

les essais

Fiction

**or Other Accounts
of Photography**

to reflect on photography and its most recent developments

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The Mirror and the Encyclopedia Regarding Some *Fictions of Knowledge*

"Not only do we lack the principles leading to truth, but we have others that can easily accommodate the false."

PONTENELLE¹

It is in the mimetic arts, when narrative is supported by written or oral transmission, that the mind can best grasp fiction and its workings. Photography occasionally enters into this framework, if only in the photo-story, and it comes close when it rediscovers the tradition of the wordless story, as in Duane Michals' sequences, for example. Aside from such instances, which are hardly representative of contemporary practices, references to fiction in photography are somewhat more scattered. Of course, since the late 60s, in one way or another, it has acted as a support for a great number of works with an interest in fiction. Photography has been inserted among other graphic elements in Jean Le Gac and John Baldessari's work, has served as iconographic reference in the narrative figures of Jacques Monory, or has in itself been used to suggest fictional space, particularly in North-American photography, from Ralph E. Meatyard to Sandy Skoglund, without forgetting Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall, Philip-Lorca diCorcia and many others. In these instances, photography is tasked with introducing a diegetic potential, the beginnings of a fictional universe. It is as if it were the ideal intermediary image to evoke, in a gallery or museum, those cultural practices in film, theatre, advertising, and photo-stories that carry not only narrative substance, but also a large share of our collective imaginary in an age when humanity is consuming more fictions than ever before.

And yet, if we focus on the fictional power of images, ignoring clues in or outside the work that alert the spectator to the staging of a scene, to an intentional dramaturgy, nothing distinguishes these photographs from those we might call

“naturalist,” taken in the flux of reality, where the unity of a series can sometimes take on diegetic and narrative unity, as in Nan Goldin’s work. It can be time, as in the frozen instant, or it can be space, as in the traces of an arrangement or reconstitution, that prevails in the making of the image. But the ability to produce fiction endures, so it seems. In truth, it’s dependent on the spectator, as has been suggested in the abundant literature produced in *the presence* of the photographic image, from the earliest days of photo-criticism in the 19th century up to the highly subjective readings of Roland Barthes.² Fiction is not so easily pinned down in the domain of photography; like many commonly held notions, it dissolves or expands past all limits as soon as we try to determine its borders.

Knowledge Threatened

Some might accuse us of being evasive, others of trying to change the subject, but such a difficulty begs a return to the stage of definition.³ A glance at the nearest dictionary at hand, unfortunately, only extends our semantic detour: have we repressed the archaic meaning of “untruth” and, thereby, the etymon that fiction shares with “feign”? Or were we unaware of the technical sense of the word as used in law or economics to designate a conventional method of simulating value or status? The definition goes on to refer to activities so entangled in human nature that, finally, an encyclopedic approach to the modalities and uses of fiction seems more appropriate. But, having examined several such volumes, we are forced to admit that fiction is not among the subjects upon which the encyclopedic mind enjoys expounding. Its absence from the “Alphabetical Index of Important Concepts” in the *Encyclopédie française* or from the body and thesaurus of the *Encyclopædia universalis* demonstrates just how little they offer to our research.⁴

And yet, in their day, the Encyclopedists did attend generously to fiction. Of course, their methods were no more hermetic than their nomenclature. In his article on the Moon, for example, d’Alembert cut right through the debate on the issue within the scientific community of that time to conclude “that there are plants and animals on” our satellite. A century later, though Camille Flammarion admitted the issue remained unresolved, Pierre Larousse’s *Grand dictionnaire universel*

concluded it was no longer possible to conceive of life on the moon. Not surprising then to discover, in another volume of the Larousse, that the article on "Fiction" was reduced to a few lines, whereas in Marmontel's contribution to the *Encyclopédie*, it had filled several columns.

It seems that the concept of fiction had to be suppressed, even entirely eliminated from the nomenclatures of knowledge, in order to avoid it contaminating and eventually compromising the methods of positivist thinking at the root of modern science. At this point, a detour by way of Borges might lead us out of this suspicious silencing of fiction to some contemporary practices that, with the support of unquestionably authentic documents, create doubt-ridden archaeologies of knowledge, or what we might choose to call *fictions of knowledge*.

