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From the Cold War to Globalization: Around Picasso, Modernist Utopias and One or Two Postmodern Narratives

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REFERENCES

Jonathan Harris, *The Utopian Globalists: Artists of Worldwide Revolution, 1919-2009*, Chichester : Wiley-Blackwell, 2013

Picasso and the Politics of Visual Representation: War and Peace in the Era of the Cold War and Since, Liverpool : Liverpool University Press, 2013, (Tate Liverpool Critical Forum). Sous la dir. de Jonathan Harris, Richard Koeck

Raphaël Aubert, *Malraux & Picasso : une relation manquée*, Gollion : Infolio, 2013, (Archigraphy Poche)

Chantal Pontbriand, *The Contemporary, the Common: Art in a Globalizing World*, Berlin : Sternberg Press, 2013

- 1 Just when we are welcoming the publication of the anthology¹ *Art et mondialisation : décentrement. Anthologie de textes de 1950 à nos jours*, which tries to introduce French readers to the milestones of a train of thought turning its back on the great Western narrative in favour of a globalized approach, three other recent books deserve special attention.
- 2 *Picasso and the Politics of Visual Representation: War and Peace in the Era of the Cold War and Since* actually raises a series of issues which historiography persists in ignoring. Resulting from a lecture given to mark the exhibition *Picasso: Peace and Freedom*, conceived for Tate

Liverpool in 2010 by Lynda Morris and Christopher Grunenberg,² the subject of the essays brought together in this volume is not only the winning of hearts and minds, as represented by the Cold War, but also the role which this latter continues to play in our perception of “world” art. In his introduction (“Picasso as a Sign of Class Struggle”, pp. 9-26), Jonathan Harris reminds us that a reference work such as *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Anti-modernism, Postmodernism* (Thames & Hudson, 2004), albeit edited by such renowned art historians as Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss, makes “virtually no mention” of Pablo Picasso’s output after 1945. A series of communications shows the sum of decisions which fuel this silence, when outright hostility is not involved, by introducing a lot of information about the painter’s involvement in communist and anti-fascist organizations through which he pursued his fight against Franco’s regime. If Lynda Morris describes his involvement with the French Communist Party and in the Movement for Peace, as well as his wrangles with the communist authorities (“The Battle for Picasso’s Mind”, p. 27-49), Paula Barreiro López singles out the artist’s successive refusals of offers of rapprochement formulated by representatives of a Spain that was soon part of NATO, and emphasizes the constant support he gave to dissident Spaniards and to spokespeople for countries fighting against the colonial powers (“Classified Files: Picasso, the Regime and the Avant-Garde in Francoist Spain”, p. 89-107). Sarah Wilson, for her part, (“Loyalty and Blood: Picasso’s FBI File”, p. 129-145), dedicates to the files that the FBI had on Pablo Picasso a study which demonstrates as much the incompetence of the offices responsible for that monitoring (but, it is true, effectively doubled by the CIA) as the importance assumed by the ‘cold warrior’ for each of the two camps.³ Slightly prior to this, David Craven analyses Pablo Picasso’s output in the light of his anti-militarist and anti-colonial positions (“When Picasso Was Feared by the U.S. Government”, p. 109-128).

- 3 Without going into detail about these analyses, in the wake of Jonathan Harris’s work, we can here observe how Pablo Picasso’s image is diffracted in so many questioned representations, starting with our own present. Likewise, the legacy of the Cold War is broached starting from the “globalized world, at once alike and different” in which we are living. The issues posed by post-colonial studies make it possible, for example, to raise questions which the positions constructed by the narratives in which we are enveloped help to hide.
- 4 Jonathan Harris is involved with a comparable exercise in *The Utopian Globalists: Artists of Worldwide Revolution, 1919-2009*. In it he traces the developments of the utopia aimed at a transformation of the world by art (‘utopian globalism’) from the early 1920s up to the present day, by analyzing the gradual dovetailing of this critical thinking and techniques peculiar to the society of the spectacle, in the context of a growing globalization of exchanges.
- 5 Vladimir Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* project, broached in the book’s introduction (“The World in a Work of Art”, p. 1-27) and examined in chapter two (“The Line of Liberation: Tatlin’s Tower and the Communist Construction of Global Revolution”, p. 76-117), announced a world revolution which would transform social relations, but also foreshadowed a new type of relation between art and life. The works analyzed in the following chapters all share this legacy in common, a distant echo of which we find in the series of commissions made by the multinational company Unilever for Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall space (London), with which this essay ends (“From the Spiral to the Turbine: A Global Warning”, p. 316-332).

