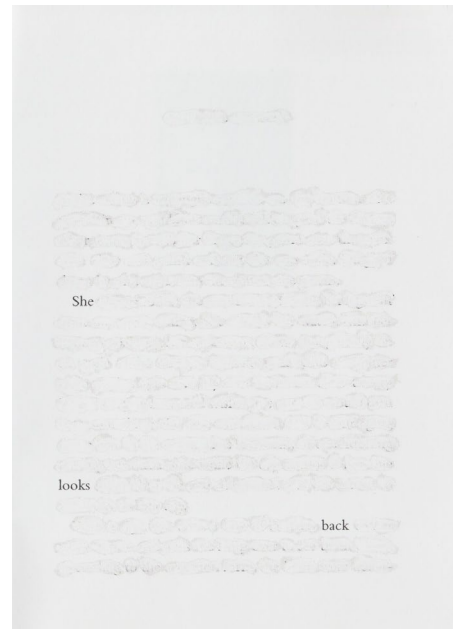
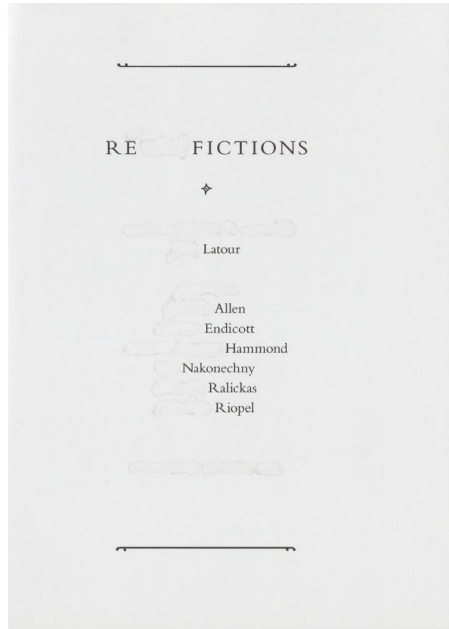
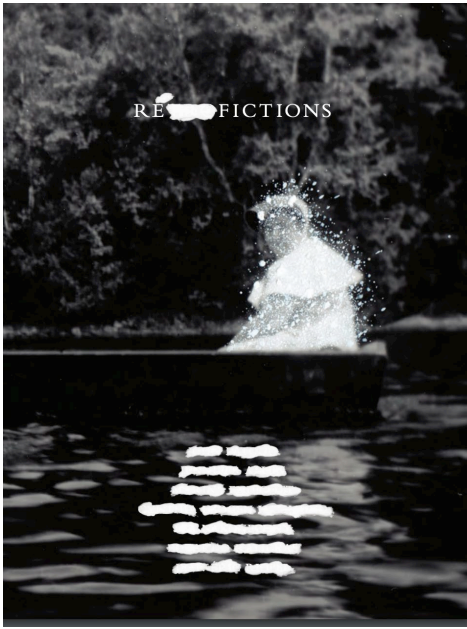
"In 1933, Jean-Paul Sartre was sent to Berlin to replace Raymond Aron as the head of the *Institut français*. While in Prussia, he came into contact with an innovative type of philosophy that was later to influence much twentieth-century French theory, namely, phenomenology. Although he was never able to meet the founder of the phenomenological movement, Edmund Husserl, while in Berlin he attended the lectures of Eugene Fink, one of Husserl's most advanced students. The experience, Sartre later recounts in an interview published in *Espirit*, was "a revelation" . . .

