Histories of Language

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Daniel J. Sherman, *Le Primitivisme en France et les fins d'empires (1945-1975)*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2018, (Œuvres en sociétés)

Les Arts à Paris après la Libération : temps et temporalités, Paris : Centre allemand d'histoire de l'art ; Heidelberg : arthistoricum.net, 2018. Sous la dir. de Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, Thomas Kirchner, Déborah Laks, Nele Putz

EDITOR'S NOTE

Every new history book contributes to rewriting previous narratives from the viewpoint of the present. Up until now we have chosen to address these updates through two-way dialogical comparisons: the new narrative versus its predecessors. But the present transforms objects and paradigms, in distinct ways, depending on the available distance. What we offer here is a sort of exquisite corpse of the present's effect on the past, in three stages or three cadaver slices, consisting of 1 to 6 books each.

- 1 In 1951, at the Cannes Film Festival, Isidore Isou screened *Traité de bave et d'éternité* [Treatise on Venom and Eternity], a typical example of "discrepant" editing because of the juxtaposition of film and soundtrack. In it, the nonchalant strolling [*flânerie*] of Daniel, an Isou-like dandy from St.Germain-des-Prés disturbing the spectators' cinematic decorum is punctuated by snippets of found film—probably retrieved from the stocks of the Service Cinématographique des Armées [the Military Film Department]—evoking situations of armed conflict in French Indochina. At the height

of the dirty war, François Dufrêne, on military service in Morocco until 1958, called one of his first “*crirhythmes*” or “shout rhymes” “Peace in Algeria”, a spectacular acoustic outburst for a war which is still not saying its name. As a prisoner-of-war at Königsberg and an erstwhile combatant in Indochina from 1949 on, Henri Chopin manipulated the tape recorder to invent audio-poems in the early 1960s, re-creating the experience of war through the acute and layered transformation of the voice. The dissident Lettrist Jean-Louis Brau, a travelling companion of Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, who was swiftly disqualified for his “militarist deviations”, as a participant in the wars in Indochina and Algeria, wrote on the spot, in the thick of the May ’68 protest demonstrations, a “digest” of forms of “youth uprisings”, linking the student protests with the radical dynamics of the recent avant-garde movements.¹ Lastly, the incantatory reverberations of the poem “Vaduz” written by Bernard Heidsieck a few years later, in 1974, in the wake of the action-poetry demonstrations and programmes, took on a dramatic topicality, once whispered: “all around/all around Vaduz/there are around/all around Vaduz/Forgotten Persons/Stateless Persons/ Exiles/ Interned Persons/ Displaced Persons/Excluded Persons/Runaways [...]”.²

- 2 Singularly enough, these specific moments of the late avant-gardes form a “symptomatic” reverse-shot, so to speak, for destabilizing the methodological and historiographical certainties of art in France after the Second World War. As micro-histories of hijacking and appropriation and, in many instances, “cultural guerrilla warfare”, as Jean-Louis Brau so aptly called them, in the synchronic period of decolonization and the exacerbation of day-to-day life in the post-war boom years—the *Trente Glorieuses*--, those certainties pointed to unexpected solutions of continuity between unresolved pasts and precarious and indecisive futures.³ As objects of negotiations for historical and theoretical constructs, grappling with the powerful ideologies of representation, and as objects of tenacious forms of amnesia, works of art are not only associated, as Hannah Feldman described it, with a war which is still not over, a war that is crumbling, but also with the crises of a public memory, with a colonial violence and with a historical “de-specification” of intellectual and cultural projects that have suffered its effects.⁴ It is precisely through an analytical operation that involves de-conditioning critical language, dismantling enduring rhetorical mechanisms, and abandoning overarching narratives, that the contradictions, ambiguities and paradoxes of this history may nowadays propose narratives that have been re-contextualized due to a subtle practice of archiving, biography, terminological criticism, and comparative knowledge. The fact that this history is currently a critical history of terminologies and adventures with words (even, in many cases, of misadventures) is not incidental. The collective work initiated by the Deutsche Forum für Kunstgeschichte Paris, for its annual theme on “The Arts in Paris after the Liberation”, clearly shows this in the plurality of voices involved. What emerges is a history of temporal diffractions and a language, which still needs to be pursued and enriched.
- 3 “Not only does the crisis have its language, but further, the crisis has been language [...]”; in the middle of May ’68. Roland Barthes read about the “event” in a groundbreaking article. The “event” would be the opportunity for a switch of paradigm, where words and writing suffer from a fundamental change, whose indeterminate part remains to be defined and “invented”, just like our inability to name both change and indeterminacy: “[...] do not wait for a ‘decipherment’ of the written description. Look at

the event from the angle of the chances of symbolic change that it may imply, which means, first and foremost, oneself breaking, as much as is possible [...] with the system of meaning which the event, if it sees itself as revolutionary, must have the task of shaking [...].⁵

