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Excerpts from the archive of Pierre Restany and Otto Hahn

- 1 In the foreword to the collection of his articles published in 1992,¹ Otto Hahn explained that, in his early days as an art critic which coincided with the appearance of Pop art, many of his colleagues, who were “retarded in every way”, took him for “an agent of American cultural imperialism”. (p.6-7). There followed the names of Jean Bouret, who

wrote for *Lettres françaises*, José Pierre of *Combat*, and Edouard Jaeger of *Phases*. A little further on, Hahn told how he was not the only person involved in that adventure, with Pierre Restany, Alain Jouffroy and Michel Ragon crossing swords “alongside the young”. Thus sketched, we find a straightforward clash between those pro and those con, which in fact tallied with a fairly clear-cut casting of French critics. There are, however, nuances, and we shall offer a few examples here.

- 2 Let us bear in mind, first and foremost, that the year 1963—when Otto Hahn embarked on his activity as an art critic—was the year when American Pop art first made its way, under that name, into France, with the exhibition *American Pop Art*, held at Ileana Sonnabend’s gallery in May² and *De A à Z 1963: 31 peintres américains choisis par The Art Institute of Chicago*, held at the American Cultural Center in May-June, just a few months after the New York exhibitions *New Realists*, at the Sidney Janis Gallery, and *Pop Art* at the Pace Gallery. In that same year, 1963, there followed in June, at the Sonnabend gallery, *Roy Lichtenstein*, and then *Dessins pop* in November-December. In January 1964, Otto Hahn’s article “Pop Art et Happenings”³, which appeared in *Les Temps Modernes*, thus wound up a year of debate, and ushered in another year which would be marked by Robert Rauschenberg’s triumph at the Venice Biennale.

Manuscript by Otto Hahn. Excerpts from the file “Pop Art” © Fonds Otto Hahn

- 3 The eruption of Pop art gave rise to a great deal of confusion among French critics. Among the areas of confusion was that between Pop art and a “neo-Dada” (a term imported from the United States) incarnated by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Those two artists, the spearheads of the Leo Castelli gallery, who had been known in France since 1959, thanks to the *Exposition internationale du Surréalisme 1959-1960* (EROS) organized by Daniel Cordier and the first Paris Biennial held that October, inaugurated the Sonnabend gallery, on the Quai des Grands Augustins, in Paris, in November 1962, with a Jasper Johns show (November-December 1962), then a Rauschenberg-Johns show

(February-March 1963), based on which Rauschenberg in particular became the greatest American artist in the eyes of French critics. Although suspect, in the eyes of some of those critics, the two artists would hang on to their place for many years in the history of art both as neo-Dada heirs⁴ and as the “direct fathers of Pop” (Hahn, 1964), and of the “pre-Pop” artists, or a “transition”, to borrow Pierre Restany’s terms. This position, what is more, preserved them to a relative degree from the wrath of Pop’s denigrators: Georges Boudaille, for example, with his unadulterated loathing of Pop art, granted, in a purely rhetorical way, the title of “great masters” to Rauschenberg and Johns—he did not always show such a degree of equanimity⁵, and a few lines further one deemed that with regard to Rauschenberg’s *Retroactive II*, shown at the Salon de Mai in 1963, “the whole work itself has neither beauty nor rhythm”.

- 4 In France the situation was complicated by the fact that the terrain was hogged by Pierre Restany and his “New Realism” from 1960 on. Restany’s relations with Pop got off to a bad start. The affair is well known, and often recounted by critics: in October 1962, the exhibition *The New Realists* organized by Sidney Janis, for which the American gallery owner had asked for Pierre Restany’s assistance in the spring of 1961, was intended to show the French stable along with the “neo-Dadas”, in particular Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and John Chamberlain. In the meantime, Janis brought in the Pop artists who switched the situation in that comparative exhibition, in favour of the Americans—which was only fair, if we bear in mind that Restany had himself rallied the American “neo-Dadas” to his own flag in the exhibition *Le Nouveau Réalisme à Paris et à New York*, held at the Rive Droite gallery in the summer of 1961... In any event, Pierre Restany bore few grudges, because, a few months later, he published various essays which illustrated his knowledge and analysis of the subject: in February 1963 in *Domus* about Pop, which he analyzed as a specifically American phenomenon—a way, too, of more clearly distinguishing it from neo-Dada and thus from New Realism;⁶ in August, about the happening, which extended that “tidal wave” of realism—an explicit way of relegating the “neo-Stalinist” French pictorial attempts at narrative figuration to the status of “sub-Missionnaires of the Vietnam war.”⁷ None of this stopped careless –or dishonest and/or insincere—journalists from continuing to muddle things, like Pierre Schneider when he talked of New Realism as “one of the names given to that new and universal tendency” which encompassed, *inter alia*, “Neo-Dada” and “Pop Art”,⁸ and, in January 1964, Georges Boudaille, who attacked any form of figuration, and lumped Cobra, Surrealism and Pop Art⁹ together, quite indiscriminately.

