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Brigitte Gilardet

Translator: Simon Pleasance



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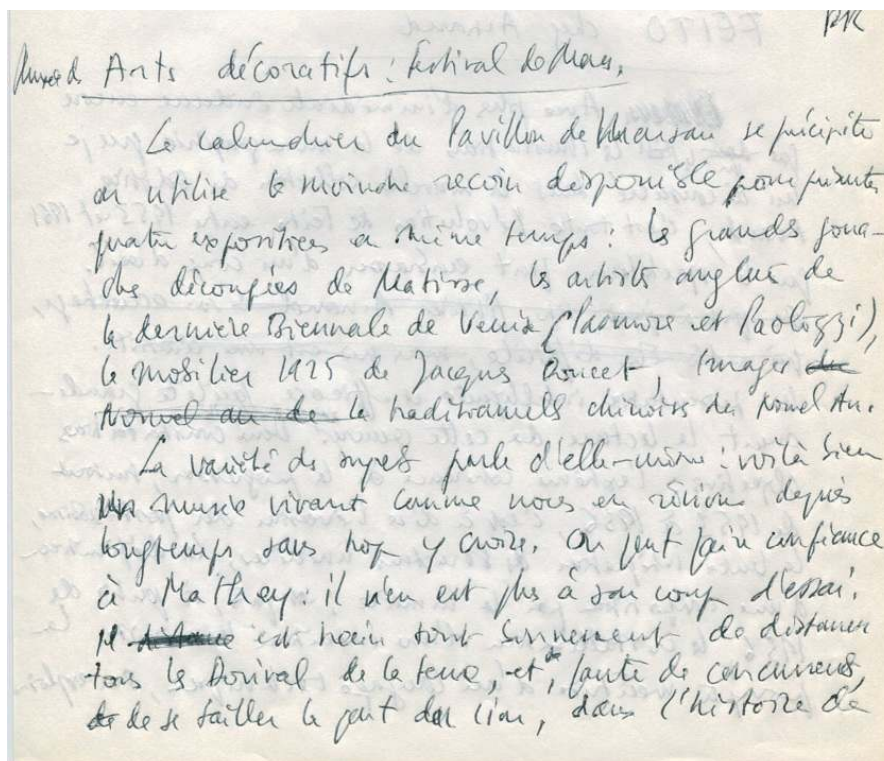
François Mathey's Programme, through the Eyes of Three Art Critics

Brigitte Gilardet

Translation : Simon Pleasance

- 1 François Mathey (1917-1993), curator then head curator at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (1953-1985), organized more than 350 exhibitions. The collections of the Archives de la critique d'art trace his hectic activity. With Michel Ragon, Pierre Restany and Gérard Gassiot-Talabot he shared the same tastes and the same desire to promote living art. The three critics all backed him in this adventure. François Mathey, in turn, supported them when they championed Nouveau Réalisme, Figuration Narrative, and utopian architecture. The exhibition *60/72 : douze ans d'art contemporain en France* brought this mutual back-slapping to an end, because François Mathey had the audacity to present his own history of art. The show was deemed to be political, to boot, and duly condemned.
- 2 Yet François Mathey's early days were nevertheless seen as promising. In 1960, Pierre Restany hailed his daring, along with that of his co-curator for the exhibition *Antagonismes*, Julien Alvard: "The doors of the National Museum of Modern Art will be the last to open [...]. Faced with this all too customary shortfall, it is the Pavillon de Marsan which is scoring points, with François Mathey gulping in the emanations, pure and impure alike, of the new wave. The exhibition *Antagonismes*, at the musée des Arts décoratifs, is an event of paramount importance for the artistic life of Paris."¹

