Re-interpreting the Last Supper from the viewpoint of “people who have been cooking throughout history”

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Re-interpreting the Last Supper from the viewpoint of “people who have been cooking throughout history”¹

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REFERENCES

La Rébellion du Deuxième Sexe : l'histoire de l'art au crible des théories féministes anglo-américaines (1970-2000), Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2011, (Œuvres en sociétés-Anthologies)Ed. de Fabienne Dumont

- 1 To say that *La Rébellion du Deuxième Sexe : l'histoire de l'art au crible des théories féministes anglo-américaines (1970-2000)* shatters the isolation which has been the lot of the history of contemporary French art for many years may seem like a euphemism. Yet the issue of the links between Feminism and Art History, recently institutionally raised once again through the exhibition *Elles@centrepompidou*, has been neither overworked by the event—which cruelly lacked critical and theoretical reappraisal—nor honed by the chapter-like arrangement of the rooms proposed by the curators. From this standpoint, it is altogether crucial that thinking can take textual risks, involving not only feminist artistic praxes, but also the way certain praxes are incorporated, vie with each other, or disintegrate in a *narrative*. The anthology which Fabienne Dumont has produced here, electing to focus on Anglo-Saxon theories—and even if this choice is debatable (does it not tend to attach to the already sacrosanct capital of Anglo-Saxon art the importance of an issue where the challenge, it just so happens, has to do with the pulverization of *all centres?*)—is a pleasure to read, the pleasure of seeing the different histories and episodes which inform “the roads leading elsewhere”² of feminist theories being

developed in time. This impression governs all the texts chosen for this volume, written between 1976 and 2005. In them, we can gauge the scope and breadth of a new question submitted to time's passage. As Lucy Lippard writes: "Feminism is new inasmuch as it is not post-something."³ What we are actually facing is the emergence of a discursive stage. A stage with many different sets and actresses, whose novelty—and by the same token subversion—involve the blank page which must be rewritten.

- 2 Organized in four distinct parts—"The Pioneers" (pp.33-150), "Revisiting Past Centuries" (pp. 151-304), "Masculinities and Artists of Colour" (pp. 305-432), and "Postfeminism and Queer" (pp. 433-504)—the book offers translations of fifteen essays. The first part is dominated by the figure of Lucy R. Lippard, who definitely sets the tone for the whole project, if only because, at the core of her writings, she installs the autobiographical dimension, with the "self" suddenly having a legitimate place within the critical discourse. "Perhaps this cannot be clearly seen from without, because I'm still working on it, but I have a new inner freedom to say what I feel and react in a much more personal way to any artwork",⁴ she wrote in 1976 to explain to what extent "the women's movement" had changed her life. It is since that revolution in viewpoints that another History of Art has become conceivable. The alternative proposed by feminist theoreticians combats hierarchies, isolation, the precious object, and the binary-factors upon which modernism forged the History of Art. What is more, Lippard explains, "the greatest contribution made by feminism to the future of art has probably been precisely its *lack* of contribution to modernism."⁵ From here on out, everything becomes possible, and *La Rébellion du Deuxième Sexe* develops the wide domain of a feminist rewriting of Art History: from the study of the case offered by Amelia Jones of *The Dinner Party* (1974), Judy Chicago's installation, with its "tremendous power of nuisance",⁶ to the contributions of Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock dismantling the stereotypes and silence surrounding female art since Antiquity, and that of Linda Nochlin reviving, *inter alia*, memories of the *pétroleuses*, those proletarian female arsonists of the Commune, to G. Pollock, again, demanding to understand the modern female body other than through the nude, the brothel and the bar. The last part of the book, and in my eyes the most stimulating, has two texts, one by A. Jones on Postfeminism, the other by Judith Halberstam on the representation of the transgender body in contemporary art. These ideas help us to sense to what degree the dissemination of feminist theories has not only helped to pinpoint the omissions and wrong tracks of Art History, but above all to invent wholly new discursive fields, capable of describing the whole breadth of "dislocated" experiences, be they artistic or sexual, opening the way to the end of differences between figuration and abstraction, for example. Halberstam's analysis of Eva Hesse's work is extremely heartening from this viewpoint.
- 3 All these writings dispense a "situated" knowledge: objects are seized which produce and decree their own context, and a history is constructed running counter to the selective and normative tradition. Thus it is that an egregiously political vision becomes, through the beam of Art History, possible: not only because "what is personal is political", but also because conceiving of omission versus resignation makes it obligatory to come up with new itineraries. This is perhaps where the book is slightly disappointing. If, as L.R. Lippard writes, women artists have "slowed up" the avant-garde and traced a "network of secondary roads which simply cover more territories than freeways do",⁷ serving more "working-class homes", it would have been nice if *La*

Rébellion du Deuxième Sexe were to take us a bit more out into the world. Let us think, for example, of the new territories which the *Subaltern Studies* have been referring to since the 1980s. It might have been nice to contrast globalized forms of instability with the solidity of ideological structures, whose capacities to absorb contradictions are well demonstrated by G. Pollock.

NOTES

1. The expression comes from the artist Judy Chicago. It is quoted by Amelia Jones in her text : « Les Politiques sexuelles de *The Dinner Party*. Un contexte très critique » (1996-2005), p. 147. A. Jones comes by this expression from a text by Lee Wohlferf, "Sassy Judy Chicago Throws a Dinner Party, but the Art world Mostly Sends Regrets", in *People*, 8 December 1980, p. 156.
2. Lippard, Lucy R. « Un Changement radical : la contribution du féminisme à l'art des années 1970 » (1980), *Ibid.*, p. 82
3. *Ibid.*, p. 81
4. Lippard, Lucy R. « Ce qui a changé depuis *Changing* » (1976), *Ibid.*, p. 36
5. Lippard, Lucy R. « Un changement radical : la contribution du féminisme à l'art des années 1970 » (1980), *op. cit.*, p. 77
6. Jones, Amelia. « Les Politiques sexuelles de *The Dinner Party*. Un contexte très critique » (1996-2005), *Ibid.*, p. 110
7. Lippard, Lucy R. *Ibid.*, p. 89