

Like an Exhibit at Madame Tussauds: Samuel Aranda's Portrait of Raoul Vaneigem

By Bill Not Bored

It is quite possible that, when he was hired by *Le Soir* (a Belgian newspaper) to take a photograph of Raoul Vaneigem at his retreat in Barcelona, Spain, Samuel Aranda didn't know anything about him. Or maybe he did, I don't know. In some circles, Vaneigem is very well-known. In any case, Aranda must have been chosen to take the shot, not because of his experience as an award-winning documenter of "conflict, migration and social issues around the globe,"¹ but because he was born in Santa Coloma de Gramanet, Barcelona and probably still lives somewhere nearby.² All he'd have to do is get in his car, drive to the address provided by *Le Soir* (which was conducting an interview with Vaneigem via email),³ take the shot, send it off, and then move on to his next assignment.

One might suppose these two men would hit it off. According to a quote relayed by Sony UK, Aranda is "only interested in emotions."⁴ And of course, human emotions are very important to Vaneigem, the decades-long champion of spontaneity, passion and radical subjectivity.⁵

But it is quite clear from what resulted that these two men *didn't* light up each other's eyes or warm each other's hearts. The picture that resulted is in fact almost completely devoid of human emotion, just as it is almost completely devoid of light and warmth – facts emphasized (perhaps inadvertently, perhaps deliberately) by Aranda's caption or, rather, by the caption that was affixed to his portrait of Vaneigem by the folks back in Belgium: "A self-proclaimed Epicurean, this intellectual polished his thought under the Catalan sun."

¹ Here I'm quoting from Panos Pictures: "Samuel has spent the last 13 years documenting conflicts, migration and social issues across the globe. His work ranges from extensive coverage of the Arab Spring to an intimate portrait of Spain gripped by the economic crisis. Working frequently for the New York Times, his work has taken him to countries far and wide, from the Middle East to South America and Eastern Europe. His coverage of the Spanish Crisis, which was published in The New York Times, showed the effects of the national situation on the lives of individuals and families, drawing attention to the severity of the impact of the economic collapse on Spain's working class. In 2012, he was awarded the World Press Photo of the Year for an image of a mother cradling her son who is suffering from tear gas exposure during the uprising in Yemen." <https://www.panos.co.uk/photographer/samuel-aranda/>

² Panos Pictures says he "currently lives in Crespia, Catalonia and runs a studio-gallery in La Bisbal d'Emporda."

³ Eventually published on 14 November 2020 as "The Elementary Roots of Raoul Vaneigem: 'Humanity Dies So That An Economy in Which Mad Money Goes Round and Round Can Survive':" <http://www.notbored.org/le-soir.pdf>.

⁴ "In photography, I'm only interested in emotions." <https://www.sony.co.uk/alphauniverse/ambassadors/samuel-aranda>

⁵ "I see curiosity – along with love, creation and solidarity – as the passionate attractions that are the most vital to the construction of the human being." From the interview with *Le Soir*.

In point of fact, the picture is dark, so dark in fact that – despite the light coming into the room from the window (that would be the Catalan sun, I suppose) – it is difficult to see Vaneigem clearly or to see what he’s doing, sitting at that desk.



It is only when the picture is “artificially” lightened – I used a very simple program to increase the exposure and diminish the shadows – that the viewer can see what Samuel Aranda saw there in that room on that particular day.



Such a portrait, indeed, *any* portrait, is a complex collaboration between the photographer and the subject. Yes, the photographer has many means to communicate how he feels about the subject (the angle of the camera, for example), and of course the subject has no control over the effects on the viewer that these means might produce. But the subject also chooses how to present himself to the photographer, and the photographer can only make do with what he is presented. He may ask, “Can you turn slightly?” or “Give us a smile?” but of course the subject may ignore him and continue to frown and only show his face in profile. The photographer may ask, “Can you explain what’s in front of you on your desk?” but of course he may receive no answer, just cold, stony silence.

Samuel Aranda’s portrait of Raoul Vaneigem shows us a man – he apparently requires a cane to steady himself while walking (see the lower right-hand corner) – who doesn’t acknowledge our presence in the room with him. He doesn’t look at the camera; he isn’t interested in meeting the gaze of the viewer. Instead, his eyes are down, apparently on the computer in front of him; his right hand is on the computer’s mouse. But it doesn’t look like he’s working, or even answering burning questions from the reporters from *Le Soir*, otherwise his hands would be on the computer’s keyboard.

There’s a curiously two-dimensional aspect to this image. Note the yellow lamp on the left-side of the table. Its neck bends towards us; presumably there’s a light bulb at the end of it. When the Catalan sun finally goes down, Vaneigem turns it on and continues his writing. But Aranda hasn’t captured the bulb; it is hidden behind a clothespin that appears to be holding a greenish-grey drawing of some kind to the cardboard box that the writer is using to shield his laptop from glare. Below the first clothespin, there’s another one, holding what looks to be a postcard against the side of the box. The viewer can’t tell; a small, flat piece of wood is in the way.

Atop the box are dead things: dried flowers mostly, but also a small two-legged figurine, what looks to be a small lump of quartz or some other crystal, and a pinecone. Other than Vaneigem himself, the only living things in the room are the plants in the windowsill. But is the writer presented as a living thing? No; motionless, he looks like a wax figure and the entire scene looks like an exhibit at Madame Tussauds’ Wax Museum.

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