"I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia."⁵ Thus begins a tale in which Borges offers the nation of Uqbar as a metaphor for fiction itself. Because all we know of this "region of Iraq or Asia Minor" is to be found in the fantasy literature of Tlön – another country identified as equally imaginary – the narrator is inclined to believe in the existence of Uqbar. Nevertheless, he grounds the unshakeable foundation of his belief in the authority of the encyclopedic knowledge. Even though, mysteriously, the four pages in which he discovers the forgotten region only appear in a single copy, his, of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. After tossing one or two more reference books into the mix, the author, via a postscript, eventually reveals that *Tlön Uqbar Orbis Tertius* actually recounts a plot to invent a country by a secret society whose members include "Dalgarno and George Berkeley."

This story draws the lines of force of the sort of geometric construction involving complex positionings of meanings and fictional layers that could easily include a number of projects undertaken since the mid-1980s by artists as diverse as Alain Bublex, Joan Fontcuberta, John Stathatos and Riwan Tromeur. All these artists make use of a similar gesture, creating a modulated beam of reflections that puts photography – which at an instinctive level is conceived as a mirror – into play with an encyclopedic knowledge linked, for example, to contemporary or vanished cities, to explorations of the North Pole, to discoveries of naturalists, or even to the legendary story of one of the first cosmonauts. These subjects are all densely

concentrated with signs of civilization and of a collective imaginary. As in a Borgesian tale, the structure fabricated by the artists consists not of lies, but of a fiction that borrows and explores its own aesthetic, or more aptly, its poetics. The source of this poetics is perhaps in Ulysses' telling the Cyclops his name is Nobody, after having pierced the Cyclops' eye, that is, putting into play an "epiphanic experience, [...] a trial which teaches the dupe that, well before having lost his eyesight, he was blinded by his own power and savagery."⁶

