Of and on Yves the Monochrome

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- 1 Everything seemed to have been said about Yves the Monochrome, this latter being the perfect example of the artist endowed with the talent for leaving behind him a set of traces and evidence (writings, manifestos, lectures, sound recordings, films, photographic documents, and catalogues) with a view to helping historians to painstakingly reconstruct the stages of a career in art. The Beaubourg catalogue *Yves Klein : corps, couleur, immatériel* is a muddle for novices, and redundant for the initiated. It also marks a step backwards if we compare it with the publication that was the brainchild of Jean-Yves Mock in 1983. Yet the idea of embarking on a line of thought about the connections between Klein and the international setting of the period—which is the declared goal of the second part of the catalogue—was a praiseworthy project *per se*. Unfortunately, the articles dealing with Eastern Europe, Austria and Germany (links with the Zero Group, and Viennese Actionism), Japan, and Italy (Klein's relationship with Lucio Fontana and Spatialism, and then with the so-called “nuclear” artists, and those gravitating around the magazine *Azimuth*) are all very superficial, their authors happy to remain within strictly chronological parameters, within which the theoretical aspect is hardly ever considered. Confining ourselves just to Italy, a comprehensive comparative study is still

waiting to be undertaken, involving an analysis of the contents of Klein's texts, and the writings of Fontana and the other members of the Spatialist movement. In a word, these recent chapters merely present information that is already well-known, and definitely less well presented than in the excellent chronology of the 1983 catalogue.

- 2 Denys Riout's book offers a clear look at the artist's life and work in their essentials, such as monochromy, immateriality, and, above all, that notion of "impregnation" that is so important for understanding the oeuvre (a concept which also nurtures Riout's major—and most coherent—contribution in the already mentioned Pompidou Centre catalogue). What is more, the author stresses the ambiguity of the word "*vide*" in relation to the exhibition known as *Le Vide*. He points out that on the day it opened, the exhibition still had no name, and that the term "*vide*" was swiftly commandeered: "The artist himself adopted it, referring for example to the "wonderful blue void" of his studio, and the "absolute void which the real pictorial space should be and is" (p. 55).
- 3 Jacques Bouzerand, for his part, has produced an effective introductory book, which responds better to the general public's expectations, while Terhi GÉNÉVRIER-TAUSTI for her part offers us a biography which may well satisfy newcomers and specialists alike. There is much well-documented information about judo, Klein's initiatory trip to Japan, Klein's family, Fontenay-aux-Roses, and St. Rita. In addition there is a very precise description of all the stages which helped towards the preparation of the document known as *The Leap into the Void*, in particular the report by Jean Vareilles, at the time director of the judo club at Fontenay-aux-Roses, which describes the series of leaps into the void involving the assistance of club members.
- 4 The re-issue of the handbook *Les Fondements du Judo* is introduced by a short conversation between Daniel Moquay and Pierre Cornette de Saint-Cyr. This latter rightly dwells on the fact that Klein "announced to us the civilization of space and the immaterial" (p. IX).
- 5 The other re-issue brings together "*Le Dépassement de la problématique de l'art*" and "*La Conférence à la Sorbonne*" (under the overall title of *Vers l'immatériel*), two documents which offer a new opportunity to appraise the relevance of Klein's thinking with regard to what his work "broke" with, in the context of the day.
- 6 After Klein's judo apprenticeship, the artist's career was constructed over an eight-year period (1954-1962). It is the story of a concentration of energy—physical and mental alike—that developed right up to a point of exhaustion, and Klein's heart attack. In his biography—referring to the artist's stay in Japan—D. Riout conjures up the judoka's tough training and the regular use Klein made of amphetamines, which were readily available over the counter in Japan at that time (p. 21). Like Piero Manzoni (1933-1963) and Pino Pascali (1935-1968), Klein died in his thirties (1928-62), of exhaustion. Three lives and three bodies of work all lived and created in an over-excited way.
- 7 Concerning the artist's status, Klein stressed the need to turn art into a social activity: "20th century artists must undertake an integration within society and stop being weird creatures." ("*La Conférence à la Sorbonne*", p. 71). He placed himself within a logic of artistic socialization, which prompted him to make contact with such partners as Electricité de France (for the blue lighting of the Obelisk for which the Paris Prefecture refused to give the go-ahead) and Gaz de France (for the "fire paintings"). Based on a determined refusal of the "hypertrophy of the ego" peculiar to the Abstract Expressionists (*op. cit.*, p. 57), Klein announced the death of the damned, accursed artist and the birth of the artist as go-between. He also worked on the essential issue of the priority of mind and sensibility

over technique. For him, the space age would be a triumph of the mind, not of gadgets: “Wherever technology flounders, science begins”, quoth Herschel. “And I think I can say this evening, with all due common sense, that it will not be with rockets and sputniks that man will achieve the conquest of space, because, in so doing, he would always remain a tourist in that space; but it is by living in it in a sensitive way, which is to say not by incorporating himself in it, but by steeping himself in it, and becoming one with the very life that this space is, a space where quiet strength reigns...” (*Ibid.*, p. 53). Here, Klein linked back up with the position of the Italian Spatialists in their earliest manifestos: a spiritualist vision of the conquest of space seen as a conquest of the mind. In something they wrote on 26 November 1951, the Spatialists were already asserting this: “These past five years have seen artists heading precisely in our direction: regarding as a reality the spaces and the vision of universal matter with which science, philosophy and art, as knowledge and intuition, have fuelled the human mind”¹.

- 8 Klein’s project never became exhausted. He even went so far as to imagine the creation of a centre (a school) of sensibility. His work is above all an invitation to become involved in an apprenticeship of “colourful ascent” (*Ibid.*, p. 66) in order to reach “the colourful space that can’t be seen, but in which one becomes impregnated” (*Le Dépassement de la problématique de l’art*, p. 26).

NOTES

1. « Manifeste de l’art spatial », in *Lucio Fontana* catalogue, Paris : Centre Pompidou, 1987, p. 286