“Painting as Crime”

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La Peinture comme crime ou la part maudite de la modernité, Paris : Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2001

- 1 *La Peinture comme crime* (19 October 2001-14 January 2002) was undoubtedly the most controversial exhibition in France for several years. Devised in a deliberately polemical form (agin all decorative thinking in the aesthetics, but also agin the formal or formalist interpretation of old, modern and contemporary art), it was also iconclastic, if we are to judge by the paintings and pictures (from the Happening-and in particular from Viennese Actionism-to William Blake) which it introduced into an especially "classical" and "sensible" institution, to wit the Louvre museum. Several authors became involved in the polemic against this exhibition, in particular Hector Obalk and Philippe Dagen in *Le Monde* -this latter talking about "painting taken hostage", with obvious political allusions. But in the end of the day the exhibition was a clear-cut success, with 240,000 visitors. It was also one of the French exhibitions most talked about and quoted by foreign colleagues.
- 2 The thesis put forward by Régis Michel, curator "at the Louvre" and sole author of the voluminous catalogue (another intentional affront to the customs of the profession) can be boiled down to three points. What is involved, firstly, in this experimental form of a "book-exhibition" or "essay-exhibition" is the discovery of all the virulence and aesthetically revolutionary potential of the Happening, and of Viennese Actionism in particular, as especially intense moments of the anti-formalist movements of the avant-gardes of the 1960s and 1970s. From this angle, the exhibition and the book have conspicuously renewed the way we look at these movements, by subjecting them to a

probing Lacanian interpretation and by thus breaking with the dearth of specifically psychological, clinical and philosophical analyses of Body Art.

- 3 What was involved, secondly, was the exhibition of a "history of art against the grain", looking for signs harbingering the "accursed part of modernity" (the show's subtitle), or, more precisely, an art of formal destruction, within the premises of the modern themes and intent of art, in Carsten, Goya, Füssli, Sergel, Romney and Canova. It is especially daring on the part of an institution like the "Louvre" to permit such a capsizing of chronology, used in this precise instance as a machine for producing new hypotheses and new challenges.
- 4 Thirdly, Régis Michel attempts to rehabilitate the form of the essay-exhibition. In this domain, *La Peinture comme crime* links up with the analysis of art at the time of the French Revolution (another of Régis Michel's specialties), which was applied by Werner Hofmann between 1974 and 1981 with his *Kunst um 1800* exhibition cycle at the Hamburg Kunsthalle. The catalogue for the Louvre exhibition contains a whole host of hypotheses, liaisons and diachronic ways of looking at things which can only enrich the now somewhat sterile debate about the historical avant-gardes and the not yet completed aspects of modernity. The megalomania of the author-designer of the catalogue is of paramount importance in this respect, because he manages to make a spectacular break with the institutional form of the catalogue, as he does also with the implicit self-censorship which it very frequently gives rise to. In our book, Régis Michel seems to bring this crazy endeavour off in at least two areas. He constructs one of the first coherent views of the issues to do with the impulses and abysses of Body Art, a psychic and formal vocabulary which turns this art form into one of the most intense phenomena of the transformation of the notion of human and individual identity that contemporary philosophy has, for its part, questioned. What is more, with this reminder of a subterranean, intense and anti-aesthetic tradition of modernity, he shows that art is never just a matter of forms, space, depth, colour and light, and that it is also invariably a form of confrontation with the boundary, with pure psychic and vital intensity, not to say the abyss. Rudolf Schwarzkogler checked out this abyss before he shut himself away in his madness in 1967, two years before he died. The title *La Peinture comme crime*, taken from Schwarzkogler's conceptual sketches, may thus be read in the sense of the opprobrium that the avant-gardes cast on painting, but also in an altogether different sense, the sense of an undeniable right on the part of any painter-painting having never ceased to be experienced as a crime committed against the visible world.
- 5 In this context, the re-publication of Otto Muehl's autobiography has the great merit of making a firsthand document, dating back to 1977, available once again. But beware of muddling this book with a major work on Viennese Actionism. In 1977, Muehl publicly rejected his earlier activities, regarding his multinational community, set up in 1972, as the node of a new social organization which would once and for all make the idea of western art null and void. The community-the "AAO" (Action Analysis Organization)-was founded upon a merger between psychoanalysis and Viennese Actionism. By 1975, it had acquired a very wide audience in alternative circles in Germany and even in France, and this, in turn, gave rise to the production of a propaganda literature akin to that of Maoist groups. Otto Muehl's autobiography was published in German and French and sold at the many public meetings organized by the community. With this book, Muehl tries to counter the Fascist accusations levelled at him by the Far Left and by ecologists in Germany, while at the same time giving full vent to his own megalomania (in certain

unpublished writings he compares himself at the time with Jesus, Napoleon and Hitler). One year after the publication of this autobiography, the community—which was accused of being a sect—had to break off all its public activities, and it became a clandestine organization, with ultra-hierarchical rules which go to explain the corruption of minors for which Muehl was sentenced to seven years in prison, in 1991.

AUTHORS

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Robert Fleck is the author of a "history of the Muehl community" to be published by the Verlag des Buchhandlung Walther König (Cologne) in spring 2002.