Notes on the Alternative

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RÉFÉRENCE

Hélio Oiticica and Neville D'Almeida: Block-Experiments in Cosmococa – Program in Progress, Londres : Afterall ; Cambridge : MIT Press, 2013. Sabeth Buchmann, Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz

Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces 1960 to 2010, Cambridge : MIT Press ; New York : Exit Art, 2012. Sous la dir. de Lauren Rosati, Mary Anne Staniszewski

Caroline Maniaque-Benton, French Encounters with the American Counterculture 1960-1980, Londres : Ashgate, 2011, (Studies in Architecture)

NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French by Simon Pleasance

- 1 The recent publication of two books dealing with the American counter-culture between the 1960s and the 1980s, and its repercussions on today's art, brings ways of thinking about the notion of alternative back into play. *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces 1960 to 2010*, edited by Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski, and Caroline Maniaque-Benton's book, *French Encounters with the American Counterculture 1960-1980* actually both shed light on an alternative and little known history of American art, which came into being in the shadow of a triumphant art scene.
- 2 The intent behind the exhibition catalogue *Alternative Histories* is to retrace the history of New York galleries and alternative venues over six decades, from 1960 to 2010. The aim of this methodical survey is to describe the efforts made by artists brought together in often ephemeral collectives to fight against cultural conservatism and the commercial dictates peculiar to a centralizing power known as the mainstream. More than 140 places and

projects (exhibitions, performances, publications, bookstores, etc) are thus listed over a period spanning half a century of creative activity. Complete with a section containing thirteen interviews with figures who set up these venues, or took part in their organization, the book relies on firsthand sources which reveal substantial documentary work. From forerunners—like the Judson Memorial Church—to the founding, in 2010, of the online network OurGoods, which puts artists, designers and craftsmen in touch, with the aim of helping with the creation of independent objects, the catalogue tries to draw up a genealogy of these venues and spaces, from their emergence in the latter half of the 1950s to their more recent variants, de-materialized by the digital culture. Despite the way they have evolved, these places conjure up the history of an opposition to a conformist political power governed by the laws of capitalism, whose normative aesthetic tallies with the demands of a greatly expanding market. Grouped by decades, the venues record key moments in this clash: from the formation of the different emancipation movements of the 1970s, to the 1980s marked by a political and social conservatism typical of the Reagan and then Bush administrations, ending with the changes occurring since the 1990s, with the age of the Internet and technological advances. This concern to be exhaustive lends the book a format akin to an anthology, furnishing a significant set of data that have hitherto been scattered, if not inaccessible.

- 3 The whole subject nevertheless raises an essential question which has to do with the definition of the notion of alternative. In his essay “Álter the Native”, Papo Colo emphasizes the co-dependence of the mainstream and the alternative, but the book sets forth a vision of this latter as a fully-fledged entity, whose narrative currently needs constructing. As a result, the consubstantial opposition with the normative is not explored, with the catalogue outlining the major stages of a parallel adventure. The Marina Abramović exhibition (*The Artist is Present*), held in spring 2010 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, may be seen by the authors as a meaningful turning-point in the phenomenon of absorption by the museum of strategies peculiar to alternative venues, but it would have been interesting to develop the history of these complex relations between the centre and the fringe, and reveal their points of contact, and even of hybridization. The problem comes all the more to the fore because the period covered is broad: the notion of alternative is thus understood in an unambiguous way, be it in the 1960s or the 1990s, thereby freezing a movement that is nevertheless still fluctuating. Although the authors underscore this movement’s evolving nature, they do not regard as central the relation to the norm seen as a fixed entity to which it would, *ipso facto*, be opposed. Through the design of the Marina Abramović retrospective, which a venue like Exit Art could have organized fifteen years earlier, the MoMA demonstrates a new capacity on the part of the museum institution to concentrate the two poles of the alternative—such a tendency having incidentally been profiled in 2000, when the museum incorporated P.S.1. as part of it. Relying on this fact, Lauren Rosati draws the conclusion that the opposition as such is henceforth no longer operative, whence the need to talk in terms of “extra-institutions” to describe those spaces and venues proposing an approach that is simply *other* than that of sovereign agencies. This not very persuasive notion of supplement is based on a utopian conception of the alternative which, finally re-absorbed, has made way for a peaceful co-existence between the two polarities.
- 4 Caroline Maniaque-Benton’s book clearly shows the twofold face of the United States, at once an icon, if ever there was, of modernity, and cradle of the counter-culture. Through her thorough and meticulous study, the author explains the impact of the ecology-based

