

H-France Review Vol. 11 (October 2011), No. 220

Jill Carrick, *Nouveau Réalisme, 1960s France, and the Neo-avant-garde. Topographies of Chance and Return*. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2010. xii + 184 pp. B&w illustrations, facsimilies, plan, bibliography and index. \$104.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-7546-6141-2

Review by Sarah Wilson, Courtauld Institute of Art

This is a fascinating book: the first critical *exposé* in English of French critic Pierre Restany's Nouveau réalisme movement, baptised in 1960, which ran parallel to American Pop but was ambivalent about Americanisation, a highly political issue. It was only in 2007 that a major exhibition at the Grand Palais did justice to the group as a whole, following a retrospective at the Musée de la Ville de Paris in 1986; the Centre Pompidou has recently staged a series of superb monographic shows of Nouveau Réaliste artists: Yves Klein, Jacques Villeglé and Arman. Like Pop, this movement broke from traditional School of Paris painting or sculpture which kept to traditional materials and modernist aesthetics of representation and abstraction. It introduced what Restany called *la prise sociologique du réel*: a 'sociological' engagement with real life into art, in the living presence of Marcel Duchamp, dada inventor of the 'readymade' before the First World War. Restany's show '40 degrees above Dada' of May 1961 acknowledges this paternity. To visual art one can add the new emphasis on 'things' in the French novel or the writings of Georges Perec, and the theoretical emphasis of 'everyday life' in Henri Lefebvre or the young Pierre Bourdieu; a heady ambient discourse that distinguishes Nouveau Réalisme from the pragmatic relations with objects of contemporary American artists such as Robert Rauschenberg.

Whereas the 1986 exhibition omitted crucial references to the knowledge or visibility of works by Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, the 2007 Grand Palais catalogue was far more sophisticated and included Jill Carrick's essay 'Le Nouveau réalisme: un détournement de la profusion des choses' (developed in her book as Chapter 3, 'Restaging commodity spectacle') together with Didier Semin's new 'melancholic' reading and various other focuses.

What was particularly French about the movement in the 1960s? Restany argued for his artists' French identity—despite their contemporaneity with the American neo-Dadaists such as Jasper Johns or Rauschenberg. He succeeded, one could argue, but at a price; the currency of 'Pop' as a more successful brand name would win out. In June 1961, the Galerie Rive Droite show 'Le Nouveau Réalisme à Paris et à New York' offered an image of mutual exchange and appreciation, but in New York at the Sidney Janis Gallery, 'New Realism' in 1962, Restany's presence was diminished and his essay cruelly truncated. But Franco-American artistic friendships were strong: between, for example, Niki de Saint Phalle and Rauschenberg, whose 'shooting event' at the American Embassy in June 1961 Paris also involved Johns, and the experimental musicians David Tudor and John Cage. Larry Rivers and Jean Tinguely's collaborative sculpture, *The Turning Friendship between America and France*, 1961-2, also signified this relationship before 'art history' raised its head.

The Duchampian notion of the 'readymade' was crucial for Nouveau Réalisme and for American neo-dada—the junk aesthetic of Rauschenberg's 'combine paintings' or Oldenburg's 'Store', for example. Following Robert Motherwell's *The Dada Painters and Poets* in 1951, Robert Lebel's pioneering and comprehensive monograph on Duchamp was published in French and English in 1959. Together with the cult of the 'everyday', perceptions of the mythic power of objects were altered by contemporary advertising and consumer spectacle as theorised in Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957). The Situationists' promotion of *dérive* (drift) and *détournement* (the 'perverting' of objects or

ideas away from their original functions) and Guy Debord's idea of capitalism as a 'society of the spectacle' (1967) played their role. In addition, the *nouveau roman's* abandonment of traditional narrative and plot for deadpan description and sophisticated games with time and narrative voice, along with *nouvelle vague* cinema's use of Parisian streets and ambient sound, chimed with the Nouveau Réaliste artists' own strategies. Pierre Astier's *La Crise du roman français et le nouveau réalisme* (1968) generalised the term in a literary context.

For those in the francophone world, or for art historians, the personalities, the art works and famous moments of the movement's history are well known: Yves Klein's blue monochromes, his 'empty' exhibition *Le Vide*—'The Void'—Cesar's crushed car or thumb sculptures, Arman's 'accumulations' suspended in perspex, the torn posters of Raymond Hains and Jacques de la Villeglé or Niki de Saint Phalle's shooting-paintings. Carrick's book therefore does not tell all these stories, but functions polemically, as indeed it aims to do. Her text moves effortlessly from theoretical contextualisations of the period to the verdicts of today's most powerful art historians, such as Benjamin Buchloh or Hal Foster (*The Return of the Real*, 1996). She uses as a framing device artist Daniel Spoerri's *Topographie anecdotée du hasard*, a description of the items on the table in his flat—at 3.47 pm on 17 October 1961—a small book published by the Galerie Lawrence for his show in 1962.

