

Defining abstract art, Paris - New York - Tokyo, 1944-1964

Thursday 7 February 2019

Françoise Nicol, *a two-year study on the “School of Paris”*

Drawing on the writings of Georges Limbour, our analysis is based on the artistic proliferation associated with the stormy theoretical debates around abstract art. The problematic “School of Paris” concept in the post-war period leads us to question the role of Paris in the new international context. While many studies have focused on comparing Paris and New York, the Paris-Tokyo relationship remains relatively unknown, at least in France.

Michael Lucken, *Japan: the risk of elsewhere*

Contrary to the approaches which seek to either compare the East and the West or to identify local specificities, the Japan historian, Michael Lucken, reflects on the possible similarities. What is common to both Europe and Japan, the “here” and the “elsewhere”? And what is the nature of the relationship that ties us to this commonality? To respond to this question, we will begin by analysing two works of art, figurative works painted in Japan in the 1910s (Kishida Ryūsei) and abstract works created in Europe in the 1960s (Jean Degottex). While the forms are radically distinct, there are nonetheless several similarities relating to exoticism, a demand for the renewal of techniques, and a certain spiritual quest. Common points must often be sought more in the processes and postures adopted than in the forms.

Lilian Froger, *1962, Pierre Restany’s Japanese year*

In October 1962, the critic Pierre Restany made his first trip to Japan to participate in the jury of the Tokyo International Mini-Print Biennial. In the preceding years, he had taken an interest in traditional and modern Japanese painting and frequented popular Japanese artists living in Paris (including Domoto Hisao). He was

also in contact with his Japanese counterparts. Drawing on the documents available in the critic’s archives and his writings on Japanese painting, we will assess how this stay in 1962 influenced Pierre Restany’s positions on Japanese abstract art, and, as a result, enabled him to better define his critical thinking of Japanese painting as it developed at the beginning of the 1960s.

Natalia Smolianskaia, *“Let yourself go”: abstract art at the crossroads of concrete corporeality*

These are the words Charles Estienne, future theorist of lyrical abstraction, used in the conclusion of his manifesto *Is abstract art an academicism?*, published in 1950, at a time when abstract art had become “institutionalised.” By criticising the academicism of abstract art, Estienne considered that the tendency to deprive art of experimentation, of intellectual “blood”, was dangerous. He saw this tendency as one concerning “outsider” art, where geometric formalisation prevented free creation. At the same time, the symbolic representatives of the first pictorial happenings, Pollock and Mathieu, visited Japan in the early 1950s. They both met the Japanese vanguard, who, literally, had “*let themselves go*” and had begun creating based on what lay “within”, that is to say, with the body and with increased momentum within space, at the crossroads of corporeality and colour. This was in relation to the exhibitions and events presented by the Gutai group in the 1950s (Outdoor and Indoor) and the butoh dance at the end of the 1950s. We will attempt to analyse this *letting oneself go* and these forms of abstract corporeality by comparing geographical contexts, cultural policies, and the ways in which art and abstraction was reflected upon in the 1950s/1960s and today.

Fabrice Flahutez, *Between abstraction and figuration, letterism as the third path*

In the summer of 1945, Isidore Isou established letterism in a context in which artistic circles were gradually reconstituting

themselves. The first letterist event, which took place on 8 January 1946 in Paris, officially launched the movement and their magazine defined it as “the only contemporary movement of the artistic avant-garde”. However, the critics at the time were divided exclusively between abstract and figurative art, which constituted the paradigm through which works of art were envisaged. In brief, a new global order, that of the Cold War, was taking shape to validate the idea of an Eastern bloc subjected to the dictates of realism and a Western bloc proposing abstract art that was more or less geometric, and more or less lyrical, depending on each individual, a paragon of the free world. The critical texts that filled up the *Combat et Art d'aujourd'hui* journal, especially those written by Charles Estienne and Léon Degand, spoke in the same voice to reinforce these two biases. The distinctive characteristic of letterism was thus the fact that it led the offensive against the two formal categories, abstraction and figuration, which Isou considered carried on with a well-worn tradition of painting whose concepts had been defined at the beginning of the 20th century. This was not the combat of a single man. He was joined by other major figures of modernism after 1945. In a sense, letterism proposed a third path which we will attempt to put into perspective with the complex historical issues in the post-war period.

Marc Petitjean, *Living treasure*, the film on Kunihiro Moriguchi, “Living National Treasure” in Japan. Marc Petitjean went to Kyoto in 2011 to pay a visit to the artist Kunihiro MORIGUCHI. Kunihiro practices traditional art in Japan, yuzen (kimono silk painting), which he learned from his father, MORIGUCHI Kako, who was a Living National Treasure himself. The artist has renewed this traditional art of which he has a perfect mastery of the means, supports and materials used as well as of the methods of intervention. The training of this great friend of Balthus and Gaëtan Picon at the school of decorative arts of Paris (1963-1966) and his extensive knowledge of Western art placed him on a

path closely connected to abstract art, in an approach he himself refers to as “avant-gardist” This film was screened during the Kunihiro Moriguchi exhibition – *Towards a hidden order* (2016, at the Maison Franco-Japonaise of Paris).