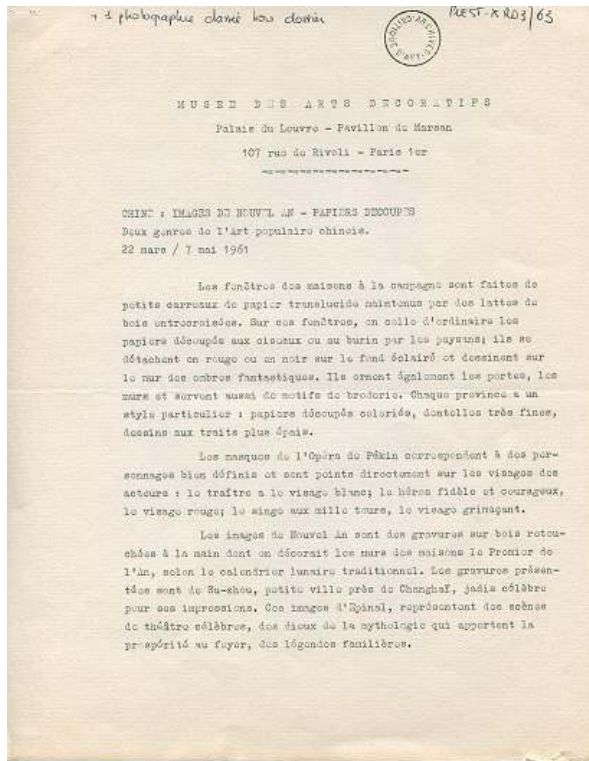
Extrait du manuscrit de l'article « L'Actualité, musée des Arts décoratifs », *Cimaise*, n°53, mai-juin 1961, p. 84, fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.X/E009/68 (1 feuillet recto/verso) – Archives de la critique d'art © Marcelle Decock



- 3 In 1961, Michel Ragon focused on the activities of François Mathey, like him a great admirer of Jean Dubuffet. François Mathey organized this artist's first retrospective in Paris in 1960, and included him in the series of events devoted to the "masters of Modern Art", who were at the same time being hailed by New York's MoMA and Alfred Barr: "After the shows devoted to Picasso, Chagall and Léger, after the Guggenheim exhibition, after young Spanish painting, François Mathey is in the process of turning the musée des Arts décoratifs, where he is one of the curators, into one of Paris's most lively venues."²
- 4 That same year, in underscoring the ever-growing place occupied by François Mathey in the scene involving exhibitions of living art, Pierre Restany took things a few steps further: "The schedule of the Pavillon de Marsan is quickening. The available modern nook is being used to put on four shows at the same time: Matisse's large cut-out gouaches, the English artists at the latest Venice Biennale (Pasmore and Paolozzi), Jacques Doucet's furniture 1925, and traditional Chinese images of the new year. The variety of the subjects speaks for itself: here, indeed, is a living museum such as we have long been dreaming of, albeit with not a great deal of conviction. We can put our trust in Mathey: this is by no means his first such foray! He is quite simply in the process of outdistancing all the Dorivals on earth and, for lack of competitors, taking the lion's share, in the history of our contemporary museology."³
- 5 François Mathey duly carried his momentum forward. In 1962, he put on the exhibition *Antagonismes II: l'Objet*, which brought together 150 artists and displayed almost 500 objects. Pierre Restany emphasized the originality of the approach: "Two years after *Antagonismes*, which was an itinerary through contemporary painting, the musée des Arts décoratifs is offering us a second invitation to make a journey, this time in the field of the

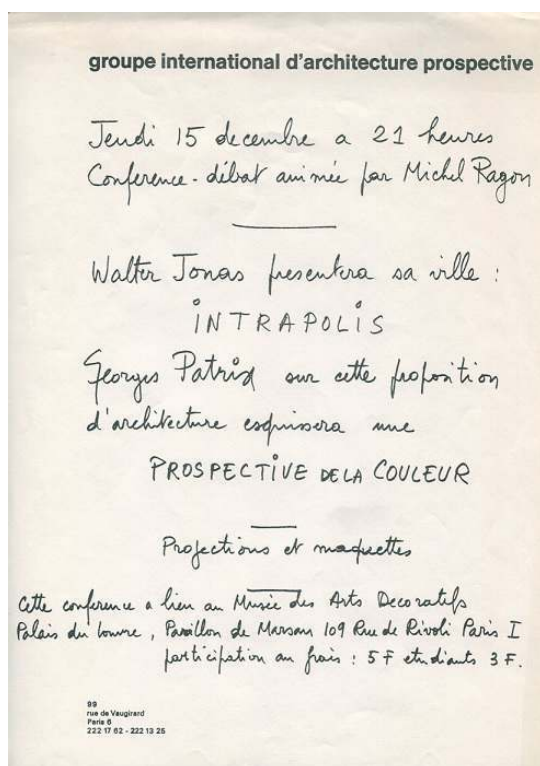
object [...]. And just as *Antagonismes* indicted the “good painting” of our day and age and mercilessly underscored forms of stylistic conformity, *Antagonismes II* takes on the spirit of an anti-functionalist manifesto. Functionalism is the industrial by-product of the geometric spirit, in applied art.”⁴

