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Lebel, Jean-Jacques. *A pied, à cheval et en Spoutnik : quelques écrits 1961-2009*, Paris : Beaux-arts de Paris les éditions, 2009, (Ecrits d'artistes)

Lebel, Jean-Jacques ; Michaël, Andrroula. *Happenings ou l'insoumission radicale*, Paris : Hazan : Centre national des arts plastiques, 2009

Jean-Jacques Lebel : soulèvements, Lyon : Fage ; Paris : la Maison rouge, 2009

- 1 "How are we to make headway in Jean-Jacques Lebel's prolific work?" asks Anne Tronche, and not without reason, in the opening essay of the book-cum-catalogue *Jean-Jacques Lebel: soulèvements* (literally, uprisings). In front of the dizzy array of propositions being offered to "viewers"/readers, a minimum of method is probably called for, even if this term may seem diametrically opposed to the tentacular—not to say rhizome-like—œuvre based on a multiplicity without a centre, if not that provided by Jean-Jacques Lebel himself, artist, "collector" and "inspired agitator". Recent publications by and about Lebel permit a reasoned (and probably too sensible an) approach to a body of work which, in refusing "the logic of labels and drawers" (Didier Semin), is still irrefutably structured. Proof of the pudding lies in these three books which make an overall distinction between three types of J-J. Lebel's creative activities (artist/collector; author of happenings; poet and writer), and bring to the fore an initial possible approach to the œuvre: its incorporation in the history of the avant-gardes.
- 2 "But we're in the middle of Dada here"... thus it was, according to Lebel¹, that Marcel Duchamp, who was present at the 1965 happening *Déchirex*, commented upon what he was attending with his friend Man Ray. If that happening, like all the others, in no way needed Duchamp's sponsorship to exist historically, with its unusualness and its scandalous nature (in the etymological sense of the word²), that observation, for Lebel,

went beyond a merely amused mind. “That sentence [...] re-established [...] a blinding truth: the happening was not “invented” by the Americans, or the Japanese, or by who knows who. It came into being in 1920 in Berlin at the Dada-Messe (the Dada fair), then in 1921 in Paris with the trial of Maurice Barrès, in the Square Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre.”³ This claimed connection with Dada with regard to the happening is in reality inseparable from the libertarian nature of Lebel’s artistic commitment, and goes beyond his closeness to the Surrealists, whose travelling companion he briefly was in the mid-1950s.⁴

- 3 The “insurrectional” dimension, deriving from Dada, “a wholesome revolt against the clericalism of all orders”, which we find, according to Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux (*Jean-Jacques Lebel: soulèvements*, p. 133), in his happenings, is not limited—which is another approach to the “Lebel world” (Antoine de Galbert)—to art forms: “political, intellectual and affective adventures”⁴ are in fact, for Lebel, the essential, and let us even say fundamental, driving forces behind his praxis. There was “the direct and decisive influence of Breton”⁵, just like that of Duchamp, Man Ray, and Benjamin Perret, as well as his meetings with Henri Michaux, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and Gregory Corso, his friendships with Erró, Allan Kaprow and François Dufrêne, and his close relationship with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. This attentiveness to others, and these fraternal relations, made Lebel a “ferryman” or go-between, for the Beat Generation in the 1960s and, twenty years later, with the Polyphonix festival, for the most experimental forms of poetry and performance; but he was also a consistently committed “activist”, in the almost militant sense of the term⁶, in the great post-war political struggles waged by the far left—the struggle for independence in Algeria, and May ’68 with the “Movement of 22 March”, and then the anarchist group “Noir et Rouge”. But as Félix Guattari noted, “social action remained inseparable, for him, from poetic action”⁷, and if there is a third string—it being understood that they are intermingled—Lebel can take pride in having freed it from its bookish drowsiness and the mawkishness that clings to the word, it is indeed that of poetry. Not only by way of the “live poetry” festivals he organized, and the revelation of Beat poetry for a whole generation, but also through the very nature, according to him, of “ungoverned” poetry, which led him, as it happens, to help us discover, through Victor Hugo the tachist, the inventor of “gestural painting” (*op. cit.*, p. 23), and to see in the 18th century Venitian poet (often licentious) Giorgio Baffo the revealer of contemporary political obscenity⁸.
- 4 The erotic element of Lebel’s work could, furthermore, be put in its entirety under the wing of that bard described by Guillaume Apollinaire as “the greatest priapic poet who ever lived”, the one who, in his work, appears—as Guy Scarpetta emphasizes—as a “lewd and jolly high priest” of a sort of “pagan religion” (*op. cit.* p. 176). The happenings reviewed in *Happenings ou l’insoumission radicale*, from *Pour conjurer l’esprit de catastrophe* (1962) to *Sun Love* (1967), the “polymorphous and on-going” installation *Reliquaire pour un culte de Vénus* (started in 1999) and his video installation *Les Avatars de Vénus* (2008), and the exhibitions he curated, such as *Jardin d’Eros* (1999) and *Picasso érotique* (2001), all point to the same thing: the sexual exaggeration present in Lebel’s œuvre is nothing other than a constant ode to freedom. Whence this declaration: “You have to dare to venture into the opaqueness of Eros, beyond moral prejudices, and literally go crazy” (*op. cit.*, p. 29). Which is what he excels at through these three books.

NOTES

1. This vitality results from the sphere of influence of the best design schools, whose role is underscored by the authors, and from various initiatives on the part of designers themselves, such as the creation of the Droog Design label in the Netherlands. The VIA (Valorisation d'Innovation dans l'Ameublement), has thus been playing a decisive role for the emergence and international reputation of French design for 30 years. The Centre Pompidou pays a much deserved tribute to it in the catalogue *VIA Design 3.0: 1979-2009, 30 ans de création de mobilier*, which, in the field of furniture and household objects, represents what is known as a summa.
2. This demand for a topographical, genealogical and typological arrangement of design, over and above the eclectic abundance of its object which saturates our perception of it, determines the numerical logic of the works presented. The Sismo Designers thus overlap four criteria—project/form relation, integration of techniques, readability of uses, social implication—in order to produce a reading grid of what design is in its diverse range of activities and objectives.
3. The only real lacuna in this very comprehensive overview is the absence of the experimental design of Dunne and Raby.
4. Braunstein-Kriegel, Chloé. "Géopolitique du design : nouveaux territoires, enjeux nouveaux", *Qu'est-ce que le design aujourd'hui?*, Paris, Beaux-Arts/TTM, 2009, p. 70
5. Favardin, Patrick. "Le VIA, une évolution stylistique", *VIA Design 3.0, op. cit.*, pp. 42-43
6. We know how historiography is at pains to extricate itself from the age old dialectic between symbolism-criticism and the functionality-use group. Thus we find Emmanuel Tibloux whose introduction to the catalogue *Who's Afraid Of Design?* and contribution to the latest *Azimuts* renew the axiology (theory of intrinsic values) which puts art in a position from which it surveys design. This latter adopts "a tendentially consenting position through research work involving forms and processes which puts the question of use in the foreground". Or when the "tendentially" becomes somewhat tendentious.
7. Without complying with it, her book enhances a very sound knowledge of Anglo-Saxon historiography, from Nikolaus Pevsner to Hal Foster (whose *Design and Crime* thesis she disputes), by way of Penny Sparke whose feminist outlook she adopts, while relativizing her analysis of the relations between design and consumerism.
8. *Le Design européen depuis 1985, op. cit.*, p. 7