Disavowal—political disavowal—is at the heart of Carrick's proposition. Pierre Restany's own reading has dominated interpretation thus far, she argues. She criticises his 'taking up [of] the rose-tinted spectacles of optimism on offer in post-war, commodity-obsessed France' where 'Restany argued that Nouveau Réalisme directly mirrored French postwar society's enthusiasm for new mass-produced goods.' Restany was a Gaullist; indeed, at one period he worked for the government. This adds to his 'not left enough' position for Carrick. Yet she does not point out the humiliation and disarray of the Communists after Stalin's death and the revelation of his crimes in 1956—let alone the arguments for the political necessity of allegiance with the 'Atlantic civilisation' promoted forcefully by Raymond Aron in the postwar period. As an adversary of Jean-Paul Sartre, Aron's was the pragmatic and steadfast alternative based on the reality of Marshall plan aid. Americanisation was the inevitable corollary to modernisation. The excitement of the American-lead age of nuclear energy and space travel embraced by Yves Klein and of the first trips to America for many of these artists is not conveyed here, while Restany is castigated for his enthusiasm and positive rhetoric.

One of the most significant quotations in Carrick's book is by the (English) U.S.-based critic John Russell: '...In terms of idiom, the *nouveau réaliste* reacts to air conditioning or the use of plastic materials as Sir Joshua Reynolds reacted to the sight of a South Sea islander....And it is precisely on the detail of household equipment, show-window installation, neighborhood newspaper ads, commercial photography, street signs and dime-store 'fancy-goods' that the *nouveau réaliste* has fastened...'. He sees this reaction as one of delay and an exoticising of what was utterly normal for the readers of *Art in America* in 1966. Carrick invokes contemporary French theory and contrasts the artists' choice of objects with contrasting elements of everyday life exhibited in the *Mythologies* show of 1964. Both miss the sense of nausea, even revulsion, at a new world signified, for example, by Martial Raysse's works made of multi-coloured detergent bottles. These plastics were vulgar, not indigenous, indestructible and non biodegradable. Like French cooking versus tins of American *Green Giant* sweet corn, 'progress' was not necessarily positive. 'Lateness' as regards America was also played off by the Nouveaux Réalistes against the question of memory and its resurgence through the adapted 'readymade': the used, forgotten, rejected or broken objects encountered in so much work. There was also a transformation of the wartime 'make do and mend aesthetic' that dealt with the shock of the old, not the new.

Evidently Carrick's illustrations of Arman's accumulated gasmasks in 'Restaging Commodity Spectacle'—the broken dolls and most specifically his boxed pile of dentures—evoke the Second World War and the Holocaust, whatever the artists' retrospective denials. One does not need Benjamin Buchloh's 1998 article on Arman and Klein or subsequent work, deployed with sensitivity and aplomb—such as Michael Rothenberg's *Traumatic Realism, The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, 2000—to justify an 'archeology' of Nouveau Réaliste deep memory at work. The

Nouveau Réaliste era, of course, followed Alain Resnais' 1955 film *Nuit et Brouillard* (*Night and Fog*) with its 'accumulations' of spectacles and other human remnants at Auschwitz and was contemporary with the Eichmann trials in Jerusalem and the first French translations of Hannah Arendt's work on totalitarianism.

The weight Carrick gives to 'disavowal of the Holocaust' displaces, I feel, a sufficient consideration of the Algerian war as context. Nouveau Réalisme was an angry movement, confronting contemporary violence with its own violent art. Its works had not a merely reflective, but, I would suggest, a specifically tautological function, *confronting* the commodity-obsessed blandness of disavowal. France was psychologically torn apart—as was indicated by the title of the torn poster exhibition 'La France déchirée', 1961. Martial Raysse's supermarket-based works again are exemplary. Behind the products used to make the works, signalling of everyday eating, shopping, and washing, is, implicitly, the background of the 'war with no name' raging in the streets of Paris itself. The torn-poster works of Raymond Hains and Jacques de la Villeglé make reference to political slogans, to torture—attacks on Malraux and De Gaulle. Hains's torn poster, *OAS Fusillez les plastiqueurs*, 1961, makes the link between plastics and the bomb-throwers: while for Barthes 'Polystyrene' was the name of a modern nymph, here it became a weapon of destruction.

