Towards a History of Art after the Avant-Gardes

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REFERENCES

L'Art du XXe siècle 1939-2002 : de l'art moderne à l'art contemporain, Paris : Citadelles & Mazenod, 2005, (L'Art et les grandes civilisations)

- 1 It is in the nature of histories of modern and contemporary art to be regularly rewritten, and their own developments reflect both on the art they describe and on the evolution of those observing it and the places from which they are observing it. *L'Art du XXe siècle 1939-2002* is the first effort in this field by Editions Citadelle & Mazenod. Comprising over 600 pages of text and some twenty appendices, the book breaks with this publisher's usual practice by limiting the documentary element to the strict minimum (which avoids giving the impression of a thesis) and allots considerable space to reproductions, of which there are nearly 600. Edited by Daniel Soutif, this history of modern and contemporary art stands in contrast to that other weighty tome on the subject, *Art since 1900, Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, co-written by Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and published by Thames and Hudson in 2004. Where the latter is the work of a group of authors who know each other well and share a number of interests and references, at the risk of seeming to limit the debate to their own little circle, the collection of authors proposed by Daniel Soutif, while certainly representative of critical activity in France (Didier Semin, Eric de Chasse, Denys Riout, Jean-Pierre Criqui, Gilles A. Tiberghien, Véronique Goudinoux) and Italy (Marco Bazzini, Carlotta Darò, Stefano Pezzato), indicates a wider range of viewpoints. The considerably broadened scope of this history, which takes in performance, video and graphic design (Catherine de Smet), also runs to gender issues (Elisabeth Lebovici) and post-colonial art (Jean-Hubert Martin). Considerable attention is also given to photography (Daniel Soutif)

and musical installations (Eric de Vischer). General histories of contemporary art had been rather slow in opening up to these different themes, and the positive response to this book has a lot to do with these choices, and with the quality of the texts, which are subtle and not dogmatic.

- 2 Several years in the making, this volume covers only the final years of modernism and does not rewrite its history or revisit all the ruptures and debates that shaped it. It opens after the end of the avant-gardes and the issues of rejection that followed them, when the United States assimilated modernism and confronted Europeans with their own reading of it. Although signposted by chapter headings that pick out trends and movements, its development does not focus on artists as irreducible, individual entities, nor does it see them as the pawns of the currents and movements described in the appendix. This is an exhaustive and subtle book written by specialists who go over the issues and debates with cool detachment and back up their arguments with measured comparisons.
- 3 *L'Art du XXe siècle* covers a period of transition, lucidly analysing the French complacency of the postwar years, as described by Didier Semin: "The idea of a School of Paris that was a synthesis of the avant-garde and tradition, an idyll that could almost have been written for tourist brochures selling the French experience, was in no small measure responsible for masking the reality of postwar art, even to those most immediately involved" (p. 38). The book gives a fairly precise idea of American art, from the early days of Abstract Expressionism to Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy. The international spirit of Carlotta Darò's attentive study of the postwar reconstruction period in Germany, England, Italy and France, and of Catherine de Smet's balanced survey of graphic art, is not always matched by the chapters on the visual arts. Witness the one on the "Avant-gardes in France in the 1960s". Does anyone really believe that what is discussed in this chapter was independent of what was going on elsewhere in Europe? They wouldn't, surely, if Equipo Cronica were linked to the Malassis, and Supports-Surfaces to the late, post-minimalist or post-monochrome modes of painting around Europe. Likewise, while one can only welcome the chapter on "Women," which is one of the first such chapters in any general history, and certainly has its place here, especially when one thinks of the belated discovery of Louise Bourgeois as precursor, it would have been good to give women artists a bit more space in the other chapters as well.
- 4 Perhaps I should get to the heart of the discussion organised by Daniel Soutif via his various contributors. For not only does he oppose the idea of contemporaneity to the avant-garde one of rupture, he actually relativises the very notion of rupture. The works described with a great wealth of information are, like Philippe Thomas's *Sujet à discrétion* (1985) and Jean-Marc Bustamante's *Inventaire* (1989), placed in a history in which art contemplates the world with definite detachment. For example, the comment on Maurizio Cattelan's *La Nona Ora*, 1999, in which the figure of Pope John Paul II is pinned to the ground by a meteorite, is the following: "At a time of universal, real-time communication of events in words and images, the sole of function of art, as Cattelan understands it, seems to be to embody a kind of surrealism that is even more shocking than the real on which it is modelled." And then this, by way of a conclusion: "In September 2002, were there not one or two established voices—those of Karlheinz Stockhausen and, in a more attenuated form, Damien Hirst—who said that the terrorist destruction of the Twin Towers was the greatest artwork of all time?" (p. 573). Art must confront societal issues, but this history of art is not a history of the 20th century seen by art, but history perceived in its cultural dimension.