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The International 68 and the Powers of the Image

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Laurent Greilsamer, *Fromanger : de toutes les couleurs*, Paris : Gallimard, 2018, (Témoins de l'art)

Les Années 68 et la formation des architectes, Rouen : Ecole nationale supérieure d'architecture de Normandie : Point de vues, 2018. Sous la dir. de Caroline Maniaque
Flashes of the Future: Die Kunst der 68er oder Die Macht der Ohnmächtigen, Aix-la-Chapelle : Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, 2018. Sous la dir. d'Andreas Beutin, Eckhart J. Gillen

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Le Trait 68 : insubordination graphique et contestations politiques 1966-1977, Paris : Citadelles & Mazenod, 2018

- 1 In 2002, Kristin Ross observed a May '68 memorialization process, which had depoliticized the revolts by turning them into a cultural movement, "an individualistic and spiritual quest announcing the watchword of the 1980s, "freedom".¹ In 2018, in a new turn in the memorial cycle (with the commemoration of May '68's 50th anniversary), a large number of publications, exhibitions and debates in France, and elsewhere, have taken part in a re-appraisal of this historical milestone based on a present-day way of looking at things.
- 2 These approaches are diverse. They review the political power of images and their producers, the consequences of those radical events on the configuration of art

disciplines, the international dimension of the uprisings, and the understanding of '68 as a long "moment" linking the 1960s to the 1970s (chronologies vary from author to author). In the face of the process of de-politicization observed by Kristin Ross, this new wave of publications seems, on the contrary, to underscore the inclusion of '68's artistic and visual productions in far-left circuits. This choice bolsters the idea of a participation of the visual and of art in radical political movements, identifying its production with organized and semi-organized structures, at the risk of minimizing the unstructured relations between people, social classes and genres which also determined the '68 moment.

- 3 The far-left aspect, which recurs several times in studies on the subject, is the point of departure of the catalogue *Images en lutte* (edited by Philippe Artières and Eric de Chassey). The work, it so happens, examines "the visual culture of the far left" between 1968 and 1974. It includes an impressive visual archive of France in revolt, which connects the production of posters, tracts and pictures with the different political families on the Left (Maoists, Trotskyists, Anarchists...). This correlation fits these practices into the political praxis (showing unusual transfers, such as the genealogical tree of leftism imitating Alfred Barr's famous diagram of modern movements). It also demonstrates the sequence of facts that fuelled the revolt. The repertory of images produced and in circulation in the '68 "moment" reveals a visual culture at the service of students' and workers' demands, but also of anti-imperialism, and the national liberation struggles in the South, as well as campaigns for the environment and social justice.
- 4 *Images en lutte* shows how graphics and painting became an exceptional vehicle for the construction of a particular visual culture. Its posters, tracts, drawings, magazines and fanzines are dealt with in a fascinating collective study by Vincent Chambarlhac, Julien Hage and Bertrand Tillier. Their book *Le Trait 68* broadens the chronology from 1966 to 1977. It underlines the international impulses in the imagery of France's May '68, and analyzes the revolutionary value of these images, whose insubordination lies in both their style and their content.
- 5 Pictorial output is also Sarah Wilson's subject in *Figurations + - 68* (the translation of the 2010 English edition). Choosing as its narrative thread the relations between the painters of New Figuration and the representatives of so-called "French theory" (including Bourdieu-Rancillac/Deleuze-Fromanger/Lyotard-Monory), the study re-interprets the '68 "moment" through a rich visual contextualization of the theoretical writings of these authors. The exchanges which Sarah Wilson talks about can be extended in the first person in the series of interviews conducted by Laurent Greilsamer with Gérard Fromanger.
- 6 In tandem with the studies on the French context and the culture of the image, the catalogue *Flashes of the Future*, edited by Andreas Beitin and Eckhart J. Gillen, emphasizes the significance of gestures and actions in understanding the participation of artists in the revolt. The curators' point of departure corresponds with the culturalist readings described by Kristin Ross in 2002. But the rich set of studies and reports brought together strengthens the idea of internationalism and performativeness of artistic practices in Europe and South America.
- 7 The major part played by images—not exclusively in the configuration of imagery of revolt, but also at the service of strikes and barricades—and their producers is on the whole broached by way of an approach stemming from art history and cultural and

visual studies. The underlying idea is that images did not bear witness to the revolt. They took part in it as weapons within a movement of international scope. Otherwise put, May '68 in France, with its specific features (including the impact on the way the training of architects was transformed, comprehensively studied in *Les Années 68 et la formation des architectes*, edited by Caroline Maniaque), can be understood as one more episode in a trans-national and trans-regional revolt. This conclusion seems to be shared by all the authors (*Le Trait 68* emphasizes it most of all). What emerges is a complex and subtle evaluation of the relations with the armed struggle which this international inclusion of France's '68 implies. *Images en lutte* underscores the call for violence and the refusal to take up arms—at least in the French context and despite its inclusion in the melting-pot of the radical Left. The red line which links art praxis and struggle can be seen somewhat coyly in the other publications, including Lucas Baden's essay on *Kommune 1* in *Flashes of the Future*. Nevertheless, driven by the winds of the revolutionary movements in the South, the '68 'moment' was firmly rooted in an anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist approach, which supported the armed struggle and guerrilla warfare. So how are we to understand the role of images—as ideological weapons—in the armed takeover that the Tricontinentale movement (very present in the May posters) advocated? The painter Claude Lazar talked of a “Kalashnikov cult” in the art circles of the radical left in 1978, when the *Exposition internationale en solidarité avec la Palestine* was held in Beirut—the case study of the book *Past Disquiet*, edited by Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti.² This book offers an analysis of the years '68, in its various forms, by situating its impact on a worldwide scale and showing that solidarity and struggle still went hand-in-hand in the political and cultural worlds. It is clear that understanding this heritage and above all updating its message are still complicated matters today, despite the intention to anchor images and art praxes in the mapping of the far Left. Violence, anti-imperialism, the rejection of the division of labour, and the political action of the wretched of the earth which were part of the claims of '68 are still hard to place in the post 9/11 world, marked by global terrorism and the turbo-capitalism of the age of Trump.

NOTES

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2. *Past Disquiet: Artists International Solidarity and Museums in Exile*, Warsaw: Muzem (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw); Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018. Edited by Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti