A Weird Image of Abstraction

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2023>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.2023

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2002

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Patrick Javault, « A Weird Image of Abstraction », *Critique d'art* [Online], 19 | Printemps 2002, Online since 28 February 2012, connection on 02 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2023> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.2023

This text was automatically generated on 2 May 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

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REFERENCES

Chassey, Eric de. *La Peinture efficace : une histoire de l'abstraction aux Etats-Unis (1910-1960)*, Paris : Gallimard, 2001, (Art et artistes)
Made in USA : l'art américain, 1908-1947, Paris : Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2001
Henri Matisse, Ellsworth Kelly : dessins de plantes, Paris : Gallimard, 2002

- 1 With his *La Peinture efficace: une histoire de l'abstraction aux Etats-Unis (1910-1960)*, Eric de Chassey is intent upon championing a particular thesis: abstraction, in the United States, is not a style but a method permitting a communication or communion with the beholder. Drawing on the aesthetics of reception, he doesn't shy away from quoting artists, critics and journalists, and as a rule keeps his distance from the works themselves. The introduction tosses this staggering declaration at us: "As a method, abstraction thus dialectically entails at once a distance with the image and with outward reality (the relationship is therefore one neither of imitation nor of reflection, but of modelling), and an immediacy of the image." Leaving the issue of this two-sided "image" to one side, I fail to see the nature of this immediacy of the abstract picture (more immediate than a nude woman or a battle scene?), and even less so what there is in terms of dialectics about this immediacy, combined with a disappearance of the referent¹.
- 2 This new history of abstraction in the United States charts its unruffled route from the Armory Show to postmodernism. De Chassey sees the absence of continuity between the differing ages of American abstraction as a specific national characteristic, but the same might also be said of France (Orphism - Cercle et Carré - Lyrical Abstraction) and Germany (Der Blaue Reiter - Bauhaus - Tachisme), might it not? And doesn't this concluding "abstraction once again confronted by the image" define Stella just as much as it defines the latterday Vasarely?

- 3 This course in method offers us one or two gems in a book not short of them: “O’Keeffe increasingly produces non-mimetic versions of landscapes and figures...”²; my favourite probably being this: “Yet what is involved is still not really non-figuration, in the full meaning of the term.”
- 4 But Eric de Chassey is at his most tendentious in the way he interprets artists’ writings. For example, when the Mondrian sentence, “The essential thing is that the fixed laws of the plastic arts be realized”, is seen as the affirmation of a “purist formalism”, by making “realized” synonymous with “applied”. The realization of the plastic (or plastic art, the term varies from one translation to the next) is indeed Mondrian’s project and not a working rule; this is the difference between the Utopian and the methodical craftsman³.
- 5 The author is also keen to dispel the historical misunderstanding between Newman and Mondrian: “Mondrian’s attacks on art are the direct effect of the way he was received in the United States from the 1930s on, and this prevents Newman from seeing how close he is to the Dutch artist’s options precisely when he thinks he is pronouncing against him.” Newman’s clash with Mondrian (the former reproaching the latter for a dogmatic use of the primary colours) was well enough asserted up until the *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue series*, for this alleged closeness between the two artists to merit some explanation.
- 6 There is a similar (intentional?) lack of understanding with regard to Pollock, who could declare that he had been “very representational at times and a bit representational all the time”, before there is any mention of an imitative link with nature. Pollock did indeed say: “I am (indicative present tense) very representational at times and a bit representational all the time”—this is not the same thing—and he added: “When you paint with your unconscious, figures do perforce loom up... Painting is a state of being.”
- 7 This very oriented way of interpreting the writings helps to wheel out arguments which go beyond positivism: “Because modern wars have effectively destroyed nature, the committed artist has no other solution but to resort to abstraction. Once the international political situation brightens, it is hardly surprising that this kind of conception should vanish, and that an artist like Crawford, who had only turned abstract for this reason [...] should revert to a moderately modernist form of representation”. You did read a-right: abstraction as a method to be used in time of war. Whence Eric de Chassey holds that “with Abstract Expressionism, avant-garde painters and sculptors saw themselves as those entrusted with the future of western culture”. Not even Guilbaut would have been so bold.
- 8 In a more general way, it is worth challenging our author’s emphasis, wherever he enters the fray, on reducing the great modernist narrative to a series of simplistic definitions designed for communication school students. Thus, in the catalogue *Henri Matisse, Ellsworth Kelly: dessins de plantes*, we are doled out the following in the guise of great principles of abstraction: “flatness, decontextualization, purification (my emphasis), modernization, geometrization.”
- 9 Lastly, by straying too far from the works themselves, Eric de Chassey ends up stumbling along paths as beaten and re-beaten as those leading to Jasper Johns’ flags and targets. “Pictures where the rectangular representation of the flag and the circular representation of the target merge with the very form of the canvas.” I’m none too sure that Johns represented flags and targets; I am sure, on the other hand, that I’ve never seen a tondo signed by Johns.

NOTES

1. This odd combination is a key to Eric de Chassey's discourse. In the catalogue *Made in USA: l'art américain, 1908-1947*, he talks with regard to Hopper "about an almost elitist distance in the execution" and explains the comparison between Hopper and Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans by a "selfsame combination of distance and accessibility pushed to its uttermost limit".

2. Mimetic, for Eric de Chassey, is the magic adjective (for its very modern, Adorno-like colour?) and one that enables him to make a distinction, at the price, now and then, of one or two semantic contortions, between progressive (non-mimetic) abstract artists and old-fashioned (mimetic) figurative artists. So in his pictures, Marsden Hartley "associates signs (numbers, flags, simple geometric forms) with no mimetic intention." And so, again, in the introduction to the catalogue *Henri Matisse, Ellsworth Kelly: dessins de plantes*, we read that Matisse's "fidelity to the sensation of outside" is also "non-mimetic".

3. In *Henri Matisse, Ellsworth Kelly: dessins de plantes*, still with regard to Mondrian: "Abstraction, in his work, is based on the idea of world destruction". Mondrian in the role of Olrik?