

Painting, abstraction, discourse

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Le Commentaire et l'art abstrait, Paris : Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1999, (Page ouverte). [sous la dir. de Muriel Gagnebin, Christine Savinel]

La Peinture après l'abstraction, 1955-1965, Paris : Paris-musées, 1999

Tableaux : la peinture n'est pas un genre, Morlaix : Musée des Jacobins ; Bourg-en-Bresse : Musée de Brou ; Tourcoing : Musée des beaux-arts, 1999

- 1 Four catalogues and compilations published this year once again raise the issue of the linkage between painting and critical discourse, with abstraction, where applicable, exacerbating the tension between the two.
- 2 The first essay, *La Peinture après l'abstraction*, is nothing less than stimulating. Certain observations made by Alain Cueff about the neglected role of poster artists in the renewed formulation of painting, between 1955 and 1965, lie at the root of the comparison--a new departure--between the works of Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé, and those of Martin Barré, Jean Degottex and Simon Hantaï. It is a comparison that seems to have been hitherto banned by the traditional pigeonholing of the various forms of abstraction of the period and New Realism. Here, discourse literally produces art history. By retracing its arrangements and its order, it reconstructs it. It is the stuff of it, like an object produced in and by discourse, more than it records it as an external fact. Even if the authors do not always manage to sidestep the realist illusion in the way they present the facts, the strictly creationist nature of the matter must be underscored. These artists started to work at a moment when a certain number of contrasts that are an integral part of modernity became crystallized and contributed to forming stylistic provinces--sign enough that abstraction is now a dead idea. To say that these painters

came *after* abstraction is, first and foremost, to record the fact that they entertained no theoretical discourse with respect to it. They did not accept dealing with it as if it were a pre-ordained genre. By connecting painting with other types of experiments, they changed terrain, shifting from the praxis of a reserved and separate category to one of experimental and non-conceptual elaboration of paradigmatic models. It is because the tempo of the work was altogether one of Making, and of the present, that these artists somehow skirt generic determination. Should we not call this discourse into question, in order, conversely, to try and precisely describe the positive part played by the discursive denial of any generic sympathies? So there are no longer any artists who shook off the straitjacket of these sympathies, but an art, backed up by a discourse, which moves the bar that makes it possible to refer back (beforehand) to the site of this alienation, and delimit the place of exclusion.

- 3 In Tristan Trémeau's essay, *La Peinture n'est pas un genre*, the author leans on an earlier university study that focused on the works of François Rouan and Christian Bonnefoi. It also encompasses the works of Monique Frydman, Bernard Joubert and Jean-Pierre Pincemin. By postulating a history of recent abstraction split between (post-Cézanne) essentialists, (Richterian) advocates of the tongue-in-cheek, and allegorists (with their preference for mental, social and ideological parameters), he makes room for painters who elude the definition of abstract painting as a genre. With Rouan and Bonnefoi, braiding and collage have to do with the structure of the picture, with «what precedes the painting», its «near-side». This latter term (and its source is not actually acknowledged) hails from Hubert Damisch who, from the tracery of Pollock to his study of *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*, by way of his essay on Rouan, was the first person to attempt to come up with arguments about this idea that something in painting does not emerge from its semiotics, but is on the near side of the sign, and proceeds to the resurgence of the content. Here again, critical discourse shifts a bar. It produces a focal effect, it creates a place subtracted from the definition of the law of genres. Declaring that painting is not a genre, in a catalogue introducing the works of five painters, reverts as it happens to promoting their differential value. To do so, it is necessary to reduce the link between braid and tracery, construct the modernist scarecrow of a painting that is only surface, and say nothing about the rhetorical character of the figures of the weft, and their deeprootedness in a history of the 1970s.
- 4 *Le Commentaire et l'art abstrait*, a collective university compilation, aims a direct attack on this relationship between art and discourse. Does abstraction not give tangible expression to it at most to the point of denial? Does it not embody the utopia of a painting that no *ekphrasis* needs to support? In this respect, the proliferation of the commentary is a paradox. The compilation is arranged by three types of approach: critical, psychoanalytical, and poïetic. We fail to avoid the sempiternal cliché about void and absence. If several forms of critical discourse are explored, the *criterium* remains aesthetic (phenomenological). The commentary (on the commentary) may thus be pursued, safe from any questioning about its function.
- 5 Jean-Marc Huitorel's essay, *Les Règles du jeu*, focuses on the use of restrictions in painting. Starting with ancient painting, it would seem that the proposal is meant to be historical. The use of systems in the art of the first half of the 20th century is not fully examined. But the positive side of the essay as a whole is that it follows a thread that sheds light on a whole swathe of contemporary painting. The discourse which declares the restriction (or acts as a reminder of it) is an authorized discourse. Its truth-telling purpose, which is

greater than any other conceptual tool's, is bolstered by the fact that by programming the work, it is pronounced in advance and beats the commentary to it. Henceforth, all that remains is to call this programme to mind, and take part in the altogether Oulipian game proposed by artists.

- 6 Where painters are concerned, neither the denial of any generic sympathies, nor the performative declaration of a painting that brings out the content, nor the interplay of restrictions free painting from the realm of discourse, the illusion, here, being to think that it is possible to be economical with symbolism. As far as criticism is concerned, the itinerary of the forms of commentary, more or less reliant on a certain illusion of transparency, are also economical with the analysis of the role of discourse in the production of the work as a symbolic object.