The “Derestanyization” Temptation

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REFERENCES

Richard Leeman (dir.), *Le Demi-siècle de Pierre Restany*, Paris : Institut national d'histoire de l'art : Ed. des Cendres, 2009, 978-2-86742-167-9

- 1 Pierre Restany died in 2003, fifty years after he embarked on his career as an art critic, and fifty years after his first writings on Lyrical Abstraction. He left behind a considerable number of documents, publications, theoretical writings, manifestoes, and letters, now in the safekeeping of the Archives de la critique d'art¹. Since 2003, studies of this collection have encouraged new approaches to and readings of Restany's critical activity, as much beyond France's borders as within them, where he felt suffocated. *The Demi-siècle de Pierre Restany* tries precisely to define the role, or roles, played by this unconventional figure who stirred things up and protested, and practiced a militant and creative form of criticism. This 560-page doorstop is the outcome of an international conference organized in 2006 by the Institut national d'histoire de l'art in partnership with the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) and the Archives de la critique d'art, and retains the spirit and liveliness of that meeting. It brings together a wide variety of contributions: essays and accounts, likes and dislikes, anecdotes and academic dissections of Restany's manifestoes and theoretical writings. This book is a mine of overlapping information which measures up (on an international level) to Restany himself, “the only critic of them all”, we are told by Jacques Villeglé, “to have traversed the century”. Richard Leeman, the publication's editor, bases his approach on the artist's own assertions to put forward the idea that “it is possible to reconstruct a latter
- 2 20th century art history by way of the activities, writings, networks, and battles fought by one of that century's leading players”.

- 3 The contributions are divided into four major headings: "Action", "Geographies", "Networks", and "Writing, theory, history", all inevitably spilling over, given the dovetailing, in Restany's oeuvre, of action and theory, gesture and word, geographies and networks, travels and address books, professional and personal alike. Restany in Milan, Düsseldorf, Brazil, Prague and Bratislava... Restany and New Realism: needless to say; Restany and Yves Klein: what else?; Restany and the magazine *Domus*, Restany and the AICA (as a network), Restany and the appropriation of reality, Restany and Louis Pauwels: unexpected... The book's intent is to stay outside quarrels and violent dismissals, as well as hagiographies. It is without indulgence, and as such part of a work of deconstruction vital to art historians. Can we talk about "derestanyization"? The term, of uncertain origin, dates back to 1963 in Restany's correspondence, where he seems associated with the difficult relationship between the critic and his artists, starting with Klein, who, we are told by Renaud Bouchet, was convinced that he was acting in a completely revolutionary way, and failed to understand that anyone could connect his work with old practices (Dada) of appropriation.
- 4 By working on the form of the manifestoes, R. Leeman ("Destin de l'art et logique de l'histoire. Les téléologies de Pierre Restany", p. 445), for whom the critic turned out to be a better polemicist than theoretician, has fun with his "very particular propensity for historicization", and, gives late 1962 as the moment when he became involved in producing more history than theory of New Realism through regularly updated official chronologies. In terms of content, Kaira M. Cabañas (p. 123) singles out the incompatibility of the mixture of styles in the twofold movement of empirical appropriation of objects and mystic transcendence, which is better understood in the light of the "fantastic realism" of Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, co-authors of *Le Matin des magiciens*, and founders of the magazine *Planète*, to which Pierre Restany contributed and in which, in the very first issue (October 1961), he started promoting his new avant-garde.
- 5 Restany with Pauwels versus Roland Barthes? For Annie Claustres (p. 467) "one and the same sensitivity to the presence of myth in the social and cultural fabric gives rise to an echo-like phenomenon between Restany's articles and Barthes's Book". But she has not yet found any Restany text shedding light on this relation.
- 6 Another element of the deconstruction of the Restany edifice takes us to Amazonia and the way the critic was received in Brazil. Stéphane Huchet relies on the archives of the São Paulo Biennial to observe that the critic left few traces there, and they were negative where the episode of the Integral Naturalism manifesto was concerned, written in August 1978, while on his way up the Rio Negro with the sculptor Krajcberg. Eco-cosmic awareness, "utopia of a new encounter with nature"... these were perceived by Brazilian critics as "tourist appeals" and "cultural colonialism" (see also Rosemary O'Neill's study, p. 173).
- 7 Restany-style humanism, the critic's faith in a technologically perfect future, his no to revolt ("hope, what lies beyond revolts"), his well-known Gaullism (up until 1968), his defence of "an art of modernity and positivity in harmony with the vision of France" (Jill Carrick: "Vers un art de l'Intégration?", p. 77), which made both the Situationists and Marxist critics howl, permeate the book unopposed, without any real study of the probable theoretical and sociological shifts after the oil crisis and, it just so happens, the burial of modernist utopias. So there is still plenty to do in terms of private thoughts, doubts, and the correspondence. This *Demi-siècle de Restany* depends naturally enough on

the breakdown and analysis of the archives, but also on the reservation of researchers towards an art history in the present tense, in the manner of Restany!

- 8 The book focuses on the 1960s and 1970s and stops at the Amazonian episode. As R. Leeman acknowledges, what is missing from the jigsaw is most of the documents covering Restany's activities in the 1980s and 1990s: his return to the Paris scene, his links with young critics, and more specifically his part in the formulation of Nicolas Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics".
 - 9 In a letter written on 25 May 1969 to Michel Ragon, who had just published his *25 ans d'art vivant*, Restany, who was depressed at the time, foresaw that History would not make much of their critical involvement: "Between us, critical specialists, we do indeed recognize the role we have played. This is a professional reflex. But the general history of ideas already established very different accounts to ours [...]. Foucault's analyses and Bertin's treatise on graphic semiology would play a much more salient role in the development of the formal structures of language than the entire output of our committed criticism." Was he mistaken?
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NOTES

1. I.e. in all, 73 metres/240 feet of archives containing dossiers on artists like Piero Manzoni and Arman, 180 metres/600 feet of bookshelves, more than 500 manuscripts, thousands of letters, all forming a very complete and well-ordered collection from 1955 to the 1990s.