Carrick's focus confirms her presupposition that the movement was generally apolitical. We move from Restany's theory of the object to 'avant-garde or Néo', 'Restaging commodity spectacle', and then 'Phallic Victories? Nouveau Réaliste performance'. Here, Jean Tinguely's exploding phallus, *La Vittoria*, erected in front of Milan cathedral in the 1970s—a *renvoi* for the movement's tenth anniversary—is used to frame an analysis of the shooting paintings (*Tirs*) by Niki de Saint Phalle. 'Pyrrhic victories and phallic defeats ... challenged concepts of masculinity and femininity prevalent in France in the early 1960s': Carrick's excellence as an art historian in a more traditional vein is demonstrated as she compares the exploding structure and its photographs with Tinguely's post-facto portfolio of related drawings and diagrams, embellished with various decorative 'supplements': 'the playful language of exaggeration and fetishistic excess characteristic of Tinguely's project itself.' Besides Niki's vocabulary of 'booby-trapped phallic symbols' Carrick investigates her 'double-edged staging of female masquerade'. The comparisons with the naked females of Yves Klein's *Anthropometries* and the Bulgarian artist Christo's *Wrapped women* are illuminating. And of course the castrating, traumatic elements of the *Tirs* are investigated. But the psychoanalytic bravura comes at the expense of Niki's anger—her political anger. Not just the *Khrushchev-Kennedy* piece (June 1963) 'focused on the threat of war', but a complete *œuvre* created against the background of the Algerian war, the OAS bombings in Paris, nightly reports of conquests, hostages, victims, bleeding like the trickles of paint on the shot surfaces of her canvases....

To end again with Spoerri's *Anecdoted Topography*... Carrick asks whether it can be reconceived as an 'unconventional memory site or *lieu de mémoire*'. Pierre Nora's concept is discussed and parallels with Georges Perec's novels are evoked. But Carrick does not comment upon the date at which the works were trapped on Spoerri's tabletop, the afternoon of 17 October 1961, when literally thousands of Algerians were assembling to protest at a mass demonstration across Paris, leading to extraordinary police brutality and the subsequent discovery of dozens of corpses floating in the Seine.[1] Evidently Spoerri's 'piece' was highly elaborated from a literary point of view prior to its first presentation in 1962. Chance indeed? Might the unmentioned 'absence' in Spoerri's commentary be as significant as the missing 'e' in Perec's *La disparition* (1969)? Might there be a political meaning intended beyond the deadpan—sociologically acute—enumeration and elaboration of objects? '*Implicitement oui...*', said the French critic, Alain Jouffroy, when I asked him—while lamenting the half-century gap in time separating him from the events he once lived so vividly.[2]

It is this *implicitement* which challenges the notions of amnesia, disavowal and commodity fetishism upon which this wide-ranging, scholarly work is based (often witty, with its love of criticism as parody, from the discovery of the Belgian *Daily Bul*, 1963, to ex-Lettriste Robert Estival's little known *L'avant-garde parisien depuis 1945*). The knowledge and self-knowledge of what was implicitly shared by intellectuals at the time raises questions parallel to but deeper than the néo-avant-garde's relationship to pre-1939 precursors or Estivals' challenge to what he saw as a

conformist *pseudo-avant-garde*. These complexities and rivalries surely escape the art historians of the 1980s and 1990s. Spoerri was the master of lenses and distorted or 'corrected' vision (see his *L'Optique moderne* of 1963)—indeed the *Topographie* is presented as a novel for the blind. Carrick contrasts the movement's transparency for Restany with the darker games of opacity and blindness in Spoerri.... But we can never share their spectacles. Such is the writing of history and art history.

Ashgate Press does a service to our discipline. Yet price is a huge deterrent (\$104.95) for this relatively slim volume, while small black and white illustrations simply cannot convey the visual impact of the art discussed. Non-French-speaking students are tentative about engaging with French catalogues, yet in what French literature faculties would there be the full range of well-illustrated Nouveau Réaliste publications? The plethora of literature on Pop art versus Carrick's courageous 'first' demonstrates the still-actual cultural politics, functioning across Anglo-American university humanities departments, of a 1960s Cold War triumph.

Notes

[1] See Élie Kagan, Jean-Luc Einaudi, *17 octobre 1961*, Arles, Actes sud-BDIC, 2001.

[2] Alain Jouffroy, 30 December 2010.

Sarah Wilson
Courtauld Institute of Art
sarah.wilson@courtauld.ac.uk

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172