

French-American Connections, for a Re-activated Controversy

Marie de Brugerolle

Translator: Simon Pleasance



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Delfiner, Judith. *Double-Barrelled Gun : Dada aux Etats-Unis (1945-1957)*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2011, (Œuvres en sociétés)

Didelon, Valéry. *La Controverse Learning from Las Vegas*, Wavre : Mardaga, 2011, (Architecture)

Art et science-fiction : la Ballard Connection, Genève : Mamco ; Paris : Centre national des arts plastiques, 2011

- 1 Three recent publications shed new light on the links, transmissions and infiltrations of tendencies, themes and concepts which constructed modernity, and which still inform it, especially in the United States. They deal with the posterity of *La Controverse : Learning from Las Vegas* and its retroactiveness, the “double effect” of Dada (*Double-Barrelled Gun*), and the shift of “points of coordination” away from a certain artistic grammar due to the contribution of what was long regarded as a subculture, science fiction (*Art et science-fiction : la Ballard Connection*).
- 2 The authors, Valéry Didelon, Judith Delfiner and Valérie Mavridokaris, have all in their own ways managed to revive a line of thinking about history by finding innovative angles and forms which give a new lease of life to art history by taking it in an opposite way, imagining as from today the impact of forms of earlier thinking.
- 3 The “controversy” referred to in the title situates *Learning from Las Vegas* as a polemical object. The author, an architect by training, borrows the thread of a history: that of a pair of American architects, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, and of the eponymous book which they wrote in 1972, within the architectural literature. The book is enthralling. The style is unusual. The author starts out from his educational experience

through this ground-breaking text, and uses the first person singular. The presentation is clear and chronological. He fits *Learning from Las Vegas* into the three phases of its “reception”: “1968-1971”, “1972-1976” and then “1977-1978”. The whole helps us to understand how the criticism and understanding of postmodernism have tallied with that of capitalism. V. Didelon re-reads R. Venturi and D. Scott Brown (*Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme*) in the light of Claudio Magris (*Utopie et désenchantement*) and of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (*Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme*). He then puts his analysis within the subtle perspective not of a break between modernity and postmodernity, but, as Hal Foster put it, of a postmodernity as an “unfinished modernity”—otherwise put, linking back up with the ideals which fuelled modernism at the outset. V. Didelon actually sees *Learning from Las Vegas* in the manner of a “retroactive manifesto”.

- 4 This “retroaction” of literary texts, whose effects reach us as feedback and flashbacks, as in a David Cronenberg or David Lynch film, is an on-going practical application of obsolescence as a subversive factor. “It is when a thing has become obsolete that it can be revolutionary”, I was told by Morgan Fisher, the sole conceptual artist whose cinema is both subject and object. Valérie Mavridorakis is part of the new way of looking at science fiction as an aesthetic category. New, that is, among art historians, critics and institutions (cf. M-O. Wahler’s essay in the catalogue *John McCracken* published by the Castello de Rivoli (2011), and Annette Leddy writing about *Larry Bell* at the Carré d’art in Nîmes). V. Mavridorakis, for her part, has undertaken far earlier research. *Art et science-fiction : la Ballard Connection* is in fact more than a compilation of known writings by artists and art-lovers, because the book is endowed with a real viewpoint: that of Vladimir Nabokov, taken up by Robert Smithson: “The future is the obsolete in reverse” (in *L’Entropie des nouveaux monuments*, 1966, taken from *Lance*, 1952). Nabokov may have denigrated science fiction as a literary genre, but he nevertheless practiced it in the new *Lance*, and he admired H.G. Wells. Just like Larry Bell who, at a late stage, discovered the author of *The Time Machine*, while his own work showed surprising links with the worlds described by Wells. R. Smithson and Peter Hutchinson talked about this in their writings. What is more, P. Hutchinson established a shrewd and enlightening connection with *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961): “Larry Bell’s glass boxes with their chrome-plated edges have no substance. They go out and light up like objects seen in another dimension. In this dimension, there is no colour, just pale reflections sliding endlessly along repeated planes. Out of the corner of your eye you sometimes glimpse the fleeting flash of the glinting metal and the brownish repetitions of a face which reminds you of yours. These ensembles of parallel worlds, like a field of possibilities, call to mind the superimpositions of *Last Year in Marienbad*” (p. 244). Another author intrigued by anticipation, Alain Robbe Grillet (who wrote the *Marienbad* screenplay), also had a powerful impact on American art, especially in the case of Bruce Nauman. The same applies to connecting lines which take short-cuts, authorships which are manufactured after the fact, and the posterity which, as Allan Kaprow once told me, is not always to be found in books but in anecdotes. The great quality of Judith Delfiner’s book, *Double-Barrelled Gun* is that it describes a second Dada effect, through the posterity of Marcel Duchamp, by way of Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage.” In this respect, it seems to us that Dada, in its manifestations and its foundations alike, displays affinities both with Romanticism and with eastern thinking, and with zen in particular. And it is undoubtedly insomuch as it reconciles certain aspects of these two sensibilities that, in John Cage’s eyes, the movement represented an object of paramount interest” (p. 255). J. Delfiner also explains both Cage’s art/nature link and the abolition of the boundaries between art and life, as

well as a form of “reconciliation of opposites” close to the mysticism of Meister Eckart, to which she likens both zen and a nihilistic, but also playful, approach to language. We can also hear Hugo Ball saying that “we have loaded the word with forces and energies which have helped us to rediscover the evangelical sense of the “word” (logos), which is a complex magic image” (p. 269). At the risk of being misunderstood, this complexity and these passages are handed to us through his Duchampian wanderings in Los Angeles, his attraction to Hollywood, and the fortunes, good and ill, of the Arensberg collection which was meant to have been given to UCLA on permanent loan. From Man Ray to William Copley and Bruce Conner, to Craig Kauffman and Jay DeFeo, and the San Francisco scene and the important poet Jack Spicer, it is the whole performative dimension of language which is explored and rediscovered. Here we have *Dadaland* re-appraised by the yardstick of a saga which stems from the conquest of the West. In it, last of all, we see how, while New York “was stealing the modern art project”, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Las Vegas were inventing a still unfinished postmodernity with a creative freedom issuing from a “centripetal energy”, as J. Delfiner emphasizes (p. 583).