Domus, no.450, November 1964, p. 39, first page of a typescript written by Pierre Restany, "Amsterdam, La Haye, Gand : la figuration 1964 est pop", [PREST2.XF04] © Fonds Pierre Restany

- 5 In addition to New Realism, it is important to take into account in France the context of the revival of figurative painting. In his article published in *Les Temps Modernes* in January 1964, "Pop Art and Happenings", Otto Hahn observed as much: "For a long time there has been the question of painting reverting to figuration."¹⁰ The figurative revival, resulting from a weariness with an especially informal abstraction, was not something French, as was attested to in 1959 by the exhibition *New Images of Man* held at New York's MoMA (Peter Selz), with the "new figuration" work of Leon Golub, Richard Diebenkorn and Nathan Oliveira on view alongside De Kooning's *Women* and Jackson Pollock's *Black and White Paintings*. In France, paradoxically, it was Michel Ragon, the stalwart champion of abstraction over the past decade, who announced that comeback in *Arts*,¹¹ and then in his collaboration with Mathias Fels. Michel Ragon became acquainted at a very early stage with the work of Rauschenberg and Johns, and commented on their exhibition organized by Jean Larcade in 1961;¹² he also kept an eye on English figurative art—Peter Blake, Peter Phillips, Derek Boshier and Kitaj.¹³ So it was no coincidence that he was more or less the only person to have devoted an article to the show at the Sonnabend gallery:¹⁴ in Pop art he saw another sign of that new figuration, a way of getting beyond abstraction which was running out of steam.

Manuscript by Otto Hahn. Excerpts from the file "Pop Art" © Fonds Otto Hahn

6 The Ambiguity of Pop

- 7 The reproach involving a lack of distance from reality was a commonplace in American art criticism of that time. "It's anti-art", was how some put it, "because Pop art copies reality without transposing it."¹⁵ This suspicion was in fact shared by many, including Michel Ragon, and constituted a major part of the debate about Pop. And this applied in the United States, as we are reminded by José Pierre in his article "Conformisme ou subversion",¹⁶ which quotes Dore Ashton, correspondent of *Arts* magazine for the United States, who had developed those arguments during the famous debate about Pop in New York in 1962.¹⁷ That suspicion showed its face during the initial disagreements within the Phases group, of Surrealist persuasion, in the matter of James Rosenquist, during the show *Vues imprenables* at the Ranelagh gallery in January-March 1963, where Pop was like an "acceptance of society" and informed much of the discussion. In *L'Express*, Otto Hahn reckoned that Pop was "subjected to reality" and talked about a "submission to literal reality."¹⁸ Gérald Gassiot-Talabot did indeed admit that Roy Lichtenstein was denouncing American society, but he nevertheless panned Andy Warhol, whom he reproached for doing nothing more than reproducing images, which was Conil-Lacoste's line in *Le Monde*.¹⁹ Conversely, in Alain Jouffroy's preface to Lichtenstein, he situated the latter in a "kind of detachment, objectivity and lucid detachment"; José Pierre likewise granted Lichtenstein, whose choice involved "a material already endowed with dramatic significance", a place in the collage tradition; he similarly acknowledged that Rosenquist—for whose catalogue for the Sonnabend show in June he wrote the preface—was proposing "an extremely interesting poetic solution", and that Tom Wesselmann was applying a "caustic wit" in his sweeping conformist views of the 'American way of life'. Gérald Gassiot-Talabot, for his part, took things further by deeming that the painter wanted to "denounce the vulgar and grotesque presented in the grossly obvious way which he used."²⁰ Most people—Jean-Jacques Lebel, Alain Jouffroy, Jean-Jacques Lévêque, and even Michel Conil-Lacoste in *Le Monde*—ended up agreeing both about the lucidity of Lichtenstein and Warhol, and about their painting which was removed from the American world. On the subject of Lichtenstein, Otto Hahn remained more dialectical, reckoning that "the effacement of

the painter, and his complete faithfulness to the subjects treated, lends an ambiguous character to his oeuvre.”²¹