Communiqué de presse du musée des Arts décoratifs sur l'exposition de papiers découpés du Nouvel An chinois, fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XR03/63 – Archives de la critique d'art



- 6 Michel Ragon waxed enthusiastic on the subject, admiring the baroque daring of the exhibitors and railing against the functional spirit conveyed by supporters of the Union des Artistes Modernes (UAM), whom he found by and large old hat: “We are suddenly plunged right back into the thick of sinuous, curving lines, called in French style *nouille*, “noodle style”. The volutes, curves, and floral and animal naturalism dear to the generation of the end of the 19th century, all that is thrown right in your face with not so much as a ‘watch out’ [...] Leaving the Pavillon de Marsan feeling a tad sickened, I found myself dumbfounded in the Salon des arts ménagers. Dumbfounded in front of the poverty of the forms on view, and their mean and petty look. [...] I thought I could contrast Mathieu’s theatrical bed with an indisputable “functional” bed with pure forms. I thought as much in vain. And the beds proposed by the Salon des arts ménagers are chilling, protestant and ridiculous. What can be the use of such parallelpipeds? Just for sleeping on.”⁵

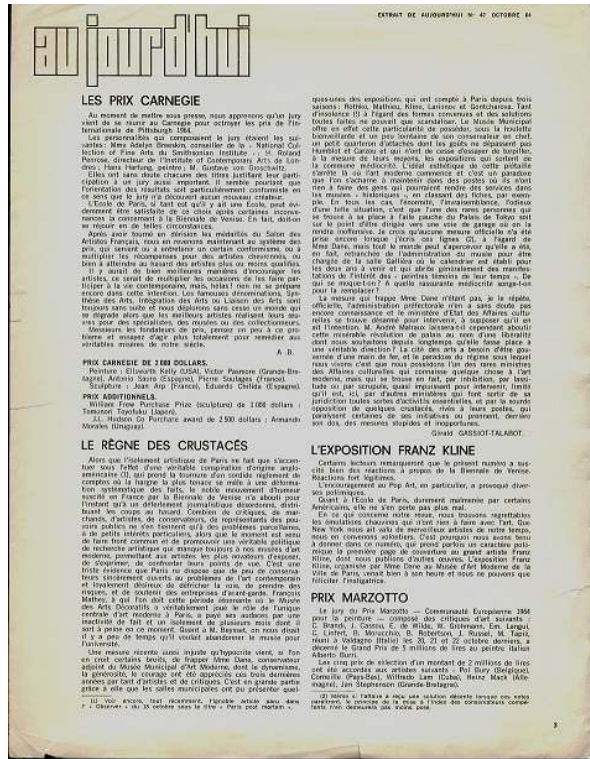
Notes relatives aux conférences du GIAP dans l'auditorium du musée des Arts décoratifs, fonds Michel Ragon, dossier complémentaire GIAP (versement 2007) – Archives de la critique d'art



