Friction(s) in Representation: How Are We to Think about Artists in the Face of Events

Paula Barreiro López

Translator: Simon Pleasance

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/53729>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.53729

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

This article is a translation of:

Friction(s) dans la représentation : comment penser les artistes face aux événements ? - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/53724> [fr]

Publisher

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

Printed version

Date of publication: 26 November 2019

Number of pages: 29-41

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Paula Barreiro López, "*Friction(s) in Representation: How Are We to Think about Artists in the Face of Events*", *Critique d'art* [Online], 53 | Automne/hiver, Online since 26 November 2020, connection on 04 February 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/53729> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.53729>

This text was automatically generated on 4 February 2022.

EN

Friction(s) in Representation: How Are We to Think about Artists in the Face of Events

Paula Barreiro López

Translation : Simon Pleasance

- 1 In the “long decade of the 1960s”, the re-assessment of May ’68 in the light of the Notre-Dame-des-Landes and Larzac struggles helps Kristin Ross to reconsider the term resistance, so overloaded in the construction of the artistic and political consciousness of the last four decades. In her recent contribution to the collective book *Comunismos por venir*, she points out that if resistance implies that “the battle” is already lost, resisting is at least still possible against the “overwhelming power of the other side”.¹ In the face of resistance, Kristin Ross advances defence. Defending presupposes that on our side there is something that is worth fighting for. The fact of defending yourself also implies a re-configuration of values, hierarchies, and social conditions crucial for the struggle. For the Larzac farmers, defending themselves meant re-appraising their standard of living, but at the same time creating a solidarity network between town and country, between countryfolk, workers, students and intellectuals. The distinction between resistance and defence—thoroughly understood, back in 1966, by the Black Panther Party, in its revindication for self-defence of African-American neighbourhoods and values—seems to me to be interesting for cross-referencing a bunch of recent publications re-evaluating that period when mobilization was rife. These new publications analyze the response and resistance of artists to the fiasco of a period that was also one of colonial and neo-colonial wars, leading to a political awareness of the ensuing violence. The catalogue for the exhibition *Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965-1975*, edited by Melissa Ho, traces the moment of collective struggle involving artists of various nationalities against the Vietnam War—artists living in the United States. This generously illustrated volume offers a cartographic and contextual look at the committed activities of artists within the Art Workers’ Coalition, created in 1969, and those of artists including Martha Rosler, but other more unexpected names such as Dan Flavin and On Kawara, who were exercised