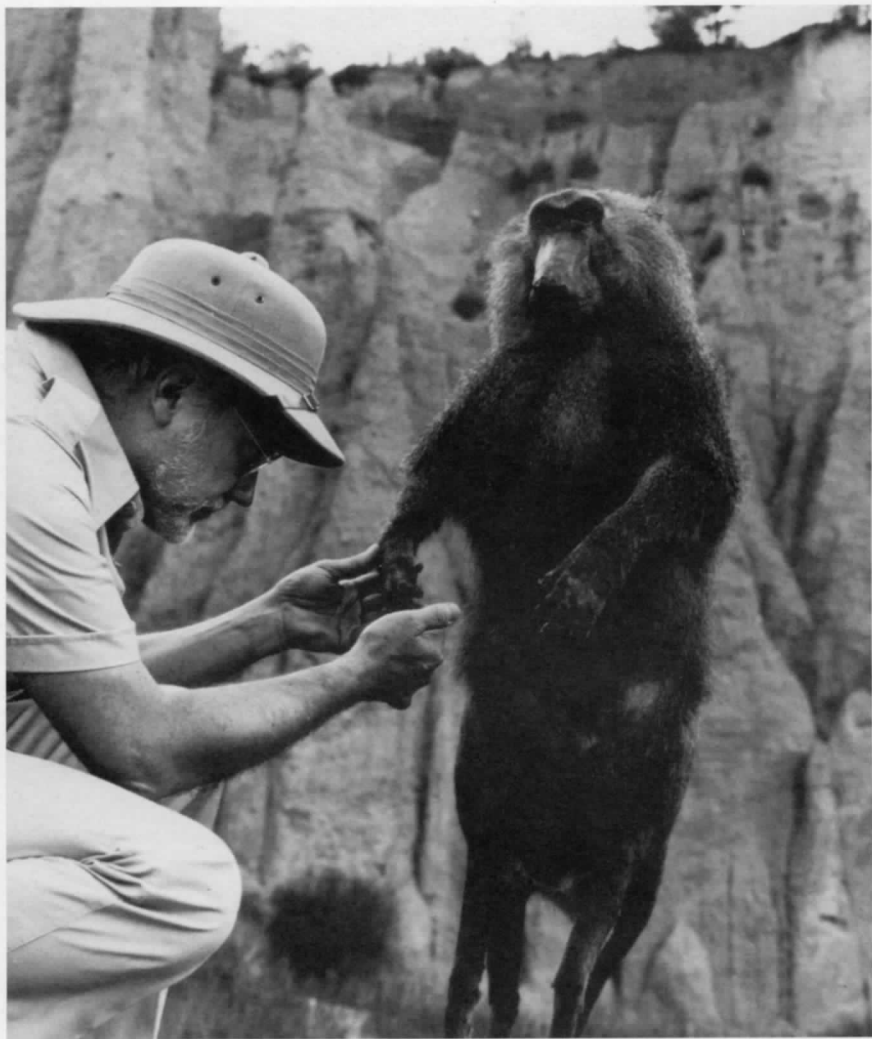
Observation, Fable, Document

The artists mentioned above depart from the category of literature in which exploration of a poetics of mystification had been enclosed until the 1980s, by the Oulipian Georges Perec, for example, or Wolfgang Hildesheimer, who wrote a fictional biography of a "forgotten" English aesthetician, a friend to Berlioz and Delacroix. Nevertheless, the text, for them, continues to play a central role. Employing, as a rule, diversion and reappropriation in almost all elements of their fictions, they reproduce scientific rhetoric, while being careful not to collapse into pastiche. Bibliographic references, citations of ancient texts, philological details, and observed facts all entwine in a game of hypotheses, inferences, syllogisms and dismantling of past conclusions. Incomplete information is presented to us wrapped in the conditional, alongside a number of markers of ignorance, mystery and approximation. And yet we cannot avoid noting that, in each moment of uncertainty, each incidence of insufficient knowledge, in spite of an often meagre content, photography acts as a formidable safeguard of reliability.

In John Stathatos' *Book of Lost Cities*,⁸ we are introduced to Arkiotis, Daedala⁹, Azzanathkona, Li-Jien and Gauzaka, by way of a text and photograph of a desert landscape of sandy hills dotted with ruins, which we could easily accept as the site of the story of Abraham. The absence of a hierarchy between text and photograph, which are set side-by-side in an illuminated box, keeps the image from becoming a painting, while the unimposing form of the whole seems to validate it as a document. Such a presentation is solemn, and has the appearance of imparted knowledge resulting from serious investigation, the kind of document one would expect to



John Stathatos, *Azzanathkona: The Book of Lost Cities*, 1996. Duratrans, fluorescent tubes and wood (44 x 128 x 10 cm)
Courtesy of the artist



Joan Foncuberta, *Fauna. Centaurus Neardentalensis*, 1987
Tinted and selenium toned silver gelatin print (50 x 40 cm)
Courtesy of the artist

find in an archaeological museum. This device operates a reversal: it's the legend – in both the technical and literary sense – that is authenticated by the photograph and its power of proof. If we add the political implications of archaeological research that Stathatos slips insidiously into the text, that *Book* really unmask the motives behind Heinrich Schliemann's odd project. In 1870, Schliemann initiated a dig, hoping to find Priam's treasure and discover the site of the Troy of Homer's narrative. Of course, he discovered none of the fantasized remains, and destroyed a great deal by carelessly sifting through less ancient layers. Even so, we know that the beginnings of the science of prehistory are indissociable from and owe much to the invention of false ruins. One of the more famous cases was Piltdown, Sussex in 1908, a methodical falsification of an entire site which took forty years to unmask, and led to the setting of clear methodologies of proof in the science of paleo-anthropology.¹⁰

These examples indicate the extent to which the immersion in legend, the pleasure of falsification, and the work of science all chafe around the clue, the proof. No need to further explain the recurrence of photography in today's artistic practices, which play on these crumbling edges in the hope of unearthing the hidden logic of an episteme in which "the separation between what we see, what others have observed and transmitted, and what others imagine or naively believe, this great tripartition of *Observation*, *Document* and *Fable* that is to us so obvious, so simple in appearance and so immediate, did not exist."¹¹ In other words, here is a relation to the world, a means of acquiring knowledge clearly untenable because it is contaminated by fiction. According to Michel Foucault, this situation – easily recognizable in the historiography of Herodotus, cited by Stathatos in the epigraph to his *Book* – comes to an end with Aldrovandi, author of a *Monstrorum historia*, in the mid 17th century. Just as the moon, that "polished mirror by which we could see ourselves from all points of the Earth and communicate our thoughts back to ourselves,"¹² revealed a trace of that ancient episteme in d'Alembert's rational thought, photography, a more contemporary metaphor for the mirror, allows some artists to revive that episteme today and revel in its aesthetic and playful possibilities.