- 7 In 1963, the critic submitted an exhibition project to the musée des Arts décoratifs, *Antagonismes III : l'Architecture*. For him, this museum was the best suited to accommodating his project “because of the options it has already taken in favour of modern architecture, to undertake the great show which has not yet been held in any country about the architecture and city planning of the future.”⁶ But even though programmed, the exhibition never happened. On the other hand, Michel Ragon and the GIAP (Groupe International d'Architecture Prospective) were invited to give lectures in the museum's auditorium.
- 8 François Mathey was not yet head curator, but he was contemplating leaving his museum. In 1964, Jean Cassou thought he could glimpse a coalition aimed at replacing himself at the head of the MNAM by François Mathey. He complained bitterly to Gaëtan Picon about this.⁷ Pierre Restany was alleged to be part of the “plot”. He had in fact written a scathing article about the Pevsner donation, in which he also pointed out that François Mathey was inexplicably relegated to the sidelines.
- 9 That same year, the curator joined Marie-Claude Dane and Gérald Gassiot-Talabot to organize the exhibition *Mythologies quotidiennes* at the City of Paris Museum of Modern Art. The show brought together 34 artists from the Figuration Narrative and Nouveau Réalisme movements, along with future Arte Povera figures (Michelangelo Pistoletto), and painters supported by the Daniel Cordier gallery. Despite the announced backing of André Malraux,⁸ the exhibition was delayed, at the request of the head of the municipal museum. In the magazine *Aujourd'hui*, Gérald Gassiot-Talabot stressed the artistic isolation of Paris and the difficulties encountered by François Mathey and Marie-Claude Dane: “The moment has come to get together and promote a real policy of artistic research which is still missing in our museums of modern art, enabling the most

innovative artists to exhibit, express themselves, and compare their viewpoints. It is sadly obvious that Paris has few curators who are sincerely open to the issue of contemporary art, and loyally keen to clear the decks, take risks and support avant-garde undertakings. François Mathey, to whom we are indebted for this amazing period when the musée des Arts décoratifs has truly played the role of the sole modern art power house in Paris, has paid for his audacity by a period of *de facto* inactivity and several months of isolation, from which he is just barely emerging at this moment.”⁹

Gérald Gassiot-Talabot, « Le Règne des crustacés », *Aujourd'hui*, no 47, octobre 1964, p. 3. Fonds G. Gassiot-Talabot, dossier exposition « Mythologies quotidiennes 1-Paris 1964 », document numérique : GGT0100_cop1964 – Archives de la critique d'art © Benoît Gassiot-Talabot

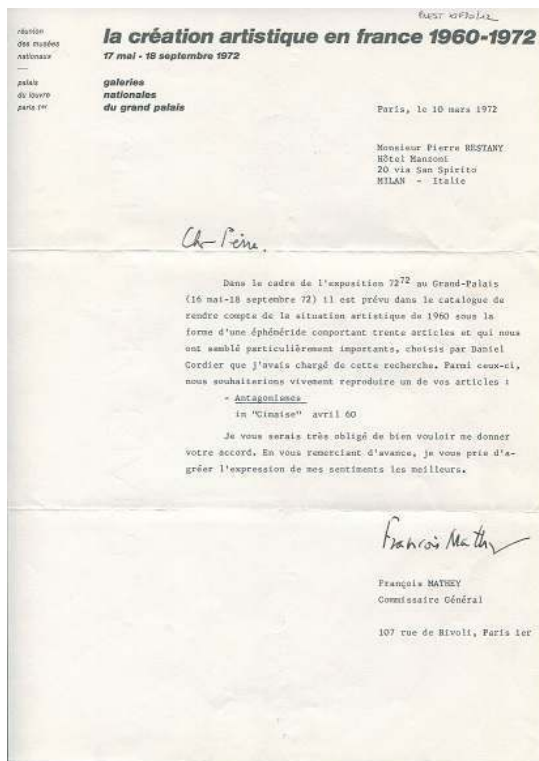


- 10 On 26 December 1964, Pierre Restany summed up the situation of Paris’s museums: “At the musée des Arts décoratifs, the situation is still as unsettled as could be. The former head curator [...] has been replaced by an acting head curator, René Salanon [...]. All this so as to permit the “smooth” return of François Mathey, who has effectively resumed his job as curator, [...], although he has given me to think that his position is delicate: Mathey is only half-satisfied with this return to the parent company, for he now has far greater ambitions.”¹⁰
- 11 In 1965, Michel Ragon borrowed the idea of the “Object” and organized an exhibition in the private Lacluche gallery titled *Le Studio meublé place Vendôme*. In 1966, the gallery held a smaller exhibition titled *Objet 2 : pour un mobilier contemporain*, and François Mathey and Michel Ragon together contributed to the catalogue for it.
- 12 In 1967 François Mathey fully resumed his position at the museum and officially became head curator. He was thus able to underwrite new means of expression. He duly played host to the exhibition *BD et Figuration Narrative*, a first in a Paris museum. It was organized by Gérald Gassiot-Talabot (for the pictorial section), and by Claude Moliterni and Pierre Couperie for the comic strip section. Roy Lichtenstein acted as a “lynchpin” between the

