After the War

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Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965, Munich : Prestel ; Haus der Kunst, 2016. Sous la dir. d'Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, Ulrich Wilmes

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Art in Europe, 1945-1968: Facing the Future, Tiel : Lannoo ; Bruxelles : Bozar ; Karlsruhe : ZKM Centre for Art and Media, 2016. Sous la dir. d'Eckhart Gillen, Peter Weibel

Opérations cartographiques, Arles : Actes Sud : Ecole nationale supérieure de paysage, 2017. Sous la dir. de Jean-Marc Besse, Gilles A. Tiberghien

- 1 Some of the history of the post-Second World War period remains to be written. It is in the throes of being prepared. While the people involved in that period are gradually disappearing, while archives are being opened up, and while the context of the Cold War and national cultural policies are being clarified, in particular where Germany and the United States are concerned (through the role of the CIA in particular, and a “de-Nazification” programme which is even more ambiguous today than it was yesterday), many certainties currently taken for granted are now wavering. Like the tip of the iceberg, this historiographical revival has been illustrated by two impressive exhibition catalogues, *Facing the Future: Art in Europe 1945-1968* and *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965*. These exhibitions come in the wake of various important works which have been published in the past decade, such as those by Laurence Bertrand Dorléac in France;¹ and in the wake of the period of pioneering (and controversial) exhibitions, such as *Les Années 50* in 1988 at the Centre Pompidou-National Museum of Modern Art, when one still thinks of the beautiful exhibitions of Maurice Fréchuret, where France and Europe are concerned (1946, *l'art de la reconstruction*),² and Eric de Chasse, covering a larger territory (*Repertir à zero*).³ More recently, at the Reina Sofia

Museum in Madrid, María Dolores Jiménez-Blanco has radically re-visited the ways in which art under the Franco dictatorship was interpreted, with *Campo cerrado: Arte y poder en la posguerra española* (1939-1953),⁴ an exhibition informed by a powerful museographical slant, consisting in presenting numerous documents putting works often unknown outside Spain in some historical perspective. The example of this show, operating like a research laboratory, sufficiently demonstrates how each place, beyond the case of Spain under Franco, has its own “modernity” and time-frame. It also shows how our mapping of the period, long summed up by a Europe/United States axis, and an angle of confrontation, must be considerably rethought. Relieved of any centre and theme, in a word, shattered.

- 2 In this context, faced with the diversity of the way the issue is treated, a seemingly simple question emerges: what are the geographical and chronological territories of the “postwar period”? In other words, where and when did the war end? The answer to this unambiguous question will perforce be plural. Certainly not in 1945. Certainly not with the capitulation of Nazi Germany, we might even risk declaring after reading *Postwar*. Choosing as an emblem the term *postwar* is first and foremost to postulate that the war carried on in minds, works, and memories after the official end of the worldwide conflict, a little in the way in which “postcoloniality” describes the ongoing nature of colonial thought patterns after countries achieved independence. In his introduction, Okwui Enwezor furthermore emphasises that de-colonization, wars of independence, and the non-aligned movement all represent a major fact of the period—by the same token as the division of the world into two Blocs. Anyone who today thinks about shifting the centre of and displacing artistic hubs, networks and standards will be acquainted with Enwezor’s work on this subject; and anyone who visited the 2012 Paris Triennale which he curated (*Intense Proximity*), or the 2015 Venice Biennale (*All the World’s Futures*) will not be surprised to see him bring together, at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, some 218 artists coming from 60 countries, from the Pacific (Japan) to the Atlantic (Europe). Sixty countries, including Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Iraq, so many territories about which the European art historian can usually only express his ignorance for the period 1945-1965.
- 3 So Munich was a place of discoveries and the catalogue illustrates as much. But is it a basically French cultural feature to be surprised to see a work organized on the basis of disputable categories, perhaps better received in the Anglo-Saxon world, such as “Cosmopolitan Modernisms”, which brings together many of those people who have literally remained “foreigners” for us, for different reasons? If we can only welcome the many case studies, and Enwezor’s determination to be done with the “black marks” of a canonical art history whose supremacy wavers in every respect, and if we properly understand what powerful gesture is represented by this attempt at polyphonic and open writing in the building of the old Haus der Deutschen Kunst, with its sad memories, the exhibition markedly confronts the contradictions and break-up of any global narrative.
- 4 The extent of the study perimeter may have a perverse effect, over and above the initial and praiseworthy desire for openness: reducing the other, our stranger, to a vignette which tends towards caricature. This is also the impression that is sometimes given by the catalogue *Facing the Future*, whose chronological markers, which are very vast and on the face of it evident, are nevertheless challenged in the introduction by Eckhard Gillen and Peter Weibel. This introduction takes the form of a history of art of the early 20th century dealt with at a clip, a teleological history, with plenty of oh-so-simplistic diagrams. The choices of the works, some of which date from the war, raise questions;