In *Tlön Uqbar Orbis Tertius*, the narrator discovers that "mirrors are abominable." Not surprising as well that Joan Fontcuberta would stage a photographic teratology and confess, on occasion, his "wariness of mirrors."¹³ In the mid-1980s,



Construite de MONTREAL (Canada)

CAR ST PATRICK LANE

Lake KERRIS Lake

Plan DUBOISIN Plan

MO. TN-ND

FROM THE LAST SURVEY
1981
Water From
Stone

Scale 1:1000
Echelle 1:1000

Alain Bublex, *Glooscap : les quartiers. Grand Grid*, 1995
Cibachrome print and ink on paper (56 x 36 cm)
Courtesy of Galerie Georges-Philippe et
Nathalie Vallois, Paris

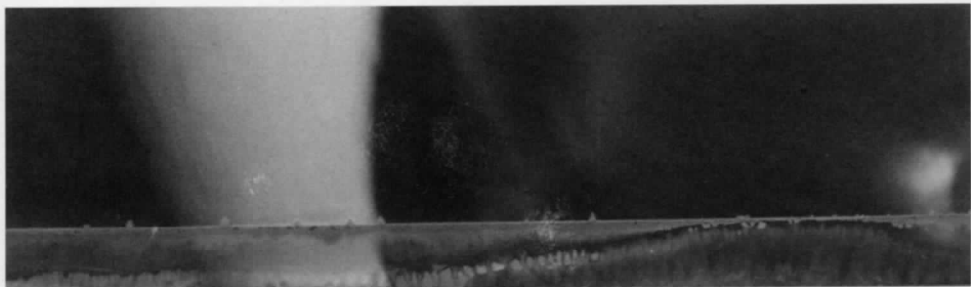
inspired by the idea that only an infinitesimal portion of what is possible exists, he and Pere Formiguera undertook to present the surprising fauna of one Professor Ameisenhaufen (1895–1955), a German naturalist whose archives they claimed had been rediscovered in 1980. Composed of photographs of animals in their habitat or in the scientist's laboratory, of drawings, topographical maps of distribution and manuscript notes detailing the conditions of capture and mores of the animals, the "Fauna" series meticulously reconstitutes the mechanisms of observation and description of the natural sciences. By virtue of the permanent exchange and circulation of their authenticating value, these documents bring to light the power of scientific exposition and, in particular, its capacity to undermine a theory as solidly established as that of biological determinism.¹⁴

"This work will be a forgery," write Alain Bublex and Milen Milenovich in the preparatory notes to *Glooscap*, their city project.¹⁵ They envisage not so much the invention of authenticity from scratch, in the manner of Fontcuberta and Formiguera, but rather a careful redirection and falsification of a host of elements culled here and there, in the present and history of other cities: geographical maps, historical facts and narratives, chronologies, drawings, plans, diagrams, graphs, logos, etc. Their goal is to create a new city, similar to those that have taken shape since the 18th century in the north of North America. The authenticity of the document is thus demonstrated in its very immanence, as though it were a value at our disposal and transferable from one context to another, without losing any of its force. Fontcuberta recently explored this idea in a massive collection of documents entitled *Sputnik*¹⁶, which retraces the legend of space pioneer Ivan Istochnikov, whose importance, it seems, had been overlooked....

Neither the unearthing of a supposed buried city, in the manner of Anne and Patrick Poirier, nor a new literary or architectural utopia, *Glooscap* is a city in which we are born, where we choose a neighbourhood to inhabit, and register our business in the appropriate archive. It is located in Passamaquoddy Bay in southern New Brunswick, where, apparently, the city that was to become Halifax might have grown. Its eponym is a native divinity who transformed a moose-hunting wolf into stone. With the place fixed, then, in a tangible territory, it was possible to deduce the history and appearance of this agglomeration of approximately three million



Joan Foncuberta, *Sputnik. Portrait d'Ivan Istochnikov*, 1997
Silver gelatin print (100 x 70 cm)
Courtesy of the artist



Riwan Tromeur, *Archipel Svalbard (Spitzberg). Île aux Ours.*
F.D. 1 / H.P.-E.N. 1 É.Q.M.1. Extrait de la série *Des Grands Nords. Le dossier de l'Affaire Størdhal, 1997-1999*
Digital print (33,8 x 149,7 cm)
Coutoiserie de la Galerie Michèle Chomette, Paris

inhabitants from the nature of the countryside, the climate and actual history of the region. Thus, this city exists in the same way as those we have never visited but that we know by a combination of representations and eye-witness reports encountered in publications, films, on television, etc. An exhibition of this work, whose continuing evolution resembles that of a city, can look like an office of municipal archives or the concourse of a tourism centre. A view of the exhibition, subsequently made into a poster, adds a degree of sediment to the reality of Glooscap. The photograph that “generated the project of this city,”¹⁷ along with the video, not only introduces the reality effect indispensable to any fiction, but it acts to complete Glooscap’s historical and aesthetic stratification by presenting its image at different eras.