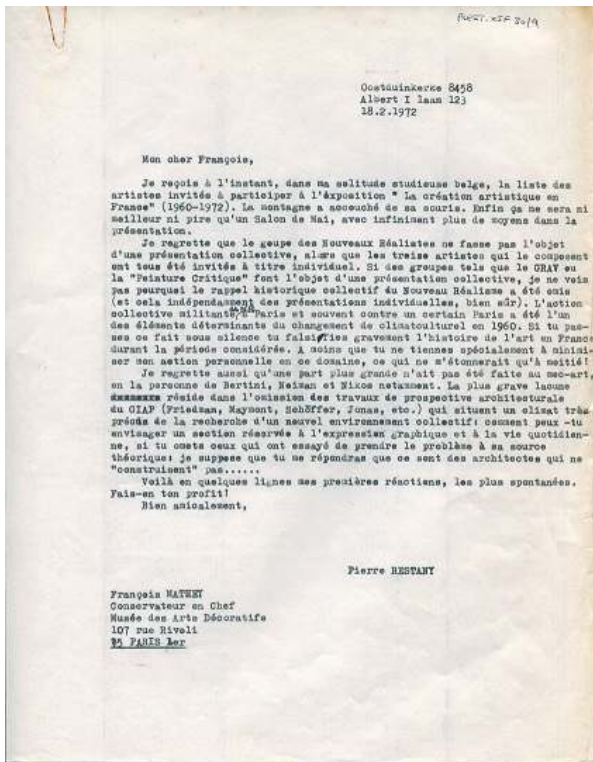
exhibition's two parts. Gérald Gassiot-Talabot was adamant that James Rosenquist's picture *F111* should be exhibited¹¹. François Mathey, for his part, introduced Ted Rousseau, MoMA's director, so that the show would go on to the United States. Gérald Gassiot-Talabot dreamed accordingly that "the visual part be treated in an autonomous way, with a greater scope."¹²

- 13 François Mathey devoted a large chunk of 1969 to the Nouveaux Réalistes. He in fact exhibited César, Arman and Yves Klein. Pierre Restany pointed out that François Mathey's support of Yves Klein had been slow in coming but decisive for the artist.¹³ In 1969, François Mathey held Klein's first retrospective in a Paris museum. The show's hanging would be challenged by Pierre Restany¹⁴ and François Pluchart.¹⁵ But it was actually Daniel Moquay, Rotraut Klein's husband, who was responsible for it, and who chose to show only a third of the works shortlisted by François Mathey and Rotraut Klein. Yves Klein was invariably a controversial subject among part of the public, as illustrated by a tract in *Polycritique Paris* which described the intervention of the police during a debate about him in the museum's auditorium.¹⁶ The exhibition was subsequently shown in Grenoble.

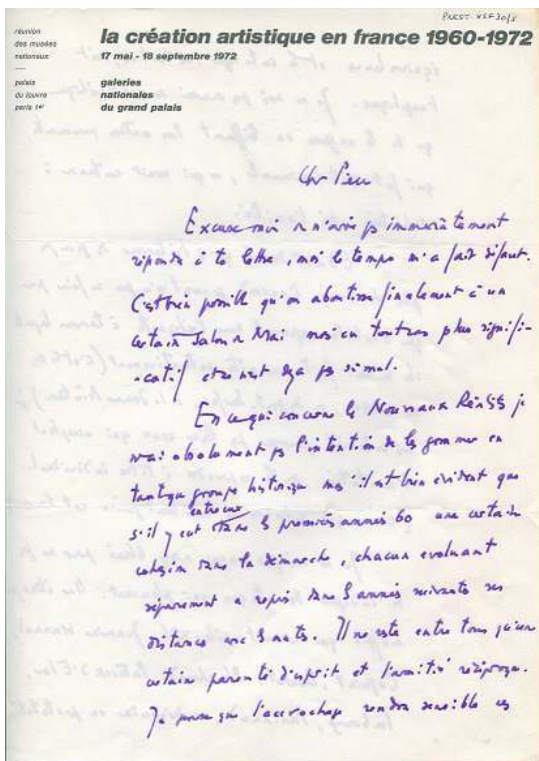
Lettre tapuscrite de François Mathey à Pierre Restany datée du 10 mars 1972 demandant l'autorisation de reproduire au catalogue l'article « Antagonismes », paru dans *Cimaise* en avril 1960. Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSF30/12 – Archives de la critique d'art © Sophie Tranie



