
“Going to Meet Ralf Marsault”

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REFERENCES

Marsault, Ralf. *Résistance à l'effacement*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2010, (Bibliothèque art action pensée)

- 1 As the outcome of an ethnological thesis (supervised by Jean Arlaud, Paris 7), *Résistance à l'effacement* is a noteworthy example of "visual studies", overlapping the fields of art history and anthropology. Rooted in a "turf", the study of the *Wagenburgen* (groups of lived-in vehicles) of Berlin (Waldemar and East Side Gallery essentially), focusing on a population (the *Wagenburger*: punks and travellers) at an historic moment (the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1996), the book came about from a project involving photographic portraits carrying on from *Fin de siècle* (1996) by Ralf Marsault and his companion Heino Muller—to whom he here pays tribute. Marsault also organized a show in Berlin on the subject in 2008: *Wagenburg Leben in Berlin*.
- 2 The book is in the form of a survey: about people both named (Godz, Popeye and Patricia) and photographed. The interviews are transcribed as uttered (or almost), and record a way of life. The survey is participatory. The material is imparted separately from the commentary which comes afterwards. What is involved, above all, is a return to traces (those of Berlin *with* its cut still visible, its possible contrasting ways of life, its no-man's-lands, today *filled in*, the way you do with a well) before they are erased. The photographs of punks are clearly defined, it is the world around that has *moved*. Some *Wagenburger* have themselves left the city; even if they are still a bit nostalgic.
- 3 Ralf Marsault is an anthropologist and photographer. He knows that he creates traces and, as has been long realized, that he alters what happens by asking questions and freezing images. Marsault and Muller, it just so happens, have opted not to deny this impact. They have even markedly ritualized the exchange, because it is indeed a question of an exchange and not of photographs torn off or stolen: the "models" are

volunteers, paid for their contribution: they get themselves ready and arrange themselves, talk about procedures, are handed photographs, and makes comments about them. This "protologue" is inspired by Eugène Atget: it is methodical and it focuses on the *visualization* of the subject (what we might call its "haecceity" or its "this-ness"). It also calls to mind the photographs of Malick Sidibé.

- 4 *Résistance à l'effacement* is thus punctuated by a portrait gallery, where the text is constructed around the image. In two major parts, divided into chapters, in the seeming disorder of roving and wandering (from person to person, from truck to caravan) which respects oddities without systematically running away from generalization and concept (as is too often the case with books involving participatory observation), Marsault first and foremost wonders about marginality and the experience thereof ("Sur l'espace liminal"), then about the meanings it assumes (or does not assume, for that matter) for those involved ("Temporalité du rêve"). If the book often seems like an unidentified object—which adds to its interest—this is brought about by the speeding-up of its viewpoints, its dizzy-making short-cuts, and its colourful conceptual tools (David Le Breton, James Ensor, René Girard and Alec Wildenstein all summoned to the same subject, but it works!), and its "Micromegas" aspect. A reflection on tattooing leads to a connection to the—tragic—theme of the mask (a gas mask chosen as an attribute for a photograph by the person nicknamed "Popeye" triggers the theme, where all that is missing is the reference to the text by Limbour, *Eschyle, le Carnaval et les civilisés*). Another on travellers' dogs leads to the question of domestication and the (complex) relationship to animality; another still about fire brings in Antonin Artaud; then there is a discussion about fear (felt and caused), time and death, which takes "Medusa" as its figure—Louis Marin and Jean Clair are then invited to the *Wagenburg*.
- 5 The words "remains" (of the mortal variety), "wild child", "nomad", "tinkers", "blemish", "look" and "patchwork" are all painstakingly weighed up, from their etymology to their symbolic reality by way of their unconscious echoes. The "youth gangs" are likened to mediaeval "warrior societies". Here, the historian of art, and sculpture, discovers viewpoints and experiences to do with metal-working. The tattoos lead to Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Maoris, but the idea that the body must change is referred to the Viennese Actionists. The text is followed by thirteen documents, appendices to a thesis, reflecting the diverse range of approaches: Julia Kristeva, Jean-Claude Schmitt (on the mediaeval hurly-burly), the punk group Camera Silens, mixing articles about current topics and scholarly ideas.
- 6 In the end, and thanks to its writing which tacks back and forth, this book, fuelled by photographs and interviews, finds its place in the plural time-frame of history. We are both extremely close to praxes and their discourse of legitimization and in a position of critical hindsight revealing the relentless solidarity of the side-line and social functioning (in the spirit of Howard Becker's *Outsiders* and the Chicago School). These groups which lay claim to the family therapy of a tribe are caught up with by the social, run through by the all-encompassing collective just when the piercing they indulge in is intended to define and limit their membership of just their "group". We are well removed from the unequivocal thinking of *Modern Primitives* (San Francisco, 1989) by Vale and Andrea Juno. In it we discover the alternative punk culture. Or should we rather say "post-punk"? Actually, like Dada to which it is often compared, the movement ushered in by the No Future of the Sex Pistols did not last long (from 1976 to

1978) as a movement properly so-called, but on the other hand it is still a form of reference. Not forgetting Stanley Kubrick's film *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), based on the book by Anthony Burgess (1962), which is an ambiguous must among the *Wagenburger*. From it they derive revolt, just like the skin heads, whom the most politically aware among them are nevertheless agin. The book questions violence, drugs, women, and their place in this community, which might be felt to be permeated by male ideals and patterns of behavior (following in the footsteps of the hippies, and objecting to them).

- 7 Last of all—and this is not the book's least merit—this compilation helps to shed a little more light on the active myth of Berlin prior to its recent normalization—whence the desire to resist the erasure announced in the title—, its urban aspect of self-run squats and street theatre, where the performers in the Mutoid Waste Company linked up with the German spirit of *Wanderlust*. The reality of the *Wagenburgen*, where there were more than a few French and English people, was truly international.