- 8 When all was said and done, the main problem with regard to American Pop was that it was American, and that it had arrived at the particular moment when the French (let's call it the 'de Gaulle-like') attitude on the subject, combined in this instance with the position of the communists, especially during the period of the Vietnam war, did not exactly help the anti-American sentiment that was widespread in the French press. English Pop (Peter Blake, Derek Boshier, David Hockney, Allen Jones, Peter Phillips), Swiss Pop (Peter Stämpfli), and even Italian Pop (Antonio Recalcati) were all admissible, but America... That alliance between the anti-American communists of the Boudaille and Bouret ilk and the rightwing anti-Americanism of the reactionaries at *Le Figaro* (Claude Roger-Marx, Pierre Mazars, etc.) was bolstered by a very French paternalistic attitude where the Americans were concerned. In May 1964, at the moment of the 20th Salon de Mai, Georges Boudaille reassured his readers about that “clash between Pop artists and avant-garde French artists and others”: “I can now say that it is thoroughly reassuring for French artists.” A problem of timing: a month later, in Venice, Boudaille had to gauge the value of that altogether French assurance.

Typescript on the Velvet Underground and Andy Warhol. Excerpts from the file "Pop Art" © Fonds Otto Hahn

9 Sonabend's Hussars

- 10 As Otto Hahn observed, in France there were ardent supporters of Pop from the outset. And Ileana Sonabend had duly noted as much. First among them was Alain Jouffroy, who, at the end of the 1950s, or even earlier, reckoned that painting was “anachronistic, derisory and pathetically out of the loop. It survives”.²² And it was in front of a picture by Robert Rauschenberg, *Le Talisman*, exhibited at the Paris Biennial in 1959, that Alain Jouffroy said he had become aware of a “revolution in the way of

looking at things”, about which he would subsequently write a book.²³ From then on, the various articles and poems he wrote about the American painter²⁴ earned him the task of regularly writing prefaces for Sonnabend catalogues: Robert Rauschenberg in February-March 1963, Jim Dine in March-April 1963, Roy Lichtenstein in June 1963, and Andy Warhol in January-February 1964. “Revolution in the way of looking at things” with Rauschenberg, “New perspective of art” with Lichtenstein:²⁵ it is not hard to understand, by way of all this enthusiastic hyperbole, why it was definitely in the interests of the Ileana Sonnabend gallery to call upon Alain Jouffroy. Likewise with José Pierre, in spite of Otto Hahn’s prejudices: as associate curator, together with André Breton, of the exhibition *EROS*, held in 1959 at the Cordier gallery, where the work of Rauschenberg and Johns was on view, he systematically defended Robert Rauschenberg in his articles, especially after Venice,²⁶ and throughout 1963²⁷ he backed Pop art, which he carefully separated from the New Realists, whose art was “for the nouveau riche”,²⁸ “reactionary miserabilism”, backward-looking, populist, etc. His support also earned him the job of prefacing the Rosenquist catalogue in June 1964 for his show with Sonnabend. Lastly, though a new arrival in the art criticism scene in 1963, Otto Hahn came to notice as a result of his considerable focus on Pop and Happenings in *Les Temps Modernes* in January 1964; nine months later, he would also write the preface for the Claes Oldenburg catalogue, also for a show with Sonnabend.²⁹

- 11 As far as Gérald Gassiot-Talabot was concerned, who was initially attuned to Pop, informed as he was by a taste that prompted him at that same moment to defend the French artists belonging to what would become Narrative Figuration, his stance seemed to evolve as Pop overshadowed its own stable: from June 1964 on, he essentially did his utmost to distinguish his own group from Pop.³⁰