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Sandrine Hyacinthe, *The work of Tal-Coat, a return to the lost path of abstraction*

Tal Coat has been alternatively described as figurative or non-figurative, as a “soft Taschist”, an “abstract ascetic”, or even an “Anartist” (a mixture of an anarchist and an artist). Labile, his work appears as a blind spot in the history of art. We will analyse the reasons behind this. Involved in the fights around the definition of abstract art, this artist and his “substantial allies” (René Char) developed an artistic approach defending the idea of an unfinished creation, which contradicted the modernist ideas of science and progress. Their shared reference to primitive, ancient and simple forms led to a return to drawings, landscapes and the human figure. Lastly, the work of Tal-Coat acted as a mediating element in the reflections around abstract art in the 1950s. In this context, we will analyse the various ways in which this work has been positioned in collective and international exhibitions between 1945 and 1964.

Frédéric Montegu, *Abstract art and landscapes*

According to Georges Roque, abstract art refers to “works that have ceased to represent the outside world, but are conceived as an inner arrangement of the relationships between forms and colours”. However, abstract painting may, in a concealed way, provide satisfactory imagery with regard to the landscape theme. This type of painting could lead to the creation of considerable possible images, a fantasy pole between images and non-images, and between appearance and disappearance. Our reflection will draw on various critical and theoretical articles as well as on various visual works

(from the 1950s), notably the works of Mark Rothko, Joan Mitchell, Willem de Kooning, Sam Francis and Helen Franckenthaler.

Raphael Neville, *How surrealism was related to abstract art after World War II*

While refusing to open a debate between figurative and abstract art, surrealism maintained an ambivalent relationship with abstract art after World War II. Frequently denouncing the “dehydrated soup” it blamed for leading pictorial automatism astray, the movement was close to Charles Estienne and the tachisme of the 1950s. We will see how the surrealist group, gathered around André Breton, attempted to question abstract art in various ways in an attempt to renew itself and define a new generation capable of animating it.

Yves Chevretil Desbiolles, screening of the film *Hélion*, New York, 1946, *an artist at work* or Hélion and the abandonment of abstract art

Three years after his escape from a stalag in Pomerania, Germany, in 1942, Hélion wrote the screenplay and the dialogues of a 28-minute film about himself. The film, shot in his studio in 1946, spoke volumes about the abstract art he had recently abandoned. Featured in the film alongside Hélion were his director, Thomas Bouchard, and Bouchard’s assistant, Diane Bouchard, Peggen Vail, his young wife and daughter of Peggy Guggenheim, and Stanley Bate, the British composer and pianist who played his *Opus 54*, probably composed for the film.

Juliette Evezard, *Michel Tapié, or Japan’s “temptation”*

After having conquered Italy, Spain and the United States, on Thursday 5 September 1957, that is nine days after the arrival of his friend, the painter Georges Mathieu, in Japan, Michel Tapié, the promoter of Art Informel, set foot on the tarmac of Tokyo International Airport for the first time. He was the guest of the Gutai group, whom he endeavoured to include in his theoretical and

merchant system of art autre. This marked the beginning of his Japanese adventure...

The round table

Jean-Claude Drouin: “The witness of an adventure whose importance I could not possibly have imagined as the teenager I was, I had met most of the actors inadvertently in my early years. A little later, in 1949, our family, out of necessity, settled in the basement of the gallery where, in 1947, the new home of Art brut stood. That was where René, Olga, and some friends or followers whose number varied depending on the circumstances would meet. Of the conversations that took place, I have kept in mind not the meaning but at least the little music, alive yet warm, of those who shared the same passion. I also still remember the gallery vernissages. In 1951, René Drouin had to close his gallery at Place Vendôme, before opening another, a more modest one, at rue Visconti. In his reserves were a large number of unsold works which would later be found in various major museums. An adventure that ended badly, and yet... was so beautiful.”

Benoît Decron will propose a historical analysis of the art gallery and place René Drouin as a gallery owner and editor back within the context of Parisian artistic life.

Claire Paulhan will discuss the relationship between René Drouin and Jean Paulhan based on the letters from René and Olga Drouin to Jean Paulhan, as well as the letters from Delange, Fautrier, Dubuffet, Michaux, Bousquet, Wols and Guérin to Jean Paulhan.

Nicole Marchand-Zañartu will speak in memory of Olga and René Drouin by referring to the creation of the exhibition in tribute to René Drouin, presented in 2016 in the library of Decorative Arts in Paris.