- 6 In refusing to apply analytical tables leading to the treatment as isolated units of practices corresponding to one and the same set of questions to do with social hierarchies and the role of art in the creation of a common life, the art historian proposes an archaeology of these “media-generated” utopian constructions, whose real point of departure is, here again, the Cold War. Each case study helps him to emphasize certain features of the transformative structure, proposing as he does to examine its effects from the viewpoint of a globalized world. Pablo Picasso’s involvement with the French Communist Party, and in particular in the campaigns aimed at winning the international community over to the goals of the Movement for Peace, appears in this light typical of a moment when going along with the objectives of a political party was already associated with communication strategies on an international scale. The interpretation sheds light on the representations of the community, which continue to structure approaches often regarded as manifestations of an autonomous artistic sphere. Haunted by the idea of a global community identified with Eurasia, Joseph Beuys, through his actions, criticized what Guy Debord, for his part, described as the generalized spectacle of the Cold War. The dream of unity thus took the form of the myth of an ahistorical Orient depicted as a source of harmony from which would come the salvation of the materialist, narrowly rationalist civilization promoted by capitalism and Marxist socialism. The refusal of any affiliation with traditional political parties (typical, we might add, in the case of Joseph Beuys, of a conservative revolutionary discourse from which also issues his injunction to return to an organic community) culminates in the total artwork represented by an event such as *Bed-in*, organized in May 1969 by John Lennon and Yoko Ono in a Montreal hotel room where, surrounded by journalists and cameras, the two stars created a composite entity incarnating the merger of West and East. It was again this act of going beyond divisions of community that Christo and Jeanne-Claude, cultural engineers of a new type, represented by wrapping the Reichstag.
- 7 This kind of archaeology is in part a theoretical fiction, the challenge being to reveal narrative potential which the narratives, focusing on formalist, apolitical categories inherited from the Cold War, have the effect of neutralizing. In no case is the analysis confined to a new essentialist narrative and Jonathan Harris manages simultaneously to highlight extremely complex socio-historical processes and the work carried out on existing narratives based on questions suited to the present time. Otherwise put, he manages to practice a history displaying its own narrative procedures. In a more radical way, he demonstrates that Tate Modern, a museum with aspirations which are themselves globalizing, has, through a series of spectacular works sponsored by Unilever, carried on the great utopian history of the avant-gardes, which are in the throes of fading away. In the context of a globalized economy, the world community image only now survives, he concludes, in the advertising messages of multinationals.
- 8 The compilation of articles published in the Canadian magazine *Parachute*, co-founded in 1975 by Chantal Pontbriand, *The Contemporary, the Common: Art in a Globalizing World*, is also devoted to the many different issues raised by the rapid growth of this internationalized economy after the Cold War. The book opens with an interview—published in French in the January 2001 issue of *Parachute*—with Jean-Luc Nancy, author of *La Communauté désœuvrée* (Christian Bourgois, 1986). The philosopher in fact brought the team of *Parachute* a set of tools for thinking about the question of community without reverting to an excluding interpretation of this being-in-common. It is extremely interesting to observe the introduction of a criticism trying to describe artistic practices which took

note of the end of the divisions and hierarchies imposed by the Cold War, and of the emergence of changing forms of identity—a liquid identity, to borrow the words of Zygmunt Bauman, caught in particular by views of fragmented spaces in megalopolises, and migrants—without giving up on the idea of thinking about the possibility of a common world. This series of essays only claims to put forward interpretative hypotheses capable of shedding light on a situation which sees old identity constructs being shattered and fragmentary histories being drawn, just like the urban narratives which Ion Grigorescu filmed years ago in the great sets of Ceausescu's Romania ("Ion Grigorescu: Performing History in Suspended Spaces", p. 263-275), and the performance-lectures of the Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué, continuing a writing about disaster in the manner of Maurice Blanchot ("Rabih Mroué: Back to Back", p. 425-429). The question of narration, which recurs in many of the texts brought together in this publication, once again cuts short the effects of truth of community models. As in Jonathan Harris's book, this return to the conditions of analytical production aims to anticipate the re-creation of a (potentially) globalizing and hierarchic narrative.

- 9 The anthology edited by Catherine Grenier, rightly points out that French institutions are late in broaching the issues raised by globalization. This delay, she reminds us, cannot be made up as long as the grand narrative of the West continues to shape a history of art whose primary goal, until the end of the Cold War, was to construct the image of a centre from which all knowledge would be organized. The present-day rewriting of modern art history as a globalized history nevertheless itself has as its main mission the reinforcement of the centrality of this narrative in the post-Cold War context. As Joaquín Barriendos writes in one of the essays which conclude this selection: "Obviously, the momentum aiming at correcting the geographical history of modern art results in the West here appropriating the authority to decide what should and should not be included."⁴
- 10 Claiming to break with a narrative model without examining its mechanisms can only lead to rekindling presuppositions. If this anthology is an initiative to be hailed, the postulate whereby it would suffice to shift our way of looking at things off-centre, in order to see them differently, remains to be challenged. In her preface to this book, Catherine Grenier typically emphasizes that its aim is to offer those interested in the links between art and globalization an overview of ideas developed as part of cultural, post-colonial and genre studies. Thereafter, this anthology contains few texts making "direct reference to art". Cultural studies have shown very little interest in art history. Seeing therein a model which it might be possible to export into a different field, without previously questioning this field, is tantamount to underestimating both the complexity and the plasticity of the "great narrative" of the West. The books we have looked at above make a critical return to this narrative, as it is developing today, by questioning in particular the idea of community which it conveys, without ever stating as much. They thus introduce analytical tools which are not to be found in this latter anthology.

NOTES

1. *Art et mondialisation : décentrement. Anthologie de textes de 1950 à nos jours*, Paris : Centre Pompidou, 2013. Edited by Catherine Grenier and Sophie Orlando
2. See *Picasso: Peace and Freedom* (21 avril-30 août 2010), London : Tate Publishing, 2010. Edited by Lynda Morris and Christoph Grunenberg
3. Featured in particular in this essay are the references of these dossiers, today online. Let us mention in tandem the publication of: Aubert, Raphaël. *Malraux & Picasso : une relation manquée*, Gollion : Infolio, 2013, (Archigraphy Poche), where certain Cold War episodes are mentioned.
4. See Barriendos, Joaquín. "Géopolitique de l'art mondial : la réinvention de l'Amérique latine comme région géo-esthétique", in *Art et mondialisation : décentrement. Anthologie de textes de 1950 à nos jours*, *Op. cit.*, p. 217. Extract of a text published in *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets and Museums*, Ostfildern : Hatje Cantz ; ZKM Book, 2009. Edited by Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg. As emerges from this analysis, this new narrative can in fact easily absorb its own criticism.