- 4 The history of action-poetry (an all-encompassing and flexible definition bringing together all the various practices of the performative nature of language in all its forms, from performance-poetry to open, sonic and direct poetry, its players, discourse, inventions and “proferaction” systems, from script to auditorium), has been outstandingly undertaken by Cristina De Simone and it retraces the tensions lying at the heart of the development of an orality which focuses on its enunciatory effectiveness. The truth of the word (albeit impenetrable and illegible) is measured—as in prophetic words—by its capacity to convey radicalness and revolutionary energy in its innovative creative projects, invariably propped up by forms of political engagement. Other recent works have put their finger on Antonin Artaud’s major influence on the forms of verbo-voco-visual experiments of the 1950s and 1960s.⁶ Linked, here, to Antonin Artaud’s writings, which inform the entirety of her analysis, the practice and discipline of the exacerbated “proferaction” in his manifestations and resonances connect with the imperative, peculiar to Artaud, of a poetry which gets away from the book and “upturns reality”. The motive of an effective, hands-on word, capable of transforming life and donning the quality of *testimony*, runs through all the forms of creativity analyzed right down to their extreme variants: the silences and impossibilities of the word railing against repressive forces, thwarting artificial forms of mimesis and oncoming disasters. When poetry went out into the street in 1968 to fulfil its revolutionary experience, it remained the turf that withstood any form of undue appropriation. It withdrew from any attempt at institutional retrieval.
- 5 This attention to frameworks, discursive operations, situations where categories are constructed, relations, and “mnestic traces” permeates the whole of Daniel J. Sherman’s work, now translated into French, and not before time. Its analysis focuses on the complex firmly rooted in the epistemic reflexes of the French culture of primitivism, and ushers in a vital methodological stance which is, in itself, and once again, a matter of languages. As a word with loaded connotations, applied on differing scales and grasped in its shifts and its semantic changes, primitivism is a siren-like concept. It comes forth here in the “popular” turf in the ATP project, devised by Georges-Henri Rivière, then there in the “associations” of good taste conveyed by the new imperatives of modern luxury shrewdly represented in Andrée Putnam’s visual arrangements. Here it comes across in the subtle transgressions from the primitive to the “brut”, as theorized by Jean Dubuffet, and there in more uneasy transitions as attested to by the laboratories of the collections of the Museum of the Arts of Africa and Oceania, throughout their awkward survival. We find primitivism later on in the re-kindling of pre-colonial ideals aimed at tourist exploitation in the period of Gaullist technocracy. As a classic case of a “meta-cultural” situation (like the definition which Greg Urban uses to describe replacement objects which recount culture itself),⁷ primitivism goes hand-in-hand with forms of dissimulation, because “in the colonial system, primitivism makes use of knowledge to justify certain types of power”.⁸ The ethnology of loss and its counterpart, the ethnology of safeguard become sensitive plates for recording terminological shifts. Contradictions, not to say forms of expressive guilt, and an inability to put a name to things, or ill name them, emerge here in a conspicuous way. We should perhaps imagine a kind of quarantine of critical language. As Giorgio

Agamben advocates, “only the person who has long stayed quiet in the name may speak in the nameless, the lawless, and the people-less. Anonymously, anarchically, and aprosodically. He is the sole person to have access to politics, and the coming poetry”.⁹

NOTES

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 9. Agamben, Giorgio. *Le Feu et le récit*, Paris : Payot et Rivages, 2018, p. 108-109
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Mica Gherghescu obtained a PhD in Art History at the Ecole de Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales [EHESS], on the strength of her work on forms of languages invented by artists, concrete and visual poetry, and experimental forms of writing. She was associate curator at the New Festival in 2013, for the section “Imaginary Languages”. She was also research *attachée* for the retrospective *Martial Raysse* held at the Centre Pompidou in 2014, and she has prepared several dossier-shows around the figure of Aimé Césaire (2016) and sound and visual poetry (2017). A former fellow in art history at the Centre Pompidou, she is currently in charge of the scientific programming at the Kandinsky Library, and is part of the *Globalisation, Art et Prospective* collective at the INHA.