The Art Critics' Month of May: a Matter of Perspective

Antje Kramer-Mallordy

Translator: Simon Pleasance

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/37274>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.37274

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 27 November 2018

Number of pages: 177-193

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Antje Kramer-Mallordy, « *The Art Critics' Month of May: a Matter of Perspective* », *Critique d'art* [Online], 51 | Automne/hiver, Online since 27 November 2019, connection on 07 December 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/37274> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.37274

This text was automatically generated on 7 December 2019.

EN

The Art Critics' Month of May: a Matter of Perspective

Antje Kramer-Mallordy

Translation : Simon Pleasance

Coupage de presse, Marc Brun, « Quand la révolution était à l'affiche... », [1968], p.18, fonds Dany Bloch [DBLOC.RX37(73-74)] © d.r.

- 1 Since spring 2018, events commemorating May '68 have been drawing crowds to rooms in museums, galleries and institutions, and filling shelves in bookshops. Most of these historical replays are focused on France's month of May¹, often doing the rounds of nostalgia-tinged tributes, but they also give pride of place to posters and photographs,

long since become icons of a romantic mythology of barricades—much to the joy of collectors. On the other hand, re-situating those events in a much wider chronology and geography still seems to be something alien.²

- 2 The year 1968 nevertheless illustrates a dizzying condensation of international historical moments: “56 countries, 22 of them European, were shaken by protests, upheavals and even revolutions”.³ Images are overlaid: the bloody clashes in Viet Nam, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the humanitarian drama in Biafra, the protest marches in Poland, the cobble-stones tossed in Paris, the attempt to kill Rudi Dutschke, the tanks in the streets of Prague... In France, let us recall, after the initial riots at Nanterre University in January 1968, the pace quickened in May, first in Paris, marked by the barricades in the Latin Quarter and the occupation of the Sorbonne, the Odeon Theatre and the School of Fine Arts, then, from 13 May on, throughout the country, with an unprecedented general strike.
- 3 Faced with the ubiquity of that revolutionary fever, giving rise to suppression and violence, the art world caught fire in its turn, becoming a battle-ground going far beyond the outskirts of Paris, and even managing to pierce the Iron Curtain. The year was ushered in with the revolutionary overtones of the Cultural Congress in Havana, while the Venice Biennale, the Danuvius⁴ Biennial in Bratislava, and documenta in Kassel turned into alternative scenes of protest, whose last throes were discussed at the 20th General Assembly of the AICA International in September, in Bordeaux.⁵ With regard to this latter event, Pierre Restany noted in his manuscript *Livre blanc - Objet blanc*, in autumn 1968: “Threatened with being deprived of art, the critic is anxious. [...] The president of the French section [of the AICA, Michel Ragon] welcomed his colleagues by urging them not to play at being war veterans. A most useful admonition, which gave rise to a general outcry. In the midst of the changing aesthetic phenomenon, where does art criticism stand today, or rather, if you will, where are the critics?”⁶
- 4 In fact many art critics were behind the protest movements, and borrowed from them the odd *modus operandi*: their declarations, resignations, tracts, meetings and actions in the street were all against the state powers-that-be and their institutions which were deemed antiquated, leaving no place for young artists. May '68 thus appeared like a “moment when desires were crystallized”,⁷ bound to introduce tangible forms of the socio-political utopias of a new world, which had already been prepared in the long term by the avant-gardes. From the very first events onwards, Alain Jouffroy and his fellow members of *Opus International* adopted the role of street reporter, and delivered in the magazine's seventh issue “live” comments on the theme of violence. In his article “Le monde est aux violents” [The World belongs to the violent], serving as an editorial note, Jouffroy wrote in a most emphatic vein: “We must either be brilliant together or give up on the revolution. We must destroy everything together, leaving nothing in the areas we are operating in, being ahead, together, of all the events which will change all the rules of play [...]. So this issue is dedicated to those who, standing on a sidewalk, will leaf through it, rage in their hearts, and will not be content just at that”.⁸

Alain Jouffroy, « Le monde est aux violents », *Opus International*, n° 7, juin 1968, p.10-11, fonds Anne Dagbert [ADAG-PER] © Fusako Jouffroy