by a war that would be decisive for the development of an anti-colonialist and anti-capitalist consciousness in the art world. The catalogue sets the scene of the Vietnam War experience (the first such war to be televised), using a range of art productions developed during the famous years marked by the de-materialization of art. The approach is intended to be powerfully contextual, propped up by a simultaneous and detailed time-line of the war and the artworks produced. This choice attempts to present a probing account running counter to the major art narratives of the 1960s and 1970s, in which art productions (painting, graphic art, installations, performance) rubbed shoulders with many different models of militant representations under construction. This cartography nevertheless shows up one or two absent figures, such as Emory Douglas, who dedicated part of his graphic output to the struggle common to African-Americans, Vietnamese, and Latino-Americans. His presence in the show might have helped visitors to grasp the tri-continental links which the response to the war wove. If the works of Malaquias Montoya and Rupert García point in the same direction, the catalogue remains focused on the American conflict, relegating Vietnam's role to the background and with it the creation of a transversal and transnational mobilization which formed a shared political horizon for citizens/artists in geographically far apart from each other. This was also the case with Spanish artists under the Franco dictatorship (which was allied with the interests of the United States), who joined the struggle against the regime—as illustrated by Juan Genovés's book, published by La Fábrica²—and against American imperialism, exemplified by the Vietnam War. This latter contributed to a (melancholic) genealogy of the left, as it is reflected in the thought of Enzo Traverso, offering a past and a future to battles waged for social justice.³ Some of the artists confronted by the Vietnam War—as Melissa Ho reminds us—had been war veterans in Southeast Asia, in Korea and during the Second World War, but others, like Hans Haacke, Nancy Spero and Leon Golub had become familiar, in Paris, with the consequences of French colonialism and the active role played by the art world in Algeria. In *Des Damné(e)s de l'histoire: les arts visuels face à la guerre d'Algérie*, Emilie Goudal analyzes that key moment in France for the creation of an anti-colonialist and political awareness. Many artists played an active part in denouncing colonialist wrongdoing. Divided into two differentiated historical parts (the war period and the re-emergence of memories of it in post-colonial Algeria),⁴ the book, just as in *Artists Respond*, proposes revealing the traces of artists' involvement for the liberation of Algeria, which remains an historical marker for several French and Algerian generations. Unlike the context of her subject presented by Melissa Ho, Emilie Goudal provides a stylistic analysis of artists and their iconographic sources. She identifies a visual vocabulary borrowed from Eugène Delacroix, Otto Dix and Pablo Picasso, as handed on to contemporary artists in the years of the Algerian revolution. This approach helps us to conceive of a formal (colonial) genealogy. But the study deserves a more in-depth analysis of those artists' contextual inclusion in the historical moment (which goes astray in several parts of the book) in order to comprehend their significance, as well as a more meaningful set of images. Both Melissa Ho and Emilie Goudal focus their research on the artistic traces of a traumatic and distressing historical and collective experience, resisted by artists. Faced with this prospect, thinking in terms of defence would seem to me to be a way of questioning what art and imagery can do, over and above the representation/contestation of a history regarded as something external. In the end of the day, living through the Algerian and Vietnam

Wars transformed not only iconographies, if not artistic ideas and production models, but also the political horizons and social imaginaries of the entire art community.

- 2 Analysis of the traces of the Algerian War over a broad time-frame (1954 to 2014) is one of the assets of Emilie Goudal's book, dealing with the problems of constructing a memory that is still uncomfortable in France—and in Algeria—and of the gap between the generations of those who experienced the revolution, and those who inherited it. The survival of the war experience, the violence, the historical responsibilities of the old colonial empires, and the confrontation with the discourse about the French and Algerian nations are prompting present-day artists to work on history and its conflict-related memories, in order to re-appropriate a contested past which must be reconfigured and differently handed down. In this respect, the analysis of the representation of women must be emphasized. Emilie Goudal starts out from the orientalized and passive vision of the war victim, identified several times over in painting with the figure of the militant Djamila Boupacha who becomes a symbol for Algeria itself. She uses the practices of contemporary artists (like Zineb Sedira and Halida Boughriet) to de-construct the identification of the assaulted female body, by rediscovering the active contribution made by women during the war years, and by re-creating their stories.
- 3 María Theresa Alves's art project *Recipes for Survival* (produced in 1983, but not published until 2018) shares with the work of Zineb Sedira and Halida Boughriet the intention to retrieve the testimony of people missing from history. It is based on the narratives of original inhabitants of her parents' town in southern Brazil, which she re-discovered during her studies at CooperUnion. This documentary work, in the tradition of Walker Evans, brings together portraits of those inhabitants and transcribes their conversations, their fears, and their living conditions, showing the tangible reality of those whom, re-placed in the context of the Algerian War, Frantz Fanon called the "wretched of the earth" ["les damnés de la terre"] (1961). María Theresa Alves shows the persistence of the effects of colonialism and the survival of the conditions against which the "tri-continental front" fought. But if this project dates back to the 1980s, the conditions of existence described are still very visible.
- 4 The social, economic and political changes of the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rampant spread of global capitalism not only re-organized the world map, but also the models of art representation, re-appropriation and confrontation in the face of the violence of history (and its silences). The work of the African-American artist Kara Walker, and that of the Spanish artist Rogelio López Cuenca illustrate this well. Kara Walker shares an obsession with the reconfiguration of the trauma rooted above all in the history of slavery in the United States. Her artistic output, which is rigorously analyzed by Vanina Géré, in *Les Mauvais sentiments: l'art de Kara Walker*, unambiguously posits the complexities of re-appropriating history, and underscores the tensions with the models of representation and action created during the civil rights struggles in the 1960s. Defined by Vanina Géré as a "post-civil rights" artist, her straightforward approach towards racist stereotypes comes up against images of emancipation constructed by the militant left, fighting for civil rights in the United States at the same time as it protested against American intervention in Vietnam (and for this Kara Walker has been pointedly attacked by certain African-American militants). Vanina Géré's book plunges us into a detailed study of Kara Walker's work, questioning her representation of the black body, and racism, and the in-depth study of silhouettes.⁵

