Conceptualising Colour with Radicalness

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REFERENCES

Darby English, 1971: *A Year in the Life of Color*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016
We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965-85: A Sourcebook, Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 2017. Sous la dir. de Rujeko Hockley, Catherine Morris

- 1 In order to seize past events and re-conceptualise them from the angle of contemporary reception, art history and criticism use various forms of recollection: dates and visual traces. In *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965-85. A Sourcebook*, Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley chose to bring together the most representative archives of the artistic and political actions led by that period's main figures. These rare documents are reproduced in fac-simile, and are supplemented by interviews with artists and intellectuals from this important moment for African-American art. The chronological choice – 1965-1985 – is also often favoured by curators (for example Connie Butler's 2007 exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, in Los Angeles) when they want to show the advent of the 1970s, the struggles that preceded and initiated them during the Vietnam War, as well as the backlash of the Reagan era. This reference book features, to the reader's delight, many unpublished sources, and the visual productions that are included emphasise the need for a direct language that shapes the political function of images and words. It sheds light on the radicalness of Black feminism which counters the racism that even the most progressive white feminists were sometimes unable to avoid when it came to understanding African-American women's specific social status, trapped between patriarchy and xenophobia/racism. The title paradoxically embraces the Freudian slip manifested in the choice of the imperfect tense to emphasise the nostalgia of the 1970s: "We Wanted a Revolution". Following the logic of contemporary reception,

one can question the choice of this tense, the symbol of a protest that is no more, and that maybe never was. This narrative-like “wanted” is a strange Freudian slip indeed, as it suddenly shifts revolution in its entirety to an unfinished project on paper. Fortunately, radicalness existed then and still does now, in artworks, political discourses and critical activism. What Black women did in the 1970s remains a unique reference model. The role of this form of protest stemming from colour is at the centre of art historian Darby English’s analysis in *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*. Issues specifically connected to racial discrimination and the will to produce abstract art that would reflect on the effects of painting and sculpture, immerse the reader in these inclusive hypotheses of modernism to their very limits. In an effort to redefine these media within institutional normative hierarchies, English conducted very thorough researches, in particular at the Getty Research Institute and at the De Menil Foundation. From the introduction, he rests his study on two photographs taken during the installation of *The Deluxe Show*, an exhibition that took place during the summer of 1971 in a cinema in Houston. On this occasion, Clement Greenberg, on the look-out for new experiences, met Peter Bradley, a fervent purveyor of artistic ideal, where chromatic ranges, by clouding mainstream abstraction, would open up possibilities for social transformation, through the reconsideration of the hegemonic functioning of the segregation (whole busloads of African-American children visited the exhibition during the six weeks it ran, as well as 5.000 other visitors). The two men exchanged an unusual token: a Stetson hat, a typically American piece of headgear, worn by cow-boys and prairie sheriffs. First it is seen on Greenberg’s head, then on Bradley’s. English’s book is a large-scale historiographic inquiry through the angle of observation. Starting with a seemingly meaningless symbol, and through a method specific to the discipline, he moves forward, clearing the ground in such a way that the previously prevalent theoretical narrative shows its own flaws. 1971 was also the year when *Contemporary Black Artists in America* was organised at the Whitney Museum in New York. A controversial project, it sparked violent protests from the members of the Black Art Movement. Taking place just a year after the Art Workers Coalition art strike, it was criticised as a means, for the museum, to enter a minefield in which it could clumsily state its fake good will: the African-American artists in question were kept away from the conception of the exhibition and were not consulted. In his comparative study analysis of these two crucial moments, English confirms that the political aspect of art is necessary in order to understand history. He too included a facsimile at the end of his book: “Black Is A Color”, written in 1967 by Raymond Saunders.

AUTHORS

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Elvan Zabunyan is a contemporary art historian, a teacher at Rennes 2 University and an art critic. Her current research, which will be published as a book, questions the legacy and memory of slavery in the Americas in relation to contemporary art. She contributed to *Attica, USA, 1971* (Point du Jour, 2017) and to a *Reader* on Adrian Piper, which will be published in 2018 for the

artist's solo exhibition at the MoMA. She is coordinating one of the branches of the European ECHOES programme (European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities) from 2017 to 2020.