All these works blend knowledges, clues and simulacra in a maze apt to confuse a *hermeneut* whose search is excessively teleological. The “Dossier de l’Affaire Stördhal (The Stördhal Affair File),” which Riwan Tromeur displayed on a stele in the middle of the exhibition “Des Grands Nords (Of the Great Norths)”¹⁸, is explicitly marked in just this way, by a fingerprint in the shape of a labyrinth. Furthermore, divided from one end to the other by the continuous horizontal line of photographs hung on its picture rails, the exhibition harbours the very mark of falsehood. According to a long forgotten convention which Tromeur, unbeknownst to him, has revived, “the ancients signified truth by a point and falsehoods by a line, the idea being that from a single point one can draw an infinite number of lines.”¹⁹ The web of references and tales woven together in this work, described by its author as “fotografiction” and “photo-story,” intertwines the imaginary exploration of the Poles with astronomical observations. It adds a number of *topoi* of the Vernian scientific novel: the discovery of lost documents (223 scientific photographs, complete with meticulous references, whose abstract appearance is reminiscent of extraterrestrial landscapes occasionally produced by astronomers for purposes of popularization²⁰), Stördhal’s revolutionary theory, the machinations against him in the scientific community, and a photographic mission to the Pole in search of evidence, undertaken by three characters or authors borrowed from literature: Sir Arthur Gordon Pym, Dan Yack and Blaise Cendrars (all with previous experience in such expeditions). But it is perhaps in reading that the scratches on some of the

photographs were the result of one of Moravagine's fits that the spectator, in the midst of the game, glimpses the operation of the mechanism in which he or she is caught. What is really at stake can now emerge from this thick narrative substance. It is the irreducible split between the image and the photographic, represented here by a split between story and form, that hides an artificial link: the spectator, who is the one who creates figure from an abstract form, with only the slightest encouragement to his or her irrepressible fictional drive.

There is no question here of any sort of trend.²¹ These fictions are few in number and constitute a radical break with the panorama of contemporary art, by eschewing the body, banality, everyday realities, and staying clear of the paths of neo-conceptualism and autoreferentiality. They ought therefore to be distinguished from simulations of artists (Yoon Ja and Paul Devautour Collection), art agencies (Readymades belong to everyone®) or communications agencies (IFP), where photography also serves as a recurrent support, often described as a "fictional enterprise." Rather than working toward a "critical mimesis"²² as do these other trends, *fictions of knowledge* explore the possibilities of playful feinting, the "act as if" peculiar to role-playing, and finally they exchange, by extrapolation, one convention for another: that of the exhibition of art works for that of the institutional transfer of knowledge. This exchange, deterritorialized, opens up an aesthetic space where the image, caught in a process of reciprocal contamination with a variety of external elements, is no longer an object reducible to an entity. And – an advantage that's far from negligible – the artist can thus forge a specific way to tell stories and, consequently, the possibility to perpetuate an aesthetic pleasure that is often excluded from the realm of art under the influence of neo-Platonism, which represses fiction out of fear of its power to contaminate.²³