This book is at once rich in research (with a very well-garnished documentary corpus) and in interpretations. For Vanina Géré, this artist's approach (and, we might say, unlike the artists campaigning for civil rights during the Vietnam War years) is not tantamount to railing against racism, but to "undermining its forms of representation" (p.111), in subtle ways. In proposing highly sexualized, destabilizing, and undeniably aesthetically seductive images, Kara Walker confronts us with "our ways of reading caricatural blackness and whiteness" (p.69), and invites us to say something. For Vanina Géré, sexuality and violence in Walker's œuvre are used as "critical instruments in the face of the hypocrisy of the good intentions and the historical amnesia which are represented by nostalgia" (p.73).

- 5 In retrieving denigrating images of colonization, historical amnesia and the disjointedness of models of racism are also the strategy used by Rogelio López Cuenca. In *Las Islas*, a multimedia piece, he proposes a video plus an installation of male models clad in tropical shirts bearing images of women as objects of conquest, retrieved from the visual arsenal of colonial history. Made for his retrospective show *Keep Reading Giving Rise* at the Reina Sofía Museum, *Las Islas* connects—as Sayak Valencia explains in the catalogue—, "discourses on colonial porno-tropics with the figure of the colonizer metamorphosed as the (sex) tourist".⁶ As an heir to the institutional critique developed during the Vietnam War years, Rogelio López Cuenca works on the construction of the memory of the past, in order to show its silences and underscore its short-circuits with the present. Employing images produced by mass art and culture, with the aim of hijacking them, his projects highlight, to use the words of the curator Manuel J. Borja-Villel, the "(un)reason behind global migration policies; the historical effects of colonialism and its perpetuation and current means of self-reinvention".⁷ But, like Kara Walker, the way of seeing things conveyed is already straightforward and ironical, anti-epic and de-constructive. Above all, it stresses the loss of ideals in the shift towards the spectacular system of advanced capitalism, by confronting us with the frictions of representation and the flaws of our contemporaneity.

NOTES

1. Ross, Kristin. "La larga década de 1960 y el "viento del oeste"", *Comunismos por venir*, Barcelona: Arcadia, 2019, p. 202. Edited by Pablo Martínez
2. See also: Vindel, Jaime. *La Familia Lavapiés: Arte, cultura e izquierda radical en la transición española*, Santander: Ediciones La Bahía, 2019
3. Traverso, Enzo. *Mélancolie de Gauche : la force d'une tradition cachée (XIXe-XXIe siècle)*, Paris : La Découverte, 2016
4. "Partie 1. 1954-1962. Les artistes face aux "événements" : contester une guerre sans nom" and "Partie 2. Les Résurgences de la mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie dans la production artistique postcoloniale" in: Goudal, Emilie. *Des Damné(e)s de l'histoire : les arts visuels face à la guerre d'Algérie*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2019, (Œuvres en sociétés)

5. Géré, Vanina. "Pour arriver au politique : machinations des silhouettes de papiers découpés", *Les Mauvais sentiments : l'art de Kara Walker*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2019, p. 136-153, (Œuvres en sociétés)
6. Valencia, Sayak. "The Island is Exotic – The Archipelago is Post-Exotic", *Rogelio López Cuenca: Keep Reading Giving Rise*, Madrid : Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2019, p. 191
7. Valencia, Sayak. *Ibid.*, p. 23