In the Gaps of Knowledge

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RÉFÉRENCE

Bounoure, Vincent. *Le Surréalisme et les arts sauvages*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 2001, (L'Ouverture philosophique)

Bréhant, Cécile. *Pierre Roy et les marges du surréalisme*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 2001, (Espaces littéraires)

L'Art et l'hybride, Saint-Denis : Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 2001, (Esthétiques hors cadre)

Pablo Picasso : le masque ou les enfants de la grande qualité, Paris : Somogy, 2001

Pablo Picasso : la peinture seule 1961-1972, Paris : Réunion des Musées Nationaux ; Nantes : Musée des beaux-arts, 2001

- 1 “Because history is uttered from the place where the historian stands, it cannot totally ignore the change in artistic practices; instead of favouring stylistic continuities, a whole raft of research is now focused on dissimilarities, and on what shatters the logic of series and challenges their hypothetical coherence” (p. 165), writes Pierre Sorlin in his contribution to the collective work *L'Art et l'hybride*, whose brief, in a nutshell, is to rethink art on the basis of the theme of the hybrid. As taken in works of the theatre, literature, film and the visual arts, where its frequency betrays the attraction of the other, of the “differential”, of the impure, and of the discontinuous, hybridity turns out to be a complex figure but one capable of shedding light on the diversity of art by bringing out the relevance of the transactional forms of creation. The hybrid notion is essentially protean and multiform and, as such, acts as an agent revealing the “mobility of boundaries”; nor does it fail to question the historical and aesthetic methods for approaching the arts—methods whose presuppositions do not roundly stand up to the irregularities, frictions and “unlikely encounters” at work in contemporary artworks. This comparison between the diversity of art and the possibility of a knowledge about art

is just one of the interesting points about the lines of thought developed by the different authors of this book.

- 2 Still on the subject of the hybrid, Tiphaine Samoyault notes that “writing novels or poetry is aimed at discovering [from language] a secret which the language of knowledge does not yield.”(p.183). The language of knowledge is also the language that is railed against by Vincent Bounoure, whose writings on the (so-called) primitive arts are now compiled between two covers, with the exception of *Vision d’Océanie*, his most developed work on the subject. It was as a Surrealist poet that Vincent Bounoure broached the arts of the southern seas, and more rarely the arts of Africa, by way of articles published from the 1960s onward in the magazine *L’Œil*, and more recently in specialized magazines such as *Arts d’Afrique Noire*. *Arts premiers*. Vincent Bounoure has a store of erudition that is well served by outstandingly beautiful writing. His studies on distant arts challenge the might of a unitary and preconceived knowledge, denying any value to stylistic classifications, to the interplay of influence and dissemination, and to the determination of origins in the birth of forms, all so many methodological procedures which annex and fix their object, and relieve it of any possibility of development. Conversely, V. Bounoure emphasizes the role of works, their destination, and their power of expression in the human communities where their action occurs. Art is primarily a symptom of man’s humanity. In an article published in 1970, in which he examines the *korwars*, a traditional art of Geelvink Bay, V. Bounoure first talks about the role of these sculptures among the inhabitants, their power, the magical-cum-emotional conditions of their making, and their specific status in the context of religious beliefs, showing that it is indeed their calling which lends meaning to the visual formulae they comply with. Each one of his writings about the primitive arts thus tends to reassert the inane of speculations about the stylistic features of works of art, a sort of analysis which, he says, skirts round its object. In the first essay in the book, devoted to anthropology (published in 1970 in the *Encyclopédie Weber*)—a strikingly topical text, given the interest in the so-called ‘primary’ arts (*arts premiers*), multiculturalism and the disciplinary association between art and anthropology, Bounoure speaks out in favour of anthropology as “pure experience. Experience of the question focusing on man, experience of the possibility of a knowledge about man” (p.35). Art has a prominent place in this anthropology, as an expression of human wishes and desires.
- 3 If Vincent Bounoure was an ardent champion of Surrealism, Pierre Roy, to whom Cécile Bréhant devotes a monographic study, was certainly not on the sidelines. Born in Nantes in 1880, the painter Pierre Roy bestrode the first half of the 20th century, divided between modernity (his participation in Surrealism between 1924 and 1928) and tradition (his position regarding the return to order). The author, who is eager to rehabilitate an artist who has been more or less relegated to the proverbial dustbin of history, retraces his career with the help of archival documents, including the artist’s handwritten correspondence, and analyses his work on the basis of sources and a corpus of specific forms and themes. In the case in point, the historical approach tallies with the rediscovery of an artist, as well as with the assessment of his stance in relation to the events and movements writ large by art history. The study is an interesting one, for, in addition to the fact that it helps us to gain a better knowledge of an artist on the fringe, it refers back to a situation, that is complex in a different way, to do with art in France in the 1920s and 1930s, reminding the reader, for example, of the role of the art critic Waldemar George, who was then very influential in the official art scene. As a backer of

Pierre Roy, whom he turned into a representative of magic realism, for, in him, he saw an artist of the marvellous and amazing, but one well-removed from Surrealism, the critic was also in at the start of Roy's American career, contributing to the fame of trans-Atlantic painting, along with Joseph Brummer. The re-appraisal of a non-innovative artist, who stood out against the '-ism' game, as the author clearly demonstrates, does, needless to say, pinpoint the shortcomings of history based on the election of groundbreaking movements, but also runs the risk of succumbing to the hazards of relativism. In this rigorous book, in which we must nevertheless regret the dearth of illustrative material, Cécile Bréhant has managed to sidestep just this.

- 4 Writing on art becomes still further diversified in two recently published books about Picasso. The first is the catalogue of the exhibition held at the Nantes Museum of Fine Arts on Picasso's painting from 1961 to 1972. Criticism has long rejected the artist's latterday manner, we are reminded by Guy Tosatto, who also clearly specifies that Picasso set himself "deliberately in a somewhat awkward position in relation to the avant-garde logic of the day". So, this time around, the understanding of the oeuvre does not borrow either from the history of styles or from modernity. The phenomenological reading put forward by Alain Bonfant casts us into the very core of the creative experience, where the act of painting is identified with a way of existing—Picasso himself lending substance to "solitary painting" in order to cope with anxiety, old age and death. The second book was produced in the wake of an original educational experiment: *Le Masque de Picasso ou les enfants de la grande qualité* brings together the works made by a group of children based on a Picasso mask on view in the Léon Dierx Museum at Saint-Denis on La Réunion island. Texts written by them and translated into Creole enhance a corpus of imagery, offering a different approach to the work of art, which is at once playful and invigorating, light and solemn.