- 5 But because of the strikes, the issue did not appear on the news-stands until June, just when the new general election was being prepared, when petrol was once again available in service stations, and the Sorbonne and the Odeon had ended up being evacuated.
- 6 After writing an article in the month of April calling, in a promonitory away, for a “cultural strike against the State”,⁹ on 18 May Pierre Restany, backed by François Pluchart and Otto Hahn, organized the closure of the National Museum of Modern Art, that “cemetery”¹⁰ of a culture long since left behind. But instead of the historic taking of a “Bastille” of culture, the protest act was limited to a sign affixed to the museum gates, already closed just in case, and ended with the instigator being summoned before the Sorbonne’s “Committee of Cultural Agitation”.¹¹ Michel Ragon, for his part, became involved in the discussions about reforms involving the teaching of art and architecture, which gave rise to much dispute between him and the occupants of the School of Fine Arts, as he would recall a little later on: “Needless to say, art critics were opposed even more violently than artists, during the May Revolution. Even more so because they were opposed not only by the students who were opposing the artists, but also by the artists who were being opposed by the students.”¹² Within the AICA, where he chaired the French section, his militant stance was not unanimously appreciated, either, with the result that some people did not hesitate to talk about “Ragonnerie” and its idiotic decisions of May-June”.¹³ After asserting his personal convictions, Ragon ended up by resigning on 10 June from his responsibilities as general curator of the French pavilion at the Venice Biennale, “because of the prevailing reactionary attitudes of the Government of the 5th Republic”.¹⁴ On 20 May, he had launched an appeal to the Minister of Cultural Affairs to dissociate himself from the truncheon-wielding “bludgeoners”: “We entreat André Malraux to take off his minister’s livery blemished

by abominable police repression and to come in person to the liberated Sorbonne, to mingle with the idealistic and lucid students who have believed in his books. We entreat him to come and talk beneath the portraits of Trotsky, Guevara and Mao".¹⁵

- 7 For lack of response from the minister and indignant over the expulsion of the Argentinian artist Julio Le Parc, along with other foreign artists,¹⁶ Ragon stayed away from Venice. In December 1968, Gérard Gassiot-Talabot would follow in his footsteps, by standing down from his function as head of the French selection committee for the 10th São Paulo Biennial.¹⁷
- 8 Critics' involvement in 1968 wavered between protest and solidarity, revealing individual trajectories marked far more often by adversity than by the unison of common causes. If critics with revolutionary souls suffered from "June despair"¹⁸, such as the flipside of the May '68 euphoria, people would have to wait for the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the armed forces of the Warsaw Pact on the night of 21 August to fully acknowledge the return to order imposed by the political authorities. Neither the 1956 Budapest uprising, nor the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, nor even the violent crushing of the Polish student revolt in March 1968¹⁹ had managed to provoke such a wave of indignation and international support as was to be found in missives and articles being exchanged all over Europe.²⁰ It was probably necessary to pass by way of the effervescent May experience for western intellectual circles to feel directly targeted by the sundering of revolutionary ideals against a communist backdrop. A letter penned by the Prague-based critic Jiří Padrta to Pierre Restany attests to this: "This is a fine record of this friendship with the USSR with which you have been endlessly "nurtured" for 20 years. I remember, with a certain emotion, your dear little Paris revolution that was so hymned [...] by us all—and I compare it with our experiences of the past five days. What a difference".²¹

Jeanine Warnod, « Des artistes de l'Ecole de Paris menacés d'expulsion », *Le Figaro*, 14 juin 1968, fonds Dany Bloch [DBLOC.RX37/62] © Jeanine Warnod

- 9 When it was time for acerbic assessments, Pierre Restany drew from his '68 experience a conclusion that was shared by many of his colleagues, advocating from then on that individual freedom was the sole salvation: "Real critical involvement does not consist in obeying the watchwords of such and such a party, or even of such and such a splinter group, but in going about things as a free man, and assuming one's individual responsibilities in the confused and passionate context of collective action. By acting in this way, there is a high risk of finding yourself isolated against the grain, and prey to the attacks of professional revolutionaries who have once and for all confiscated the revolution to their advantage. Whatever!"²²

NOTES

1. On this, see the programme for the events organized for the year 2018 by several Parisian institutions all paying tribute to May '68 (<http://www.soixantehuit.fr/>). This article is based on collective research undertaken as part of the PRISME programme (EA 1279 Histoire et critique des arts/Archives de la critique d'art/Fondation de France/MSHB/Région Bretagne).

The author warmly thanks the students in the Master's programme "Histoire et critique des arts" at the Université Rennes 2. See 1968 : *la critique d'art, la politique et le pouvoir*, an online publication of the research seminar in the PRISME programme (September 2017-April 2018). Supervised by Antje Kramer-Mallordy. <http://acaprisme.hypotheses.org/1568>

2. The ambitious exhibition at the Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst (Aachen) *Flashes of the Future: Die Kunst der 68er oder Die Macht der Ohnmächtigen* (20 April-19 August 2018), supervised by Andreas Beutin and Eckhart Gillen, proposes a wholesome international approach, part of a lengthy chronology stretching from 1958 to 1972.

