Yves Klein

Eric de Chassey

Translator: Simon Pleasance

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2266>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.2266

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 2000

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Eric de Chassey, « Yves Klein », *Critique d'art* [Online], 16 | Automne 2000, Online since 07 March 2012, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2266> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.2266

This text was automatically generated on 19 April 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

Yves Klein

Eric de Chassey

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Charlet, Nicolas. *Yves Klein*, Paris : Adam Biro, 2000

Kahn, Annette. *Yves Klein : le maître du bleu*, Paris : Stock, 2000

Restany, Pierre. *Avec le Nouveau Réalisme sur l'autre face de l'art*, Nîmes : Ed. Jacqueline Chambon ; Paris : Centre national des arts plastiques, 2000, (Critiques d'art)

Yves Klein : *la vie, la vie elle-même qui est l'art absolu*, Nice : Musée d'art moderne et d'art contemporain, 2000

- 1 The monographic exhibition organized by the museum of modern and contemporary art in Nice would seem to have spawned the simultaneous publication of a rash of books devoted to one of the most popular of French artists in the latter half of the 20th century. In addition to the exhibition catalogue itself, which offers excellent large format reproductions and plenty of quite varied writings (from the occasional essay to an attempt at comprehensive interpretation, by way of personal recollections and an anthology of the artist's own writings), there has also been a biography written by a French journalist specializing in the genre and a large illustrated book—of the variety that publishers call *beaux livres*—edited by an academic currently busily writing a thesis on Yves Klein's writings.
- 2 Where the biography is concerned, let us merely note that it might well have been organized American-style, based on dozens, nay, hundreds of testimonials, with scholarly notes, and frenzied quests in the most varied of archives. It is no more than a fictionalized life, which, for example, only uses the pared down correspondence (in particular with Tantine, the artist's mother's sister, who played a major part in his life) in order to extract anecdotal and sentimental aspects—a desire to “penetrate secrets, the future, the unreal” was Klein's wish, “rooted in the very depths of [his] soul stamped by the seal of Mandrake” (p.30). One point will perhaps suffice to show what merit this book

deserves: in it, its author lays claim to such familiarity with her subjects that she calls them all by the first names. As for Nicolas Charlet's book, this is based on a close chronology of Yves Klein's life and career, illustrated by good and sometimes previously unpublished illustrations (sadly, a little blurred by a pretentious layout), and enlightened by often sensitive interpretations, albeit not always free of contradictions [monotony is seen at times as a flaw and at others as an asset, the works are at times self-sufficient and at others in need of words to "assist the silence of painting" (p.129)].

- 3 Books on this artist hitherto available in France were essentially those published for the monographic exhibition at the Georges Pompidou Centre in 1983¹. The exhibition held in Oslo in 1997 did, indeed, shed much light on Yves Klein's œuvre, and on his monochromes specifically, but it offered a catalogue that was, in the end of the day, somewhat disappointing². Recent publications still depend markedly on accounts by the artist himself (which are, needless to say, far from being exempt from manipulation, witting or otherwise, and require a slightly more detached analysis), as well as on those—like an additional filter—of Pierre Restany (whose anthology of recently published critical writings essentially gathers into a single volume books that have been published but are unavailable, rather than original articles). This reliance is also often combined with a somewhat unbridled lyricism, probably explained by the fact that Yves Klein is "neither Marxist nor abstract, neither atheist nor formalist", which doubtless "irks a whole chunk of the right-thinking intelligentsia" (Charlet, p. 9), but should not, for all that, condone dispensing with the minimal demands of art history and theory.
- 4 All these books show that it is hard to unravel the threads of both legend and objectivity in an œuvre marked by the self-construction of a personal myth, backed up by fictional accounts masquerading as truth, and on chronological distortions (as illustrated by the controversy with Takis, who showed at the Iris Clert Gallery three pedestal-less magnetic sculptures suspended in midair, on 15 July 1959, which spurred a letter predating 21 May from Klein in which he claims credit for the invention of this process, and not without ill will (Kahn, pp. 262-264). From this viewpoint, it is most regrettable that the rare earlier examples of a more distanced approach to the figure of Klein have scarcely been followed up. There is thus cause for hope that Jean-Marc Poinso's articles on the *Le Vide* exhibition at the Iris Clert Gallery in 1958 and the *Monochrome und Feuer* exhibition in Krefeld in 1961 (articles included in the Nice catalogue) will bestir a close examination of the artist's whole exhibition strategy. The same goes for the more general analyses put forward by Denys Riout (in *La Peinture monochrome*, Nîmes: Jacqueline Chambon, 1996, pp. 15-37), which focus the attention on the way Klein pulled out all the stops to respond to the observation that "when wrenched from the issues of the picture, monochrome propositions invite the viewer to invent a new attitude, vital for the artist's desire and the beholder's mind to be able to meet" (p.22). As these examples demonstrate, consideration of Klein's work has everything to gain from being reinstated within its context, beyond the "new realism" to which it is on the whole reduced under the authoritative aegis of Pierre Restany's discourse (Nicolas Bourriaud's firm intent to link him with economic and entrepreneurial considerations is also an interesting avenue). This would, for example, avoid making something exceptional of the refusal of the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles in 1955 to hang *Expression du monde de la couleur mine orange*, while François Morellet and Elsworth Kelly had had similar adventures.

- 5 This would be especially worthwhile in respect of the artist's writings, which are too frequently seen as isolated scraps of genius, whereas they are clearly permeated by a rhetoric that is shared by more than a few of his contemporaries and predecessors.
-

NOTES

1. Exhibition catalogue *Yves Klein*, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou, 1983, as well as Millet, Catherine. *Yves Klein*, Paris: Artpress/Flammarion, 1983, and Restany, Pierre. *Yves Klein*, Paris: Ed. du Chêne, 1982 (revised edition of an earlier work)
 2. Exhibition catalogue *Yves Klein*, Oslo: Museet for Sammtidkunst; Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art; Tampere: Sara Hilden Museum, 1997
-

AUTHORS

ERIC DE CHASSEY

Simon Pleasance