American architectural models, the return to nature and the promotion of ethnic cultures on the emergence of a French-style counter-culture. Examining the different distribution organs for these models on both sides of the Atlantic, between 1960 and 1980, she takes a particular look at the way in which certain construction techniques, using retrieved and recycled materials, resulting from DIY found followers among French architects. In this respect, *La Face cachée du soleil* (1974), a book written by Frédéric Nicolas, Marc Vayne and Jean-Pierre Traisnel, published under the pseudonym “Le Bricolo Lézardeur”, which includes illustrations by Robert Crumb and Ron Cobb, played an important part in the transmission of architectural principles based on ecological considerations—here, it just so happens, solar energy. Architects like Georges Maurios and Pierre Lajus were won over by those self-construction techniques widely broadcast by the Californian magazine *Shelter*, which appeared in 1977 in a French version under the title *Habitats*. By setting out the topicality of such positions in terms of ecology and renewable energy sources in particular, the book gives glimpses of the see-saw movements between the centre/fringe polarities, bringing to the forefront positions formerly defended by communities living against the grain of the ‘American Way of Life’. If she re-contextualizes the appearance of the term “counter-culture” and focuses on the different occurrences of the adjective “alternative”, the author nevertheless builds her analysis on a commonly accepted sense of this latter, as it contrasts mainly with the mainstream, seen as a basic datum.

- 5 The book by Sabeth Buchmann and Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz, *Hélio Oiticica and Neville d'Almeida: Block-Experiments in Cosmococa - Program in Progress*, exaggerates the temporal dimension of these installations, and thus makes it possible to refocus the debate about the notion of time (and not simply space). This title encompasses a series of nine “supra-sensorial” environments produced between 1973 and 1974, each one including a slide show, a sound recording, and instructions for visitors. “Quasi-cinemas” was the term coined by Hélio Oiticica to describe these systems, which deconstruct the film medium by stopping on each image, whence the choice of the slide show as the projection format. Going against the grain of commercial cinema based on a linearity underpinning the spectacle, the *Cosmococas* are presented as so many concentrates of time, with the organization of the images exaggerated by the slowness of the projection (one slide every 20-30seconds). The component materials—images of average quality—incidentally contrast with the high definition equipment of the film industry. These elements tend to introduce a distance with the viewer, forcing him/her to react, in one way or another, to the environment. The common factor shared by the different sequences projected as part of these propositions or “Block Experiments” is the recurrence of portraits of icons from popular culture, presented on different surfaces—book covers and record sleeves in particular—on which a drawing takes shape that is made with cocaine powder. These overlaid white volutes disturb our reading of the photographs and make their meaning more complex. This kind of thread between the images appends to them a signature of the artist that is directly related to his Brazilian origins. The local culture, which is marked by the trade in this substance, re-emerges by way of these winding lines which evoke the issue of exile as well as the question of the boundaries between what is banned and what is authorized, public and private, artistic activities and drug sub-cultures.
- 6 The slide shows form non-narrative sequences which are projected in loops, with no beginning and no end. This kind of lack of definition is strengthened by the open nature of the *Cosmococas*, as a programme in progress, capable of accommodating within them all sorts of interventions (performances, letters, recorded conversations, etc.,) which

constantly alter their form. A similar openness is part of the construction of a time-frame questioning the work's originality, which is always being deferred. The confidentiality of these systems, never shown in public while the artist was alive, marks another attribute of the alternative as secret production, known to a limited circle of the initiated. The idea of experience is pivotal here, as shown by the particular character of the spatial arrangement of the *Block Experiments*, including hammocks, seats and mattresses, and even a swimming pool in *Cosmococas 4 (CC4 Nocagions)*—a work paying tribute to John Cage. These environments are constructed on the principle of summoning the spectator's senses through essentially inter-media practices. Hélio Oiticica claimed that he saw no difference between the arts, and targeted the state of confusion of the senses, stressing, for example, the “tactile” nature of the images thus formed.

- 7 The *Cosmococas* seem to condense a certain number of elements permitting a re-appraisal of the relation between mainstream and alternative. The assertion of a discontinuous time-frame, the absence of narrative, the overlap between mass culture and vernacular traditions, the emphasis on the anti-Greenbergian notion of intermedia, and the confidentiality of the system are actually so many features making it possible to re-think the gap between the two poles. In a letter written in 1971 to the film-maker Ivan Cardoso, Hélio Oiticica described *Trash*—the film made by Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey—as “the commercialization, once and for all, of the underground”, a sort of gentrification (*embourgeoisement*) of the fringe, proof of the structural instability of any position going against the flow.