Criticism versus History

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REFERENCES

Leeman, Richard. *Le Critique, l'art et l'histoire : de Michel Ragon à Jean Clair*, Rennes : Presses universitaires, 2010, (Critique d'art)

- 1 Up until now we have been missing a comprehensive study of postwar French art criticism that has viewed its subject with sufficient hindsight to provide its author with a sense of detachment in relation to generational challenges. Awareness of the waning of Paris as the international capital of the arts gave rise to a flood of reactions, including from art critics. These latter would voice their views with a “determinedly historicistically-oriented” pen, demonstrating their eagerness to re-establish order while guaranteeing a place for French art in the history of modern art.
- 2 In his book *Le Critique, l'art et l'histoire : de Michel Ragon à Jean Clair*, the art historian Richard Leeman¹ reveals the intellectual stances of the various critics then confronted by these changes, and describes the story of their reactions.
- 3 In order to delimit the scope of his study—ranging from 1959 to 1972—R. Leeman decides, on the one hand, to sidestep periodic pigeonholing based on non-artistic historical criteria, such as the end of the Second World War, and May '68, and, on the other, to have recourse to the “convenient dates” of the beginnings of decades. More to the point, the events which stake out his periodic pigeonholing result from a subtle observation of French art circles. To analyze critical production and its historiography, the author feels obliged to look beyond France—and towards the United States, among other countries. The limits of this period are marked by two goings-on: from the creation of the Paris Biennale in 1959 (brainchild of Raymond Cogniat, assisted by Georges Boudaille, Alain Jouffroy, Gérard Gassiot-Talbot, Jean-Jacques Lévêque, Raoul-Jean Moulin, José Pierre, Michel Ragon, Pierre Restany, and Guido Weelen) to the exhibition *72/72 : douze ans d'art contemporain en France* (curated by François Mathey) at

the Grand Palais, thirteen years later. These events involved, in differing ways, the attempts made by critics to set up the foundations of a history of French art since 1945.

- 4 The book is subdivided into eight chapters which chronologically trace the quintessential figures of Michel Ragon (“Voici la France”), Jean Cassou and Bernard Dorival (“L’Histoire de l’art selon le Musée d’art moderne”), Pierre Restany (“En route vers de nouvelles aventures”), and François Pluchart (“Cézanne on s’en fout”), who are examined both individually, and by way of shared criteria. With Raymond Cogniat, Marcel Zahar, Gaston Diehl and Pierre Courthion, R. Leeman traces the conservatism and the nationalist tendencies which determined their decisions within art institutions as much as the way they saw history. Jean Cassou revived the critical exercise by linking his interest in this latter with his literary talents. His writings formulated the itinerary of a “French-style modernity”. With the exhibition *Les Sources du XXe siècle* (Paris: Musée national d’art moderne, 1961), he responded to the change in historical paradigm brought on by the new artistic position(s) of the United States. In the early 1960s, Restany and Ragon incarnated the ushering in of new young critics (“Les jeunes et les vieux”, pp. 48-52). Restany, the “Pygmalion” critic, set off “towards new adventures”, and kept an eye on things happening beyond France’s borders. Ragon, for his part, worked out his own particular language, stripped of poetic turns of phrase, invariably somewhere halfway between criticism and history. In 1967, with *Du Cubisme à l’abstraction réaliste*, then in 1971 with *Pop art & Cie*, Pluchart undertook a review of recent French historiography. He questioned the official history of art championed by previous generations of critics, and earmarked an important place for the abstract and Dada avant-gardes.
- 5 Although personalities provide the basis of R. Leeman’s essay, they fade swiftly behind their publications around which the author builds the plot of his (hi)story. Nor does he turn his back on the literary genres of Memoirs, poetry (as with Cassou), and the novel (as with Ragon).
- 6 The notion of historiographic operation put forward by Michel de Certeau in *L’Ecriture de l’histoire* helps Leeman on several occasions in his quest for procedures deployed by critics in their assumption of the role of historians. The “historiographic operation” results from the combination of a particular social place, specific scientific praxes, and a manner of writing. Leeman recognizes as much, for example, in Restany’s case. In the three Nouveau Réalisme manifestoes, the critic proceeded via the stages of *constatation*, *objectivation* and *historisation*/observation, objectivization and historicization, aiming to clarify the recent past and include the group—and the critic, too—within the history of French art of the 1960s.
- 7 The periodic pigeonholing of postwar art and the different “pantheons” of modern art are, for Leeman, unveiled as being strategies for constructing historical facts. While Paul Cézanne occupies a paramount place in the historical narrative worked out by Cassou in *Les Sources du XXe siècle*, he is re-examined a few years later by Pluchart who would introduce the figure of Marcel Duchamp, with the aim of rewriting the itinerary of French modernity.
- 8 In these operations, each critic assumes an awareness of formulating history or, at the very least, of providing the sources of forthcoming art history. For example, Leeman finds such attempts in Restany, whose writing takes on a narrative and teleological character, as well as in Ragon, who prefers pedagogical clarity (*La Peinture actuelle*, 1959).

- 9 Richard Leeman lends perspective to critical writings, reports, overviews–characteristic typologies of the period–and catalogue essays. He delves into texts and paratexts so as to recognize where and how this desire to make history is incorporated. Titles of books, back covers and flaps of publications are all looked at with the analytical tools of discourse, ranging from the authors' use of metaphors and adjectives to the acknowledgement of axiological systems applied in each statement. He also lists the philosophical references of each one of the authors and the criteria of their method of argument.
- 10 By revealing the strategies implemented by critics with the aim of obtaining a primary version of art history, *Le Critique, l'art et l'histoire* today restores to the various texts in question their original critical status by re-positioning them alongside artistic events. By sorting, ordering and hierarchizing a selection of texts taken from this period, Leeman takes up the challenge of this historicistically-oriented inclination. Focused as it is more on the European side of history, this book may be read as a sequel to the work by Serge Guilbaut: *Comment New York vola l'idée d'art moderne : Expressionisme abstrait, liberté et guerre froide* (1983), from which Leeman borrows several quotations and references.
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NOTES

1. This recent publication complements other projects undertaken by Richard Leeman, such as the conference devoted to Pierre Restany (INHA, 2006), the proceedings of which have been published as: *Le Demi-siècle de Pierre Restany* (Paris : Ed. Des cendres; INHA, 2009), and the recent conference, *Michel Ragon : critique d'art et d'architecture* (INHA, 2010).