Manuscript by Otto Hahn. Excerpts from the file “Pop Art” © Fonds Otto Hahn

NOTES

1. Hahn, Otto. *Avant-garde : théorie et provocations*, Paris : Jacqueline Chambon, 1992, (Critiques d'art)
2. With Lee Bontecou, John Chamberlain, Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist, Andy Warhol and Tom Wesselmann
3. Hahn, Otto. "Pop Art et Happenings", *Les Temps Modernes*, n°212, January 1964, p. 1318-1331. Republished in *Avant-garde : théorie et provocations*, op. cit., p. 38-57
4. Ragon, Michel. "La jeune peinture américaine", *Arts*, n°916, 15-21 May 1963, p. 12 ; Michel Conil-Lacoste, "Américains de A à Z", *Le Monde*, 24 May 1963, p. 8
5. "Mais ceci est-il de l'art ? [But is this art?]", Georges Boudaille wondered about Johns five years previously in the same columns (*Lettres françaises*, 11 February 1959)
6. Restany, Pierre. "Le raz de marée réaliste aux USA", *Domus*, n°399, February 1963, p. 33-35
7. Restany, Pierre. "Une tentative américaine de synthèse de l'information artistique : les Happenings", *Domus*, n°405, August 1963, p. 35-42
8. Schneider, Pierre. "Le Pop Art à Paris. Quand la peinture subit la réalité", *L'Express*, 10 October 1963.
9. Boudaille, Georges. "La Nouvelle figuration", *Cimaise*, n°67, January-February-March, 1964, p. 24
10. In *Avant-garde : théorie et provocations*, p. 38
11. Ragon, Michel. "La Nouvelle figuration", *Arts*, March 1961. The two exhibitions: *Une Nouvelle figuration : Appel, Bacon, Corneille, Dubuffet, Giacometti, Jorn, Lapoujade, Maryan, Matta, Saura, Staël*, 8 November-8 December 1961, Paris : Galerie Mathias Fels, 1961, cat. pref. by Jean-Louis Ferrier ; *Une Nouvelle figuration II*, Paris : Galerie Mathias Fels, 1962, cat. pref. by Michel Ragon
12. Ragon, Michel. "Plus vrai que nature", *Arts*, n°827, 21-27 June 1961. On *Jasper Johns peintures & sculptures & dessins & lithos*, with Jean Larcade at the Galerie Rive Droite, from 13 June to 12 July 1961.
13. Ragon, Michel. "Huit jours à Londres", *Cimaise*, n°54, July-August 1961, p. 12 ; "L'art actuel en Grande-Bretagne", *Cimaise*, n°63, January-February 1963, p. 48
14. Ragon, Michel. "La jeune peinture américaine", op. cit.
15. Hahn, Otto. *Avant-garde : théorie et provocations*, op. cit., p. 52
16. In "Pop ! Pop ! Pop ! (D'une esthétique des lieux communs, II)", *Combat*, 7 October 1963
17. The discussion at the MoMA on 30 December 1962, chaired by Peter Selz, with Henry Geldzahler, Hilton Kramer, Dore Ashton, Leo Steinberg and Stanley Kunitz, can be heard online on: <http://clocktower.org/drupal/play/7661>.
18. Schneider, Pierre. "Le Pop Art à Paris. Quand la peinture subit la réalité", *L'Express*, 10 October 1963
19. Gassiot-Talabot, Gérard. "Lichtenstein", *Cimaise*, n°64, March-June 1964, p. 103 ; Michel Conil-Lacoste, "A travers les galleries", *Le Monde*, 31 January 1964, p. 9
20. Gassiot-Talabot, Gérard. "Lichtenstein", op. cit., p. 103
21. Hahn, Otto. *Avant-garde : théorie et provocations*, op. cit., p. 47
22. "Pour une révolution du regard", I, May-December 1960, in Alain Jouffroy, *Une révolution du regard. A propos de quelques peintres et sculpteurs contemporains*, Paris : Gallimard, 1964, p. 188-189, (nrf)
23. "Pour une révolution du regard", II (1963), *Ibid.*, p. 193
24. "Rauschenberg ou le déclic mental", *Art Aujourd'hui*, n°38, September 1962, p. 22-23 ; "Barge", poem about a picture by Robert Rauschenberg, *Quadrum*, [1963], p. 99-111. "Rauschenberg", *L'Œil*, n°113, May 1964, p. 28-35 ; 68-69

25. In *Lichtenstein (5-30 juin 1963)*, Paris : Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, 1963, n.p.
26. Pierre, José. "Les ravaudeuses contre le Pop", *Combat*, 27 July 1964
27. Pierre, José. "Pop ! Pop ! Pop ! (D'une esthétique des lieux communs, II)", *op. cit.* ; "Longue vie au pop !", *Combat*, 9 December 1963
28. Pierre, José. "Où va l'art abstrait ?", *Combat*, 5 June 1961
29. "La Démarche de Claes Oldenburg", in *Claes Oldenburg*, Paris : Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, 1964, n.p.
30. See Leeman, Richard. "Les Archives "Gérald Gassiot-Talabot" : mythologies, tendances, partis pris", *Critique d'art*, n°37, spring 2011, p. 116-119