Somehwere in the archives of the Musée de la Littérature on the Boulevard de l’Empereur in Bruxelles are nineteen photographic negatives with a series publication title of Subversion des Images. Made around the end of 1929, they comprise the entire photographic work of the Belgian poet and writer Paul Nougé. Some of their translated titles (Woman Frightened by String, Coat Suspended in the Void, The Revealing Arm), signal the peculiarity of their content. Their characteristics are unmistakeably surrealist.

Paul Nougé and René Magritte were close friends and long-time collaborators: Nougé’s writings and photographs, and Magritte’s paintings are kindred: fascinating, strange, and defying complete understanding. Nougé’s photographs seem to have been neglected until 1954 when one image, Les Vendages du Sommeil (The Harvests of Sleep), appeared on the cover of the first edition of the surrealist publication Les Lèvres Nues (Naked Lips). The series might never have been published without the insistence (interference is a better term) of Marcel Mariën (a Surrealist of the next generation, who came to prominence when people took to his style of surrealist fetish). Subversion des Images was first published as a series in 1968 in a further edition of Les Lèvres Nues. This was nearly 40 years after the photographs were taken, and three years after Paul Nougé’s death. Nougé’s photographs are technically unsophisticated but considerable effort has gone into their staging. They do not make a complete performance (unlike some work of say, Duane Michals) but can be read, if you like, as theatrical vignettes, with a thread of content related to reality and representation.

Subversion des Images is now seen as significant surrealist photography, and why the images were not published for such a long time is difficult to imagine: most likely, Nougé chose not to do so. His manner of thinking was scientific and fiercely iconoclastic. He was anti-authoritarian and anti-aesthetic. His surrealism was not concerned with recognition and fame, but with a fundamental
ideology expressed covertly. Nowadays, Nouge is not as well known, or as well regarded as many other Surrealists, perhaps because his métier was the written word rather than visual art, but there can be no doubt that he is one of the greats of the movement.

There were critical differences between the Belgian and French Surrealist movements in the early 20th century. André Breton and his followers developed the process called automatic writing, and this became a central tenet of the movement. This was a means of directly channeling thoughts and experiences (Belgian Surrealists were the first to work a trance-like state in the writer was usually needed). For Nouge, any form of writing required a great deal of conscious thought and manipulation; his poems were founded on phonetics and a vital juxtaposition of words. Nouge was inspired by the prose and poetry of Paul Valéry (whose work is one of the greats of the movement). Nouge produced Subversion des images in the same year (1929) that Sapir published his theory that language mediates human reality (later to be refined to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis). Further analysis of Nouge’s writing is beyond my ken, but his images interrogate the perception that photography depicts reality, in the same way that his writing seeks to destabilise the accepted capabilities of language. Nouge and Magritte were producing words and images that confront the mind with disturbing information to induce novel cognitive reactions (“to awaken an unforeseeable feeling”).

Photography has the edge over painting in this function because of the misplaced belief in photographic veracity. Nouge’s images are disturbing objects ‘objets boulerversants’. These were to be agents of change for the human psyche, liberating humankind from habit and creating new thoughts and experiences (Belgian Surrealists were not lacking in ambition).

Les Vendages du Sommeil (The Harvests of Sleep), the first edition of Les Lèvres Nues depicts a man in a trance-like state. He is engaged in automatically writing this text: “eyes closed, mouth sealed, my hand traces the signs of a...”. The incomplete message and the empty hand is a censorship response to the philosophy of automatic writing. Other images in the series are more difficult to understand; La Jongleuse (The Juggler): a young woman, flat out with her upper body resting on a table, seemingly exhausted, asleep perhaps, has five balls in an attitude of being juggled: they are agents of disturbance. La Jongleuse is an image of novelty and imagination that the image is placed beyond normality and becomes irrational. These manipulations by Nouge were only ‘subversions strictly necessary’ to warp the representation of reality.

Surrealism is a serious subject, and even more so when combined with another serious subject, six photography. Nevertheless, when I see Nouge’s image of a woman balanced very precariously and seemingly asleep on a shallow mantlepiece (Les Profondeurs du Sommeil) (The Depths of Sleep) or a small crowd staring expectantly at the imminent appearance of something that is never going to materialise (La Naissance de l’Objet) (The Birth of the Object), my thoughts are that Nouge was a farceur as well as a philosopher. His actions – the attacks on art, the obsession with manipulation of language, the necessity of disturbing the audience, and the urgency - are all thoroughly Dada, even though Nouge was never named as a member of that group.

I first saw Nouge’s images in an exhibition at the Institut Français d’Ecosse in Edinburgh about the surrealist world of writing of the time...

Keith Guy, *Deux Femmes Effrayée par une Ficelle* (Two women frightened by a woman frightened by a string)
a decade ago, and a few years later developed a dependency on them in some work of my own. This was a dubious thing to do: my justification is that Nougé was a prolific plagiarist, and re-writer of others’ work, and this was the basis for much of his work. There was hardly any room for women in the surrealist world of writing of the time and I wondered if some of Nougé’s images could be construed as misogynistic. I am not saying that this is true, but the idea did give me a means to exploit his work. Femme effrayée par une féeclée (Woman frightened by fairy) illustrates a psychosomatic condition of irrational fear and reminded me of some staged images in invention of Hystéria1. That hysteria can be passed around like an infection was a belief at one time, and perhaps the only sensible response to this would be to dive for cover (Deux femmes effrayées par une femme effrayée par une féeclée) (Two women frightened by a woman frightened by fairy). From this I was able to explore the beautifully crafted image La Jongleuse, it seemed the right thing to do my La Jongleuse lots of balls to juggle and Le Jongleur just two, which is perhaps as much as, if not more than, he can gratuitously cope with. Like La Jongleuse, Cils Coupés (Cut Lashes) is difficult to fathom: with a large pair of scissors in her right hand, a woman attempts to cut the lashes of her left eyelid. Cils Coupés has been likened to the film Chien Andalou which was released and screened left eyelid in Paris several months before Nougé made this image. There is much more yet to understand in Subversion des images: the enigmatic messages of his work are as relevant now as they were at the time of their making. To paraphrase Nougé: the danger of a blind faith in any medium is the risk of becoming its docile servant, instead of the other way around2.

Thanks go to the editors of Studies in Photography for this opportunity to describe some of Paul Nougé’s photographs. My own images here were made during an undergraduate degree in Photography and Film at Edinburgh Napier University and I am grateful to Dr Xavier Caronne for helpful correspondence at that time. Many thanks are due to Robin Gillanders for his encouragement sustained throughout my BA and MFA photography degrees. From this to exploiting the beautifully crafted image La Jongleuse, it seemed the right thing to do my La Jongleuse lots of balls to juggle and Le Jongleur just two, which is perhaps as much as, if not more than, he can gratuitously cope with. Like La Jongleuse, Cils Coupés (Cut Lashes) is difficult to fathom: with a large pair of scissors in her right hand, a woman attempts to cut the lashes of her left eyelid. Cils Coupés has been likened to the film Chien Andalou which was released and screened in Paris several months before Nougé made this image. There is much more yet to understand in Subversion des images: the enigmatic messages of his work are as relevant now as they were at the time of their making. To paraphrase Nougé: the danger of a blind faith in any medium is the risk of becoming its docile servant, instead of the other way around.