Translated by Robert Majzels

NOTES

1. Cited in Jean-François Jeandillou, *Esthétique de la mystification. Tactique et stratégie littéraires*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1994, p. 185 (our translation).
2. On these questions, see my contribution to the first issue of *Études photographiques* entitled "La Lumière et l'invention de la critique photographique" (November, 1996) and, in the same journal, André Gunther's article, "Le complexe de Gradiva. Théorie de la photographie, deuil et résurrection" (n° 2, May 1997).
3. "The notion of fiction," comments Jean-Marie Schaeffer, "immediately suggests others like *imitation, fakery, simulacra, representation, resemblance*, etc., all of which, though they play an important part in our idea of fiction, are hardly univocal. Not surprising then that the concept of 'fiction' itself remains elusive. Hence the need for a conceptual clarification." *Pourquoi la fiction? (Why Fiction?)* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999, pp. 14–15 (our translation).
4. Of all the references consulted, *Collier's Encyclopedia* (New York, Toronto, Sydney, 1997) was the only one to provide a thorough analytic treatment of the subject.
5. Jorge Luis Borges, *Tlön Uqbar Orbis Tertius*, in *Ficciones*, translated from the Spanish by Alastair Reid, New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1962, p. 17. My thanks to John Stathatos, who put me on the path to Borges during a detour in a conversation on the banks of the river Thames, and to Tina Sotiriadi, who facilitated our meeting.
6. Jean-François Jeandillou, *op. cit.*, p. 8. Borges seems to allude to this story in inventing an "encyclopedia with the false name *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*" (*op. cit.*) (our translation).
7. In fact, the text includes photographs of real locations and paintings, redirected by captions associating them with the context of the fiction (cf. *Marbot, a Biography*, translated from the German by Patricia Crampton, London: Dent, 1983). About Perec, see in particular his scientific writings in *Cantatrice Sopranica L.* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1991).
8. *The Book of Lost Cities*, London: Wigmores Fine Art, 1998.
9. Note that the labyrinth, along with the mirror, is the other key figure in the Borgesian universe.
10. Cf. Claudie Cohen, "Faux et authenticité en préhistoire," *Terrain*, n° 33, September 1999, pp. 36–38.
11. Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, Paris: Gallimard, 1990, p. 141 (our translation).
12. Jules Verne, *De la Terre à la Lune*, Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1978, p. 85 (our translation).
13. Joan Fontcuberta, *Le Baiser de Judas: photographie et vérité*, translated from the Spanish, Arles: Actes Sud, 1996, p. 29 (our translation).
14. Apparently, when "Fauna" was shown at New York's Museum of Modern Art, a number of visitors were taken in (cf. Peter Alberch, "Documents of Unreality," in *Fontcuberta-Formiguera: Fauna Secreta*, Madrid: Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales, 1990, p. 75). Note, in passing, that "Fauna" belongs to a rich tradition of hoaxes manufactured by a number of erudites in the newspapers throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, in which they described imaginary animals in the manner of Buffon, for example. Before he became King of France, the Count de Provence dabbled in such tricks in the *Journal de Paris*. See, for example, his "Monstre du Chili," reprinted in *Le Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle* (vol. 3, Paris: Pierre Larousse, 1867, p. 249).

15. In 1992, Milenovich resigned from the project when the success of the first exhibition in the Vallois gallery provided them with the opportunity to move legitimately from "a strange passion" to the context of an artistic practice.
16. Exhibition Catalogue, Madrid: Fundacion Arte y Tecnologia, Telefonica, 1997. Other than the mention of two members of his family in the acknowledgements, the name of Joan Fontcuberta appears nowhere in this catalogue published in Russian, with an insert of English translations. There are two additional clues: acknowledgements to Pere Formiguera and a copyright to the "Estate of Peter Ameisenhaufen."
17. "Alain Bublex: tenir à jour les paysages (Keeping Landscapes Up to Date)," interview by Jean-Yves Jouannais, *artpress*, n° 244, March 1999, p. 26.
18. Shown at the Michèle Chomette Gallery in Paris in April and May 1999. The "File" is presented under the guise of research by science historians Joos van Ry and Finn Røthorm.
19. Pio Rossi, *Dictionnaire du mensonge (1639)*, translated from Italian, Paris: Éditions Allia, 1996, p. 28 (our translation).
20. See for example in *Sur les autres mondes (On Other Worlds)* (Paris: Larousse, 1937), the drawings of astronomer Lucien Rudaux, whose methods greatly influenced Stördhal, to the degree that an original edition of the work annotated by the latter appeared in the "Des Grands Nords" exhibition.
21. All the more since the artists grouped here have few common references and each one is unaware or almost of the work of all the others.
22. On these last two ideas, see Nicolas Bourriaud, "Un duplex à Glooscap. Fictions et mythologie dans l'art de 1985 à 1995 (A Duplex in Glooscap. Fictions and Mythology in Art from 1985 to 1995)," in *Alain Bublex: Glooscap*, Paris: Galerie Georges-Philippe and Nathalie Vallois, 1996.
23. See Jean-Marie Schaeffer, "Qui a peur de l'imitation? (Who's Afraid of Imitation?)," in *Pourquoi la fiction? (Why Fiction?)*, *op. cit.*, pp. 21–60.