Contemporary Regained

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REFERENCES

Olivier Zahm, *Une Avant-garde sans avant-garde* [Essai sur l'art contemporain réalisé avec Donatien Grau], Dijon : Les Presses du réel ; Zurich : JRP/Ringier, 2017, (Documents sur l'art)

- 1 In 1992, Olivier Zahm and his accomplice Elein Fleiss founded *Purple Prose*, a periodical of a new kind in line with *Documents sur l'art*, *Omnibus* and *Blocnotes*. These journals transformed the French publishing landscape, in which a new generation of artists and critics was emerging, and all came to an end before the end of the decade, either because they ran out of steam or because they chose an exit strategy. Olivier Zahm played the role of defector, justifying the shift of his activities towards the field of fashion at the end of the 1990s by stating the impossibility of commitment regarding contemporary art forms, which seemed to “abandon all will to create an aesthetic rupture”¹ and to resist prevailing economic and political systems, “choosing instead to add on to the symbols of this state of affairs.”² The compilation of these texts, assembled under the title “An Avant-garde without an Avant-garde”, in collaboration with Donation Grau, could partly be seen as the chronicle and the analysis of this critical and aesthetic programme’s failure. Its impetus, however, transported a small number of French (especially from the cities of Grenoble and Nice) authors, curators and artists, including Dominique Gonzalez Foerster (DGF), Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, Jean-Luc Vilmouth, Pierre Joseph and Bernard Joisten. This review of a decade of critical essays, published in catalogues and the press (with, at its centre, the 6 years that *Purple Prose* lasted) identifies a determining historical period, whose agents did not want to call themselves an Avant-garde since they rejected all historical and ontological definitions of art, and more particularly its delineation within a specific field. In the background, the autobiographical quality of the book describes, with a particularly literary eloquence, the enthusiasm of a generation in

touch with the period it was shaping, perhaps the last to witness an aesthetic project formulated by artists, critics and curators united as a “we”. The reader can identify a kind of dandyism in the nostalgic tone of the book, starting with the titles of the chapters, that seem to enumerate out-of-date ideas (“Chapter IV – Spectacle”, “Chapter V – Subject”, “Chapter VI – Community”, “Chapter VII – Utopia”, “Chapter IX – Sex”...), at the risk of detecting, in later texts, the expression of retrograde ideas, such as the moral ruin of the Internet generation.³

- 2 The introductory texts, at the beginning of every chapter insist, as significant articles have done since the beginning of the 1990s⁴, on the decision of breaking with postmodernism and its deadlock nihilism. Hence their reply to the upholders of post-marxist art theory that this least “apolitical” of generations succeeded in creating ultimate enclaves of resistance and subversion. The attitudes of artists and artworks are like the antidotes to the disasters of the times, a subject the essays expound upon with a sometimes suspect exultation. Art offers powerful centres for re-subjectification against the schizophrenia of capitalism, it cracks corporate spectacle open, opposing a figure of community to the flow and fragmentation of neoliberalism, reactivating utopias as well as intentional and ephemeral spaces for togetherness. Sadly, these modes of action (drawing on or multiplying reality, substituting political semiotics for the language of fiction or intensifying a sensitive relationship to reality), clairvoyantly predicted in the 1993 anti-manifesto written with DGF, “It's more like Post-art”, are but rarely analysed in the artworks, which moreover rarely receive in-depth attention. This could have made it possible to outline strategies in common with contemporary practices of the “post-Internet” era.
- 3 What is formulated, in retrospect, is the specific relationship of art and the *contemporary*, nominalised in the theoretical project that overlays the publication. In this sense, what is at play for art criticism is stated from the start in two noteworthy essays⁵ about the exercise of revealing the present by taking hold of the way it emerges through artists in the places where they produce anomalies and time warps. This ability to reformulate the present disjunctively, that is, being contemporary, thus single-handedly justifies critical practice today.
- 4 The volume is also interesting historically from the perspective of criticism, inasmuch as it chronicles a practice that faces its own crisis by constant questioning and reorientation, up to its very breaking point. It illustrates the elaboration of a certain style with its own characteristics, rhythm, syntax and a taste for references selected from a *wide field*, from Sonic Youth to David Lynch (*Twin Peaks*). It also makes visible a period when criticism tried to restore its relationship to philosophy, searching it for precise tools in order to conceptualise (the) contemporary (and) art, from Giorgio Agamben to the Invisible Committee. In this respect, the theories of Felix Guattari were decisive for laying claim to a “deterritorialised” practice. However, it is this very concept's legacy in the field of art and its downfall which Olivier Zahm describes in a later text (2008): the decompartmentalisation his generation sought dissolved all possibility for expertise, with the idea that “everything is part of everything else”, the concept of a creative society and the “soup of interdisciplinarity”. He finally goes so far as to imagine a “reterritorialisation” of art and judgement. In 1998, after a symposium asking “what is left-wing criticism?”⁶, Isabelle Graw, the co-editor of the German journal *Texte zur Kunst*, which Olivier Zahm collaborated with, also posed the same hypothesis, albeit with more

nuance (by measuring the consequences of interdisciplinarity, or on the contrary of a return to academism in the fields of research and critic).

NOTES

1. Zahm, Olivier. "Retour sur l'exposition 'L'Hiver de l'amour'", *Une Avant-garde sans avant-garde* [Essai sur l'art contemporain réalisé avec Donatien Grau], Dijon : Les Presses du réel ; Zurich : JRP/Ringier, 2017, (Documents sur l'art), p. 76. Initially published in the catalogue of *Theanyspacewhatever*, New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009. Ed. by Nancy Spector
 2. Zahm, Olivier. "Retour sur l'exposition 'L'Hiver de l'amour'", *Op. cit.*, p. 76
 3. Zahm, Olivier. "Note pour une histoire de la nuit" (2009), *Ibid.*, p. 162-169
 4. Zahm, Olivier. "Piercing the Body of Politics" (1993), *Ibid.*, p. 214-217 and "Chaos as Usual" (1998), *Ibid.*, p. 210-213
 5. "Qu'est-ce qu'un événement ?" (1990), p. 44-54 and "De la critique considérée comme une climatologie" (1992), p. 55-62
 6. Graw, Isabelle. "Polyphonie à propos d'une querelle de méthodes" (1998), *Une Anthologie de la revue Texte zur Kunst de 1990 à 1998*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel ; JRP/Ringier, 2010. Ed. by Catherine Chevalier and Andreas Fohr
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AUTHORS

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Julie Portier published numerous essays in the press and catalogues since 2008. She teaches at the ESAAA Ecole Supérieure d'art Annecy Alpes. She is currently the co-director of artistic programming at La Salle de bains in Lyon. She contributed to the forthcoming catalogue of the exhibition *Elisabeth Ballet, Tout en un plus trois* (MAC VAL, 2017).