The Great Laboratory of the South

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Traducteur : Simon Pleasance

Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2579>

DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.2579

ISBN : 2265-9404

ISSN : 2265-9404

Éditeur

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

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 avril 2012

ISBN : 1246-8258

ISSN : 1246-8258

Référence électronique

Pierre Wat, « The Great Laboratory of the South », *Critique d'art* [En ligne], 39 | Printemps 2012, mis en ligne le 01 avril 2013, consulté le 27 avril 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2579> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.2579

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 27 avril 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

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RÉFÉRENCE

L'Art contemporain et la Côte d'Azur : un territoire pour l'expérimentation 1951-2011. Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2011

- 1 *L'Art contemporain et la Côte d'Azur*: this title might be somewhat perplexing, were it not embellished by a subtitle: *un territoire pour l'expérimentation 1951-2011*, which, as if by surprise, shifts the initially dreaded tourist angle. What do we have here? We have a hybrid object.¹ Not a real catalogue, even though it is generously illustrated and published in tandem with a series of exhibitions organized at the Villa Arson² (Nice), the Château de Villeneuve/Fondation Emile Hugues³ (Vence), the Musée d'art moderne et d'art contemporain⁴ (Nice), the Musée Jean Cocteau⁵ (Menton), the Musées nationaux du XX^e siècle des Alpes Maritimes⁶ and at Eco'Parc⁷ (Mougins). So it is a collective book, the brainchild—this is worth emphasizing because it is not that frequent—of patrimonial institutions keen to accompany their exhibitions with research and appraisal, so that these two complementary ways of seeing things would give rise to a critical overview. The fact that the book ends with a very lengthy (pp. 317-375) and noteworthy “Chronology” (by Sylvain Raybaud) of the main artistic and cultural events occurring on the Côte d'Azur during these sixty years clearly indicates its goal: to become a reference tool while at the same time, by way of the host of viewpoints broached in the dozen essays, helping to open up an area of research going beyond any mere assessment.
- 2 Such a project only becomes meaningful if we understand what it has to be constructed against, which is to say, against what images, and what myths, be these derogatory or overwhelming. Because if making the Côte d'Azur since the end of the Second World War an object of Art History presupposes stripping it of its tourist aura, with all that this includes, for better or for worse, working on this same region from 1951 on implies, above all, an attempt to show that something did still come to pass there after the Golden

Age—that era when Mediterranean rhymed with modernity. As Laurent Jeanpierre and Christophe Kihm aptly write in the introductory text: “In 1951, the period of triumphant modernism came to an end. The avant-gardes were retiring. They no longer held the job of guide which had enabled them to hold sway over the arts. But Nice and its back-country then offered themselves as a special theatre for some of their survivals” (p. 11). This, then, is the challenge of this compilation: to demonstrate that, far from being the sunny retirement home for an ageing modernity, this region would become the territory not only of its survival, but also of its renewal. To borrow André Chastel’s words, the Côte d’Azur was “the great studio of modern art”. It is a matter of showing, proof at the ready, that it has become the laboratory of contemporary art.

- 3 It actually has to be said, faced with the deafening list of those who, either because they were from Nice or its region, or because they worked there, are part of what has been known, since the 1960s, as the Ecole de Nice, that this small corner of the world has had—and still does have—a capacity of attraction which merits examination. Yves Klein, Arman, Ben, Claude Viallat, Hans Hartung, Nicolas de Staël, Ghada Amer, Philippe Ramette, and Philippe Mayaux are just some of the names (to mention just artists, when we should be talking about writers, gallery owners and many others, all breathing life into gathering places and even bistros, whose social role as meeting-places for artists is no less quintessential than that of museums), among those that have forged this region, and been forged by it.
- 4 The studies which represent the bulk of this volume rightly emphasize two features: the plurality of practices and their basically experimental dimension. What is thus involved is painting, be it Matissian and colourful, or makeshift and radical, in the manner of Supports/Surfaces (Ariane Coulandre, Maurice Frechuret, Denys Riout). But also involved are readymades (Jean-Michel Bouhours), performances (Eric Mangion), photography (Régis Durand, Quentin Bajac), video art (Mathilde Roman), film (Kaloust Andalian), architecture (Gérard Monnier), and music and sound (Philippe Robert, Emmanuel Holterbach). A way of looking at this region like a microcosmic version of a national, or even international phenomenon. As Quentin Bajac nicely puts it, borrowing Scott Fitzgerald’s expression, “a playground for the world”. The place which everyone passes through, and where everything is invented.
- 5 Nevertheless, even if this publication does not really produce a line of thinking, in reading this apology for the great laboratory of the South, you find yourself saying that such a study is also valid for what it does not explicitly say, or, more exactly, it becomes thoroughly interesting as a counterpoint to more classic forms of art history, which see the study of contemporary art in its national dimension or, as has become the norm these days, its worldwide dimension. On reading this regional history, what comes across is that the power of a territory owes nothing to any kind of spirit of the place or to the mildness of its weather, but comes from the way in which some of its leading figures have turned it into a hub of creative activity, and have done so all the more forcefully because what was involved there was a counter-hub. Because—and this is probably the most interesting thing to bear in mind—creative activity on the Côte d’Azur, well removed from Parisian creativity while on vacation, was and remains another track when compared with the centralizing one, perceived as hegemonic, of the French capital, which, for a long time now, has no longer been the world’s art capital. With regard to Paris’s long history of decline as the capital of modern art, this book adds an extra chapter, which reminds us that certain avant-garde strategies were intentionally devised upon this geographical off-

centering. It was already known that the tension within the Supports-Surfaces group, which explains why its existence was as turbulent as it was fleeting, was to a great degree linked with the clash, within it, between “*niçois*” and “*parisiens*”. This book tells us that this territory was—and still is—well-versed in the geopolitics of art: an experimental and subversive way of seeing art in a region deliberately thought of as an elsewhere of contemporary art.

NOTES

1. *L'Art contemporain et la Côte d'Azur* took shape within the eponymous association, which organized the exhibitions, a conference, and the publication. The website www.artcontemporainetcotedazur.com outlines the programme in detail.
2. “Le Temps de l'action – Acte I”, “Le Temps de l'écoute” et “Le Temps du territoire – Emmanuel Régent – L'Architecture contemporaine” (24 June-30 Oct. 2011)
3. “Attention à la figure” (25 June-7 Nov. 2011)
4. “La Couleur en avant” (25 juin-27 Nov. 2011)
5. “Montrer sa nuit en plein jour” (24 June-10 Oct. 2011)
6. “La Peinture autrement”: “Volet 1” at the Musée national Fernand Léger (Biot); “Volet 2” at the Musée national Marc Chagall (Nice); “Volet 3” at the Musée national Pablo Picasso, La Guerre et la Paix (Vallauris)
7. “La Sculpture autrement” (19 June-2 Oct. 2011)