Translated from the French by E. Ralickas



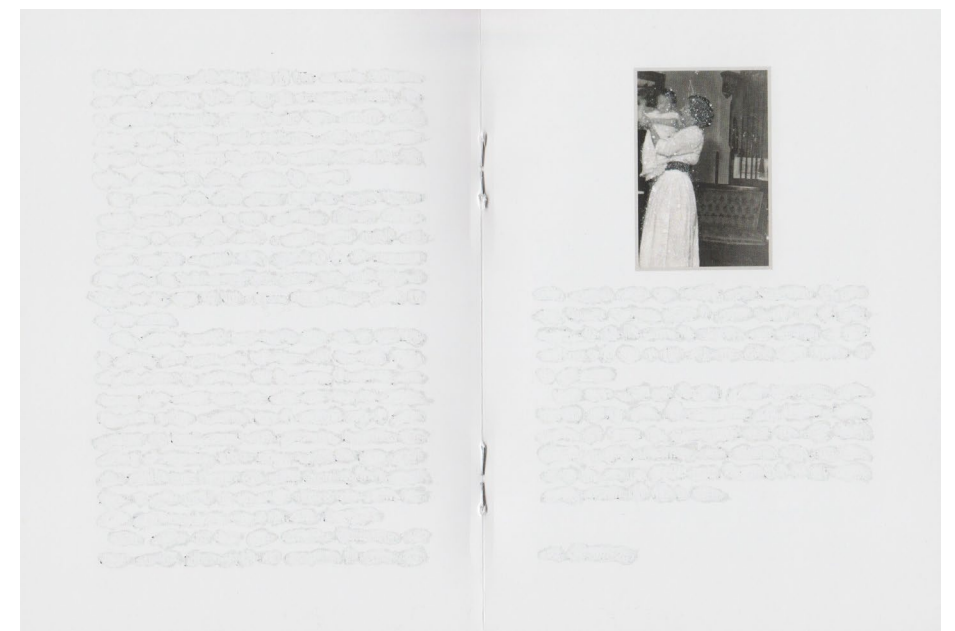
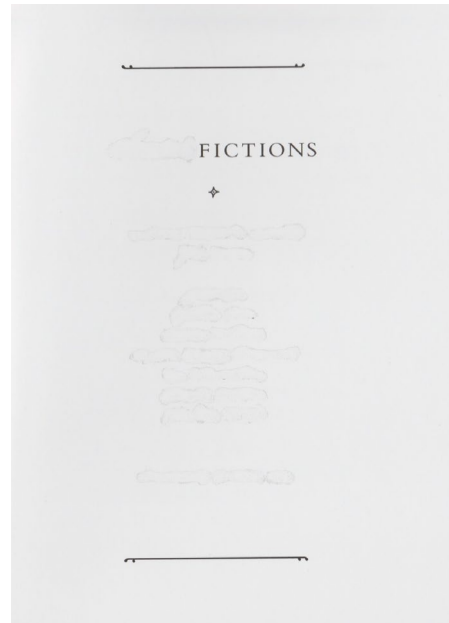
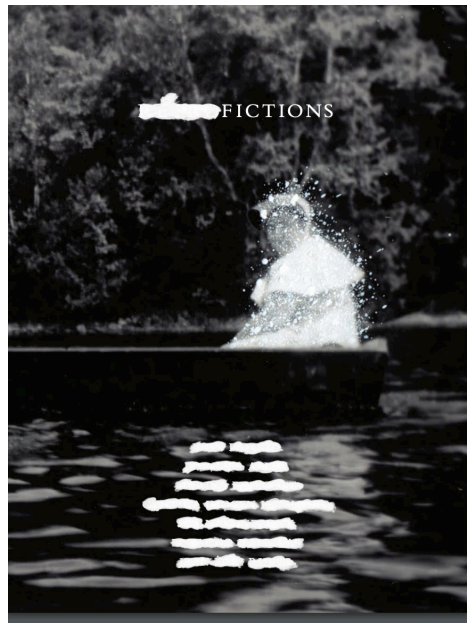
Deux femmes dans un bateau
2010

Found photograph, acrylic paint
9 x 12.7 cm



Re Fictions cover & title-page Montréal: Latour, 2018

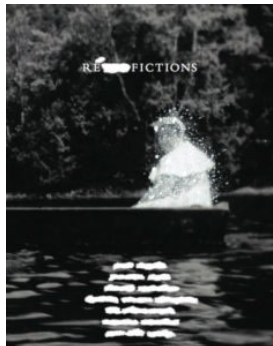
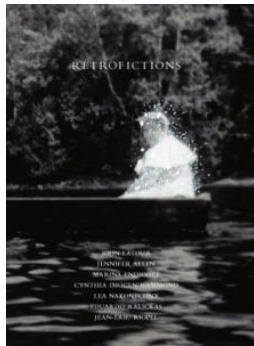
Interventions in Leah Nakonechny's *Personal Effects*.



Fictions cover & title-page Montréal: Latour, 2019

The end.

Thank-you!



Digitized copies can be downloaded for free through Artexte's e-artexte:

- *Rétrofiction* (2012): <https://e-artexte.ca/id/eprint/23674/>
- *Re Fictions* (2018): <https://e-artexte.ca/id/eprint/29677/>
- *Fictions* (2019): <https://e-artexte.ca/id/eprint/30453/>

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