
Michel Leiris | Carl Einstein: A Close Look

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Einstein, Carl. *L'Art du XX^e siècle*, Arles : Actes Sud, 2011, (Rayon art)

Frémon, Jean. *Michel Leiris face à lui-même : de Giacometti à Bacon*, Paris : L'Echoppe, 2011

Leiris, Michel. *Ecrits sur l'art*, Paris : CNRS, 2011

- 1 In *Michel Leiris face à lui-même*, Jean Frémon hones and rounds off a line of thinking embarked upon during interviews conducted by Alain Veinstein (Radio France Culture). Instead of restricting himself to the professional viewpoint of an art dealer, Frémon draws on the memories he has of his special relations with Leiris, before analyzing the parallels that take shape between this latter's autobiographical writing and the portraits he produced, one text at a time, of Francis Bacon and Alberto Giacometti. He duly reveals several dedications drawn not only from his personal copies of *Grande fuite de neige*, *Miroir de la tauromachie* and *A cor et à cri*, but also from the copy of *L'Afrique fantôme* which Leiris offered to Bacon: "A *phantom* but not *offbeat Africa* / For Francis Bacon, from his friend Michel Leiris, in memory of 15 November 1966" (p. 33). Far from being insignificant, this handwritten trace enables Frémon to question the nature of that memory (was it their first meeting?), and then describe other marginalia taken from the same book, "which the painter handled, tore, stained and enhanced in a compulsive way" (p. 33): drawings, underlinings, reframed photographs, transformed faces and, above all, "that *ghostlike* portrait of Michel Leiris drawn with brush and ink on the book's flyleaf" (pp. 33-34). In tandem with these finds, Frémon notes that the three men shared a liking for self-denigration (pp. 37-38) and an affection for Pablo Picasso (p. 43). Lastly, "Leiris spent his life in the intimate company of artists" (p. 54), producing with his closest friends "book lovers' books, some of which have become models in the genre" (pp. 54-55), in particular the late project involving a book with

Bacon. This latter did indeed see the light of day, but sadly Leiris only ever saw the proofs.

- 2 In “bringing together here for the first time” (p. 65) in one volume the *writings on art* of Michel Leiris (1926-1990), the eponymous book edited by Pierre Vilar shows the abundance of his critical output. Vilar concedes right away that an “exhaustive edition of Michel Leiris’s writings on art is a perilous undertaking” (p. 7). What is more, he had to make choices as the corpus was being established. In fact, apart from Goya, only 20th century artists are dealt with here, mainly André Masson, Joan Miró, A. Giacometti, P. Picasso, Wifredo Lam and, needless to say, F. Bacon. Vilar does not clearly explain the exclusion of “certain writings on ancient painting” (p. 7), but he still offers us a very coherent volume which handsomely goes beyond and complements earlier anthologies [*Brisées* (1966), *Zébrage* (1992), and *Miroir de l’Afrique* (1996)]. For example, in the introduction “Vestiges of imagery and prestiges of painting” (pp. 11-65), the editor condenses Leiris’s critical texts in an impressive and sweeping overview organized by periods and themes, ever sensitive to the connections with the whole of his œuvre. So by recreating the network forged by Leiris’s contacts with artists, Vilar takes us from the famous Rue Blomet to the *Images de marque* (1989). After all, “the history of painting in this century merges quite early on with the century’s own history” (p. 11). As far as Leiris’s articles are concerned, they are organized in seven sections (six devoted to the artists just mentioned and a seventh titled “Mirror of painting”), all followed by a bibliography of Leiris’s writings on the subject, a substantial introductory article by Vilar, and a valuable critical bibliography.
- 3 It is interesting to note, in the *Ecrits sur l’art*, the frequent references (at least eleven) to the author of *L’Art du XX^e siècle* [*Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1926)]. Rightly hailed as a visionary, as much in the field of contemporary art as that of African arts at that time recently discovered in Europe, Carl Einstein made a name for himself in France above all thanks to *Documents*. Whatever the language used, he remains a demanding author, as is underscored by Georges Didi-Huberman in an article focusing on “Carl Einstein’s inactuality”: “Carl Einstein’s writing is thoroughly strange, probably even more so for the contemporary reader [...] than for the reader in the first three decades of the century. [...] The blows rain down so hard, the dazzling traits follow one another at such a pace that the writing becomes suffocating, makes us choke, exhausts us.”¹
- 4 All of which is cause to hail the work of Liliane Meffre and Maryse Staiber, for their first translation in 1926 of this ground-breaking book which has been thrice republished in German (1928 and 1931; 1996). Like Leiris, Einstein spent time with the artists about whom he spoke with such enthusiasm: “For the preparation of his *Art du XX^e siècle*, he brought together an impressive documentation, stepped up his visits to artist’s studios, and his correspondence” (p. 8). If relations with art on the move are no guard against mistakes, it has to be said that Einstein’s judgement has a rare accuracy. We realize as much when we consult the list of contents (pp. 396-397) and the index (pp. 386-394): most of the artists discussed, from Henri Matisse to Paul Klee by way of A. Masson, Gaston-Louis Roux, Emil Nolde, Otto Dix and Marc Chagall, feature in the pantheon of 20th century art as we know it. From a publishing viewpoint, some might lament the absence of “the very numerous reproductions (in black and white and in colour) of artworks” (p. 8). We can counter this legitimate reservation with three arguments: inflated production costs, accessibility of the works described and, above all, Einstein’s dislike of *ekphrasis*. On the other hand, bearing Einstein’s “inactuality” in

mind, more generous notes might have been a good idea, though not essential. This book nevertheless represents an event.

NOTES

1. Didi-Huberman, Georges. "L'anachronisme fabrique l'histoire : sur l'inactualité de Carl Einstein", *Etudes Germaniques*, vol. 53, n°1, January-March 1998, p. 30