and on this side of history, 1968 is quite abrupt, when the progress of cultural history invites us to think of “the 1968 years” on a European scale. What, in fact, do art in 1945 and art in 1968 have in common? The radical changes which the period underwent, both artistically and politically, make the attempt to present an exhibition of it quite adventurous and in the end lend themselves to the establishment of commonplaces. The catalogue, which has neither bibliography nor a list of works, is thus divided into six sections: “Prologue: the End of War”, “Mourning and Memory”, “Cold War”, “New Realisms”, “New Idealisms”, and “1968: the End of Utopia?”. Such categories, already well and perhaps even too staked out, do not enable readers to work on the idea of network and communication (or of a break in communications) which any connected history should deal with. Conversely, they encourage us to separate artists and practices, in a word, to lose the thread. An example: Hannah Höch is present in the “Prologue” with her large funereal picture *Trauernde Frauen* (c. 1945), when her postwar collages, still too little known, even though they had been shown in exhibitions, are absent. This is harmful, because it is indeed Hannah Höch’s Dada past and her practice of photomontage which, in the late 1950s, attracted to her young artists keen to connect with those forgotten experiments. *Facing the Future* does not really succeed in letting readers feel what a terrible rupture the war represented, what a blanket of silence the totalitarian and authoritarian systems cast, for many years, over a part of art which is nowadays called “modern”. So the question of memory, which can be understood in several ways, and was so full of meaning during the 1950s and 1960s, should not only focus on the dead, the Holocaust (long repressed, incidentally), and battles, but also on that part of modern art which was reduced to ashes, lost, and destroyed, and would remain inaccessible for years. Our array of “avant-gardes”, and our genealogy of the 20th century are decidedly not the same as those which were common currency after the devastation of the Second World War.

- 5 There are other pitfalls. If the choice of the European geographical context (West and East) is included in a general re-reading of the period, contesting a so-called North American supremacy even when, in the facts, there had long been neither winners or losers, it is hard to accept that exchanges with the United States are hardly referred to. It is also hard to understand that the state of communications between East and West received so little attention. An essay on “Polish Art”, a subject which is as if keenly protected, is not enough to get us out of this dead end. The reader keen to know more about the place, in Europe as it so happens, of Władysław Strzemiński and Alina Szapocznikow will remain confined to “national” issues. It is nevertheless obvious that each nation does not tally with an art, and that the very idea of a “national school” cannot properly have any clout today. Last of all, a bothersome imbalance appears in the contents of this catalogue, reflected by the relative dearth of works from the late 1940s and the early 1950s. For instance, CoBrA is not the subject of any study. This oversight is symptomatic of the few university research projects about the movement, which was nevertheless a thoroughly major feature of postwar Europe, including in its individual extensions. CoBrA, which was transnational, both spontaneous and cultivated, and revolutionary while keeping a healthy distance from political parties, probably does not correspond to the accepted categories. It dodges the division between so-called “geometric” and “lyrical” abstraction, Socialist Realism, a return to the object, and the birth of performance. Putting CoBrA in its historical and cultural context, linking, for example, Asger Jorn to the memory of the Bauhaus (through his correspondence with Max Bill, and the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, among others),

cannot be done without creating a meeting between realities which are allegedly opposed by the vulgates of art history. Here, as elsewhere, everything is a matter of mental schemes, limits, boundaries, and territorial representation. In a nutshell, cartography. In *Opérations cartographiques*, Jean-Marc Besse and Gilles A. Tiberghien explain that maps are not to be confused with territories, and underscore what temptations and challenges of power inform them. They appropriately quote this comment by Italo Calvino after his visit to the exhibition *Cartes et figures de la Terre*, which was held in 1980 at the Centre Pompidou: “It is only through the progress of explorations that the unexplored acquires its right of citizenship in maps. Before, what one did not see did not exist.”⁵ We could probably say as much about the practice of the exhibition. For the post-Second World War period, in particular, it would seem that, nowadays, exhibiting implicitly means mapping.

NOTES

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2. *1946 : l'art de la reconstruction*, Geneva: Skira ; Paris : RMN, 1996. Ed. by Maurice Fréchuret
3. *1945-1949. Repartir à zéro : comme si la peinture n'avait jamais existé*, Paris: Hazan; Lyon: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 2008. Ed. by Eric de Chassey, Sylvie Ramond
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5. Calvino, Italo. “The Traveller in the Map”, *Collection of Sand*, translated from the Italian by Jean-Paul Manganaro, Paris: Gallimard, 2002, (Folio), p. 37