

The Art Scene on the West Coast

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REFERENCES

Martha Rosler : sur/sous le pavé, Rennes : Presses universitaires, 2006, (Métiers de l'exposition)

Ed Ruscha photographie, Paris : Ed. du Jeu de Paume ; New York : Whitney Museum of American Art ; Göttingen : Steidl, 2006

Los Angeles 1955-1985 : naissance d'une capitale artistique, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou, 2006

- 1 The art scene on the west coast of the United States has been very prominent in the French landscape in recent years. After the John Baldessari retrospective¹ last year, we now have various publications resulting from exhibitions and research projects which smack of something akin to an infatuation. This infatuation is already palpable in galleries and certain venues like Le Magasin in Grenoble and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Villeurbanne, which have been putting on exhibitions of Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley, Allen Ruppersberg and Martha Rosler over the past decade or so. A group show catalogue, a monograph and a specific publication will be our threads here, to determine what it is that makes the Californian scene so specific. The fine Jeu de Paume catalogue pays tribute to Ed Ruscha's photographic work, Ruscha, in the end of the day, being one of the best-known of Californian artists, whose pictorial and book-oriented work has been better disseminated than his actual photographs. This publication describes the complex relationship between the artist and photography. As with Baldessari and Larry Bell, the camera and the instantaneous nature of the gesture that captures a humdrum reality define the stereotype. We discover the subtlety of the eye and the way it sees things—a refinement that goes beyond that mechanized efficiency usually attributed to Pop Art.

- 2 In Ruscha's work, photography is more than a tool, it becomes a method and a raw material from which to draw. "I was actually looking for a non-style, or an affirmation in a non-style", to use his own words. Margit Rowell's analysis of Ruscha's photographic praxis sheds new light on the use of this medium by the artist, and helps to place him in a context. We can easily see his determination to stand aloof from the New York hegemony symbolized by Abstract Expressionism and modernist criticism. His book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1962, would become emblematic of the standardization of the peri-urban landscape, and a desire to describe reality. The way he takes photos helps to isolate things and turn them into facts. These in turn became the stuff of his paintings. E. Ruscha talks about "cinematic reality", and *de facto* the sequential development of his books links up with film cutting. This factual relation between books and paintings is clearly explained in this essay, and linked with other artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns and the Bechers. His interest in the vernacular American habitat offers a perception of a shifting landscape, with the car's windscreen becoming the frame. Over and above the quality of the reproductions and the perceptible erudition of the text, we discover an aspect of Ruscha's work that becomes very evident: the fact that what is involved, above all, is the invention of a beholding eye, basically constructed by and in language, which is at once a "catalyst and a source of imagery", as the author emphasizes.
- 3 For Martha Rosler, the use of photography is also an essential challenge, intrinsically bound up with a political approach. As much is shown by *Sur/sous le pavé*, a weighty publication of the Master *Métiers de l'exposition* of the Rennes 2 University, edited by Elvan Zabunyan. The power of the images holds sway, from the word go, over the plentiful texts. These latter, while intelligent and to the point, are somewhat smothered by a massive presentation which really ought to have merited an easy-to-use index and list of contents. As soon as you get into the book, this impression of saturation fades and gives way to the very factual forcefulness of an œuvre which, paradoxically, bestirs so much discussion and remains linked to the presence of the images. On the subject of photography, she answers Benjamin Buchloh in a republished interview: "It (photography) was accessible, vernacular, modest [...] as far as I could tell at the time, photography had no critical history. I didn't have the impression that I was getting involved in major issues" (p. 121). "A state of convulsion between art and non art", observes E. Zabunyan to conjure up M. Rosler's conspicuously unusual approach, "... it's better to hand out a photocopy of a collage of *Bringing the War Home* in tract form than to see it affixed to the white walls of a museum, well removed from the rumble of "life" (p. 409). The principal quality of this book is the wealth of documentation, in this first monograph on the artist in French. The exhibition catalogue *Los Angeles 1955-1985 : naissance d'une capitale artistique* is a necessary and much-awaited undertaking. A chronology of art on the west coast is essential, and this latter describes the diversity of the art work and the connections between the artists involved. For example, the proximity of Guy de Cointet (1934-1983), L. Bell and David Lamelas, and their relationship to performance, is a discovery for many (p. 265).
- 4 The trove of period documents and artists' writings, when possible, lends a brisk liveliness to the catalogue—something that was, incidentally, missing in the exhibition itself. This latter, unfurling like a book on the walls, was not up to the task of rendering the plurality and wit of west coast art. We can get some idea of this in the catalogue with the works of Morgan Fischer, J. Baldessari, and Chris Burden. The transparency and work of light is also much more explicit when you look at the photographs of the works of L.

Bell, Ed Moses and Maria Nordman, rather than the works themselves in the show. We gain a better understanding of the linkages between the artists and their mutual respect, regardless of their differences, typical of an artistic community which has no central figure, just like the city which is centre-less, too. As is noted by the curator Catherine Grenier, "...1955-1985 is a period defined in an arbitrary way" (p. 15). Howard N. Fox's essay gives an overall view of art activity in California which foils certain myths, but somewhere along the line it lacks spirit.

- 5 Through these three recent publications, we acquire a European vision of west coast art in the United States, which remains an exotic myth, the Eldorado where anything and everything is possible. We see the degree to which this mythology lay at the very root of a certain form of artwork, which found, in the use of the stereotype, the subversion of codes and an openness to boundless experimentation, a riposte to the infinite production of prefabricated images.
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NOTES

1. See *Critique d'art* n° 27, spring 2006, p. 74