Evolution, Word, Thing

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2047>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.2047

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

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

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2002

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Eric Darragon, « Evolution, Word, Thing », *Critique d'art* [Online], 20 | Automne 2002, Online since 07 March 2012, connection on 21 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2047> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.2047

This text was automatically generated on 21 April 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

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- 1 Curated by Serge Lemoine, who has managed to bring a wide range of viewpoints to bear upon his project, the exhibition, *De Puvis de Chavannes à Matisse et Picasso*, at the Palazzo Grassi sheds abundant light on an issue that has forever been exercising historians, even though, as far as the 19th century is concerned, it has been somewhat back-burnered.
- 2 The issue of evolution has always been the real proof of the means and methods of art history, especially when the terms of evolution tend to accelerate thinking thereupon, with names such as Matisse and Picasso associated “towards modern art” with that of Puvis de Chavannes. The author of the *Pauvre Pêcheur* occupies an unusual position in history, something we are here powerfully reminded of. By virtue of the far-reaching qualities of his work, it has not offered the necessary seductive aspects to compete with the great figures of modernism. Yet it is he who, in a lasting sense, has occupied the most innovative of minds. This is the rightly chosen viewpoint, starting first and foremost with artists, the way they think, and their history, and leaving taste-related criteria to find their own level. But things are not illuminated as if miraculously, though a huge area of analysis is at least opened up for new comparisons to be made. The shift of viewpoint plays its part, and can be explained by facts concerning Degas, Seurat, Gauguin and Picasso, sculptors like Rodin and Bourdelle, and aesthetic groupings such as Neo-Impressionism, the Nabis, and Symbolism.

- 3 The outcome is firstly to be accordingly in a position to better appraise the artist, Puvis, *per se*. We might wonder, over and above the programme of the exhibition, whether even more recent experiences do not also contribute to the interest in him. These have to do with the historicity of art, its universality, and its wherewithal. The idea of influence, which is what is interesting about it, is a delicate one to deal with, but with Puvis it lends itself to such an immense arena that one has to make it vary, in particular with regard to foreign cultures which usher in major alternatives, Klimt in particular. By way of R. Goldwater and Richard J. Wattenmaker, the idea goes back to the set of problems raised by Alfred H. Barr. It is thus included in a reconsideration of the modernist legacy which needs to be re-examined. If we would leave aside the inevitable discussions on schematism inherent in stylistic genealogies, Puvis' surprising position reveals an ability to be different and interdependent, equidistant in relation to phenomena of which he was the enlightened contemporary, and resistant to the undiffracted assimilation of the values he embodies. They seem evident and yet, coming after Chassériau and Delacroix, he did not attempt to be the reinstater of the great classical *décor*. His brilliance lay in the fact that he was the planner of a new compositional order who, within major changes, between Courbet and Signac, discovered, by way of a distance to which he held the secret key, the harmonic function of art. Ahead of Manet, Seurat and Van Gogh, he invented an expressive form which transformed tradition. He brought into being an order that became an object of speculation for artists who would try to update it in the most anxious of periods, those marked by forms of anarchy and ideology alike. This order keeps its mystery, that of an ideal movement towards a reality possessing an austere input of emotion, stripped of the showy abundance of rhetoric. This poetics of the dream, of vision, and of inspiration, incorporated in the purposes of civilization, is addressed, above all, in a noiseless way to an impersonal solitude. It is not surprising that it talked first and foremost to artists, reminding them of the most exclusive methods of their art.
- 4 Another form of universality comes under the spotlight with Mondrian. Hans Janssen and Jop Joosten, both eminent connoisseurs, have methodically strived to lend meaning to the notion of evolution, as experienced, conceived and invented by the artist in a process of awareness for his own exclusive use. After the 1994 exhibition, and after the works of Robert Welsch, it has become obvious for one and all that the entire *œuvre* requires an interpretation on a par with this endless unity that the last paintings still reveal, because it is formed with the early works. By arranging the chronology in discrete units, the authors have managed to observe, through their close study of the documents (exhibitions, accounts, statements by the painter) a praxis of painting that ends up discovering, all by itself, the history that is necessary to it. Visible thinking seems to predate the theoretical formulations which, in this approach, take on a more acute function, but all this at the price of a marked reticence before the question of theosophy, whose permanence Marty Bax is intent upon underlining, for a complete Mondrian. So a synthesis does not seem out of reach and this is what Guitemie Maldonado giftedly attempts. Yet evolution according to Mondrian shrinks before the historical notion of synthesis. It remains doggedly absolute–relative, wild–and universal, as is attested to by these words uttered in 1914: “In art one should not try to produce something human. It is precisely when one tries not to recount anything, when one tries not to say anything human, when one completely forgets oneself, that the work of art appears, which is a monument of Beauty: over and above everything that is human and nevertheless the very zenith of what is human, in its profundity and its universality!”