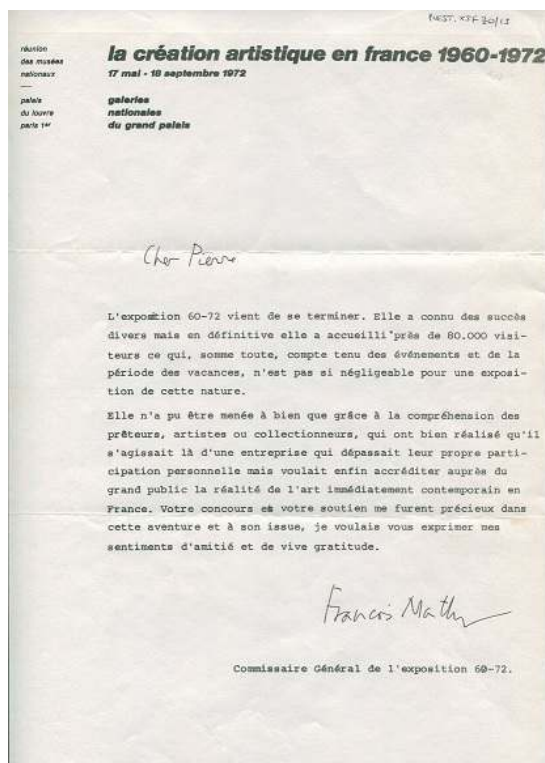
Lettre tapuscrite de Pierre Restany à François Mathey datée du 18 février 1972. Fonds Pierre Restany PREST.XSF30/9 – Archives de la critique d'art © Marcelle Decock



Lettre manuscrite de François Mathey à Pierre Restany datée du 7 mars 1972 (p. 1/2). Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSF30/5 – Archives de la critique d'art © Sophie Tranie



Lettre tapuscrite, non datée, de François Mathey remerciant Pierre Restany en sa qualité de prêteur pour l'exposition *60/72 : douze ans d'art contemporain*. Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSF30/15 – Archives de la critique d'art © Sophie Tranie



- 14 If the curator's programme was regularly reported by the critics, between 1968 and 1972 these latter gradually found other allies (such as Pierre Gaudibert) and other exhibition venues like the CNAC and the ARC. In 1972, everything changed dramatically. François Mathey was the curator of the much disparaged chosen summary exhibition: *60/72 : douze ans d'art contemporain en France* (May to September 1972, Paris: Grand Palais). He wrote to Pierre Restany: "In the end, Pompidou gave me *carte blanche*, and preferred a more dynamic exhibition which would describe the situation since 1960, rather than a broad official fresco of art history in France since 1945, which was the initial idea." Pierre Restany loaned him some works and agreed that his articles could be reproduced in the catalogue. But on 18 February 1972, Pierre Restany wrote to François Mathey lamenting the absence of any collective presentation of the Nouveaux Réalistes, the poor showing of Mec'art (Gianni Bertini, Nikos, Yehuda Neiman) and the omission of the GIAP. He reproached him for glossing over "the militant collective activities in Paris and often against a certain Paris, a decisive factor in the changing cultural climate in 1960. If you shroud this fact in silence, you are seriously falsifying the history of art in France during the period in question. Unless you are especially bent on minimizing my personal action in this domain, which would only half-surprise me!"¹⁷
- 15 This premature and savage "de-Restanyization" clearly caused offence. But François Mathey nevertheless pointed out that it was important to take another reality into account: most of those collective movements had come to an end since 1960 and it was the artists themselves who wanted to exhibit their works separately. Pierre Restany would harbour his grudge. He described François Mathey as a "mediocre organizer", but

he would for all that call upon him in 1973 to organize the exhibition marking the 45th anniversary of the magazine *Domus* in his museum.¹⁸

