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## Richard Hamilton: the Very Great Semiographer

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Translator: Simon Pleasance

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## REFERENCES

Aubry, Brigitte. *Richard Hamilton : peintre des apparences contemporaines (1950-2007)*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2009, (Inflexion)

Hamilton, Richard. *Le Grand déchiffreur. Richard Hamilton sur Marcel Duchamp : une sélection d'écrits, d'entretiens et de lettres*, Zurich : JRP/Ringier ; Paris : La Maison rouge, 2009, (Lectures Maison rouge)

- 1 For fifty years and more, Richard Hamilton has been an enthralling artist. He was not only a Pop Art pioneer, but also one of its earliest theoreticians... before the United States pilfered the idea and turned it into a lucrative trademark—their industrial model inspiring the movement, but the formulae of Cubism and Surrealism, with the re-use of found objects by collage and assemblage, also playing their part. Hamilton is little known outside the United Kingdom, and has been signally overlooked in France, where he nevertheless earned a first name for himself by latching onto the logo of the famous Ricard brand of *pastis*, but where his last name tends to catch the eye of watch fanatics and lovers of de-accessorized nymphets.
- 2 His bibliography in French is skimpy, with just three catalogues, one Canadian, all translated from English. So the publication of two new titles is headline news. But let it be said right away that we still need a stout monograph, a major show, and some acquisitions in order to remedy France's indifference to this major artist. And those lucky enough to have copies of the 1992 Tate catalogue<sup>1</sup> and the *Collected Words*<sup>2</sup>, published ten years earlier by Thames & Hudson, will still be perusing them with relish. Those more pressed for time will probably prefer a 2003 catalogue<sup>3</sup> that covers Hamilton's output

from 1937 to 2002 in just 106 pages—a feat of concision, when so many fatter volumes are being published about so many forty-somethings.

- 3 The book written by the historian Brigitte Aubry dispels any hint of impatience, with its 640 pages, 65 of them appendices. It subscribes to the spirit of the academic dissertation, as comes across at first glance from the plentiful footnotes, but it is a pleasing enough and quick read—made quicker, it just so happens, by the notes, which halve the length of the original text. The fact remains that there is a cumbersome use of inverted commas, often having a *cushioning* effect, or else encompassing quotations so numerous that the share of the author's pen is further reduced by half, with the result that it is at times hard to know what one is actually reading. Cushioning, incidentally, is not one of the book's symptomatic features. Because if inverted commas often help Aubry to smoothe the trivial character of certain expressions, there is no dearth of terminological detours (evinced a smile or two, when, for example, to describe traces of shit in the background of the picture *The Citizen* (1982-83), she prefers the expression “excremental stains” ; and, above all, the author is at pains not to cushion Hamilton's undeniable merits, even giving in, throughout her book, to a hagiographical rapture which reaches its acme when, reluctant to make comparisons with the artist's rivals, Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, she prefers to summon Johannes Vermeer, John Constable and Claude Monet. So, even if we are roundly persuaded of Hamilton's excellence, is it necessary to say that “the most persuasive” contribution to the exhibition *This Is Tomorrow* (1956) was his own? When that event, where the programmatic collage *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?*, produced that same year, was shown, was outstanding in every way. The devotion with which the author treats her doctoral subject is bothersome here, especially for readers already converted. And this is a pity, because her book, which is a must-read for French speakers around the world, can only inspire respect by virtue of its erudition, its didactic parsing, and the subtlety of certain analyses, in particular of the Joycean backdrop, and the artist's thinking about the exhibition genre, which goes well beyond his mere talent for rethinking museography. The pages on the painting and its illustrative material are more conventional, alas! And an effort is still needed to shed light on the notion of “tabular paradigm” which Aubry picks up on in Hamilton, and then in William R. Kaisen, and which, let us admit, is not self-explanatory, and still heartily resists translation. When Hamilton himself described his famous collage, he actually said: “The image should be thought of as tabular as well as pictorial”. Now, if his second adjective passes muster, all that is needed is to add *synoptic* to *table*, and what emerges from the recalcitrant epithet is the idea of inventory. The whole interest of *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes so Different, So Appealing?* thus involves prompting us to deal with things lying somewhere between inventory and illustration of engaged ideas. And the whole difficulty still remains one of finding the right connection between the world as it shows *itself* and the world as it declares *itself*—although it may be illusory to think that the world thus take the trouble, for us(?), to present itself and explain itself, for it is up to us to assume the arduous task of showing and declaring, and then finding the said relation between these two actions.
- 4 A second recent publication, *Le Grand déchiffreur*, edited by Corinne Diserens and Gesine Tosin, has Marcel Duchamp to thank for its title. Duchamp rewarded Hamilton with this nickname—“The Great Decipherer”—for all he did to shed light on *The Large Glass*. This is a book by Hamilton, a compilation of writings, interviews and letters written about and exchanged with the person who headed his pantheon, while pointing out “that the main

influence he has had on me is a sort of reaction against him.” These outstandingly translated writings teach us a great deal about Duchamp and the man who was his interpreter and almost his “humble and obedient servant” (I am quoting Baron Gros, portrait painter, for Napoleon). The book is the visible tip of an archive, the texts written between 1959 and 2008 are at times repetitive, but our reading of them is punctuated by restrained illustrations, captions, and highlighted quotations, and above all by letters, deferent to start with, then becoming increasingly affectionate: the whole endeavour put together to great effect, opening with a fine preface and making this book an instructive and engaging survey of two artists whose shared interest in machines definitely encouraged their encounter.

- 5 Of these two books, one introduces Hamilton as a “painter of contemporary appearances”, the other as an artist’s artist, opening up a wider look at the great and unrepentant painter that this very great semiographer still is.
- 6 We are currently awaiting Hal Foster’s book, *Richard Hamilton*<sup>4</sup>.

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## NOTES

1. *Richard Hamilton*, edited by Richard Morphet, London: Tate Gallery, 1992
2. Hamilton, Richard. *Collected Words: 1953-1982 (Painters & Sculptors)*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1982
3. *Richard Hamilton: Retrospective. Paintings And Drawings From 1937 To 2002*, Cologne: Walther Koenig, 2003
4. *Richard Hamilton*, (edited by Hal Foster and Alex Bacon), Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 2010, (October Files)