3. Beutin, Andreas. Gillen, Eckhart J. "Vorwort und Dank", *Flashes of the Future: Die Kunst der 68er oder Die Macht der Ohnmächtigen*, p. 10

4. The invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact army occurred during the organisation of the event, "the first biennial of young East-West artists", and encouraged artists, under the aegis of Alex Mlynářčik and Erik Dietmann, to organize the boycott of the biennial. Letter from Alex Mlynářčik and Erik Dietman (Call for the boycott of the Biennial Danuvius 1968), 22 August 1968, Restany collection [PREST.XSEST05/33-34].

5. The 20th General Assembly of the AICA International was the subject of the conference organized by Richard Leeman, *68/18 Situation de la critique d'art* on 6 and 7 December 2018 at Bordeaux Montaigne University.

6. Pierre Restany, manuscript *Livre blanc - Objet blanc*, chapter "Où en est la critique d'art aujourd'hui ?", 1968, Restany collection [PREST.XSIT26 (124)]

7. Pradel, Jean-Louis. "68-78", *Opus International*, n°66-67, Spring 1978, p. 10

8. Jouffroy, Alain. "Le monde est aux violents", *Opus International*, n°7, June 1968, p. 10

9. Restany, Pierre. "Je vote la grève de la culture contre l'Etat", *Planète*, n°40, May-June 1968, p. 161-165

10. Restany, Pierre. "Une autre Bastille à abattre ; le musée d'art moderne", *Combat*, 18 May 1968

11. See also: Tenèze, Annabelle. "Art et contestation : Pierre Restany et Mai 68", *Le Demi-Siècle de Pierre Restany*, Paris : Ed. des Cendres ; INHA, 2009, p. 141-156. Edited by Richard Leeman

12. Ragon, Michel. "L'artiste et la société", *Art et contestation : témoins et témoignages. Actualité*, Brussels : La Connaissance, 1968, p. 35
 13. Letter from Jean Bouret to Jacques Lassaigue, 4 September 1968, collection of the AICA International [AICAI THE CON022-05-01]
 14. Letter from Michel Ragon to Gaston Diehl of the Association Française d'Action Artistique of 10 June 1968, Ragon collection [FR ACA MRAGO TOP003]
 15. Ragon, Michel. "Malraux, rejoignez-nous", *Combat*, Monday 20 May 1968, p. 7
 16. On 6 June 1968, on the Pont de Saint-Cloud, Julio Le Parc, Hugo Demarco, Rodriguez Cibaja, Jean-Ange M'sika and Lucien Tayeb were arrested by the police at the freeway exit leading to the Renault factory at Flins, where riots were about to break out. See in particular : Warnod, Jeanine. "Des artistes de l'Ecole de Paris menacés d'expulsion", *Le Figaro*, 14 June 1968 ; "Protestation à la suite de l'expulsion de cinq artistes peintres", undated press clipping, Dany Bloch collection [DBLOC.RX37/63]
 17. C. D., "Neuf peintres indociles", press clipping dated December 1968, Cabanne collection [PCABA.THEPO 003/9]
 18. Jouffroy, Alain. "L'Aventure 1967-68/1978", *Opus International*, n°66-67, Spring 1978, p. 14
 19. Among the rare editorial reactions, the magazine *Opus international* published a "Special Poland issue" (n°6, April 1968), though it had been prepared ahead of the events.
 20. Among the declarations of support, see among others the article by Raoul-Jean Moulin, "Aussi longtemps que durera cette nuit du 21 août", *Opus International*, n°9, December 1968, p. 13-14, as well as the report of the 20th General Assembly of the AICA, Bordeaux, collection of the AICA International [FR ACA AICAI BIB IMP028].
 21. Letter from Jiří Padrta to Pierre Restany, 29 August 1968, Pierre Restany collection [PREST-XSEST13/28-30]
 22. Pierre Restany, excerpt from the manuscript *Livre blanc-Objet blanc*, chapter "Où en est la critique d'art aujourd'hui ?", 1968, Restany collection [PREST.XSIT26 (126)]
-

AUTHORS

ANTJE KRAMER-MALLORDY

Antje Kramer-Mallordy lectures in contemporary art history at Rennes 2 University. Her research deals with the transnational movements of art and criticism after 1945, art discourse, and the relations between avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes. As part of the research programme *PRISME: la critique d'art, prisme des enjeux de la société contemporaine (1948-2003)*, which she has been coordinating since 2015 at the Archives de la critique d'art, she recently organized the international conference *Reframing the (Art) World* at Rennes 2 University (11-12 October 2018), whose proceedings will be duly published. For more information: <https://acaprisme.hypotheses.org/>.