- 16 Michel Ragon, for his part, remained wisely aloof from the 1972 episode, and devoted himself full-time to the history of architecture.
- 17 After 1972, François Mathey was *de facto* relegated to his official area of activity: decorative art and design. He would keep up courteous contact with Gérard Gassiot-Talabot, with whom, between 1983 and 1985, he sat on the consultative acquisitions committee for the “decorative arts, industrial creation and arts and crafts” of the Fonds National d’Art Contemporain (FNAC). This special acquisitions committee, created in 1982 by Claude Mollard, would eventually fill in the gaps in public collections where design was concerned.
- 18 It should be noted that François Mathey’s activities have been unjustly neglected since those years. He did however respond to the poor visibility of living art in the exhibitions held between the 1950s and the 1970s. After 1972, however, his role as a precursor was overlooked, and he became a forgotten page in the history books. Today the archives are quite rightly helping him to regain some measure of recognition.

NOTES

1. Restany, Pierre. “Antagonismes”, *Cimaise*, no48, April-June 1960, p. 60-78
2. Ragon, Michel. “Jean Dubuffet”, *Cimaise*, no52, March-April 1961
3. Restany, Pierre. “Musée des Arts décoratifs”, *Cimaise*, no53, May-June 1961, p. 84, and in the Pierre Restany collection at the Archives de la critique d’art, PREST.XE009/69, manuscripts, 1961.
4. Restany, Pierre. “Antagonismes 2 : l’Objet, expression d’un nouvel art de vivre”, *Cimaise*, no59, May-June 1962, p. 46 -65
5. Ragon, Michel. “150 artistes annoncent l’avènement d’un nouveau baroque et condamnent l’esthétique fonctionnelle”, *Arts*, 14 March 1962
6. Bibliothèque des Arts Décoratifs, “Dossiers des expositions qui n’ont pas eu lieu : Antagonismes III”, letter from M. Ragon to M. Faré, 8 October 1963
7. Archives nationales, DGAL collection, Gaëtan Picon dossiers, shelf mark F/21 82 66
8. Archives de la critique d’art, Gérard Gassiot-Talabot collection, “Mythologies quotidiennes” exhibition dossier, letter from G. Gassiot-Talabot to André Malraux, 4 July 1964. Handwritten card from A. Malraux to G. Gassiot-Talabot of 10 July 1964
9. Gassiot-Talabot, Gérard. “Le règne des crustacés”, *Aujourd’hui*, n° 47, October 1964, p. 3
10. Archives de la critique d’art, Pierre Restany collection, PREST.XSAML10/46-47. Letter from Pierre Restany to J. R. Brest, 26 December 1964
11. Bibliothèque des Arts Décoratifs, dossier of exhibition n°D1/441. Letter from Gérard Gassiot-Talabot to François Mathey, 16 January 1967
12. Archives de la critique d’art, Gérard Gassiot-Talabot collection, exhibition dossier, letter of 10 May 1967 from Gérard Gassiot-Talabot to T. Rousseau
13. Restany, Pierre. Mathey, François. “Yves Klein et son mythe”, *Quadrum*, n°18, 1965, p. 79-98

14. "Yves Klein au Louvre", *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, 16 February 1969 ; "Yves Klein au Louvre", *Domus*, n°472, March 1969 ; and "Yves Klein au Louvre ou le rendez-vous manqué", *Plexus*, n° 22, March 1969, p. 24-25
15. Pluchart, François. "Klein a manqué son entrée officielle", *Combat*, 27 January 1969
16. Tract in *Polycritique Paris*, "La Police au musée des Arts décoratifs", 10 March 1969
17. Archives de la critique d'art, Pierre Restany collection, dossier "Douze ans d'art contemporain en France, 1972", PREST.XSF30/9. Typed letter from Pierre Restany to François Mathey, 18 February 1972. Bibliothèque des Arts Décoratifs, François Mathey archives, boxes G.
18. Bory, Jean-François. *Art contemporain : Pierre Restany, une vie dans l'art*, Neuchâtel : Ides et Calendes, 1983, p. 91-92 and p. 112