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Op(tical)-kinetic Art, or: the Comeback of the “Retina Torturers”

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REFERENCES

L'Œil moteur : art optique et cinétique, 1950-1975, Strasbourg : Les Musées de Strasbourg, 2005

- 1 The exhibition and catalogue both titled *L'Œil moteur: art optique et cinétique, 1950-1975* are part of a happy and timely current event resurrecting the challenges of an international art movement which some people had perhaps wrongly regarded as overlooked by art history. The retrospective show devoted to Denise René in 2001 at the Pompidou Centre acted as the keystone. Then last year the Vasarely Foundation in Aix-en-Provence offered the public one or two dizzy moments of optical and acoustic vertigo with Xavier Veilhan's six *Light Machines*, and a large environment by Nicolas Schöffer—to whom a monographic publication was duly dedicated². This summer, in addition to all this, the Electra Foundation held an exhibition of Schöffer's hypnotic technological ballets.
- 2 In 1965, at New York's MoMA, the exhibition and catalogue *The Responsive Eye* offered for the first time an analysis of the new international abstraction, which the curator William C. Seitz described as “perceptive”. The show involved proposing an alternative to the distinction between virtual and real, taking the shape of an analysis of a new art trend that appeared in the 1950s. In 2005—i.e. 40 years later—*L'Œil moteur* proposes a reappraisal of op(tical)-kinetic art. These two events thus bounce off each other. Furthermore, the cover of the book published by the French museum clearly echoes that of the catalogue published back then by the American museum, reproducing Bridget Riley's famous painting, *Current* (1964), which is in the MoMA collection. The aim of *L'Œil moteur*—an expression coined by Jesús-Rafael Soto—is to go beyond the hesitant game of musical

chairs between Op Art and Kineticism, which has permeated the controversial history of this movement. It accordingly proposes an overall, coherent reading of a rich visual language no longer confined to the painting/sculpture categories, by way of a closely-argued study of cybernetics seen as a paradigm of the 1950s. This learned demonstration initiated by Arnaud Pierre manages to be persuasive, proceeding as it does from an epistemology of cognition. In his introduction, which is at once ground-breaking, dense and rigorous, he examines the scientific sources (Norbert Wiener, father of cybernetics, and the neurologist Grey Walter, as well as Albert Ducros, that brilliant popularizer) of various works (N. Schöffer, Yaacov Agam, Hermann Goepfert, Gianni Colombo, and Julio Le Parc, among other examples), not forgetting the challenges of synaesthesia. After the introduction, four essays act as billboards for a critical interpretation of the way the eye sees things. A progressive fascination for electronic technologies of communications, combined with the belief in a myth surrounding the inwardness of the subject, prompted artists, scientists and engineers to devise a behaviouralist "Copernican revolution". The succinct essays by Pascal Rousseau and Marcella Lista, one focusing on the "informational model", the other on acoustics, subtly incorporate the movement within a historical perspective. The source study thus extends back to the 19th century. It is noteworthy that the essays by these three authors make little room for context, stem from an autonomous approach to history, and thus define the limits of a certain critical modernism around op (tical)-kinetic art. Anna Dezeuze's essay, which is less convincing in its phenomenological approach, is the only one that attempts to pinpoint the relations between artworks, the context of the three decades of postwar prosperity in France (*les Trente Glorieuses*), and audience participation.

- 3 But is it possible to properly understand this "Copernican revolution" of cognition for what it is, without analysing the effects of the sources laid claim to in the social and historical sphere. Michael Baxandall's excellent essay, *L'Œil du Quattrocento*³, shows the degree to which an interdisciplinary viewpoint can serve a history of the way we look at things. In addition, methodological pluralism—the variety laid claim to, among other examples, by Cultural Studies departments—might be shown here to be especially operational, in order to grasp the work of art within the vast network in which it asserts its existence⁴. In 1965, it was not easy for Seitz to dodge the hold of American modernism. In 2005, in a period in which the dualism stemming from the Cold War ought to be brought full circle, op(tical)-kinetic art can be taken in the full dimension of its historicity. This is where *L'Œil moteur* ushers in a major forum of reflection and research.
- 4 The catalogue's title *L'Œil moteur : art optique et cinétique, 1950-1975*, does not convey the full temporal quality of the interpretation presented. A "post-face" by Michel Gauthier actually analyses the present-day challenges of the movements and focuses on the scale of the heritage. This pertinent essay shows the specificity and wealth of this heritage through an analysis of works of Ann Veronica Janssens, John Tremblay and Olafur Eliasson. Reactivating the past by way of the present reinforces history. There are many theoretical writings (Walter Benjamin, Hans-Robert Jauss, advocates of the History of Present Times) which show the extent to which the links between different time-frames constitute fully-fledged food for thought upon which to construct history. It is nevertheless quite permissible to raise questions both about the development of the movement between 1975 and 2000, and about the precise historiographical milestones of op(tical)-kinetic art. But the past also reactivates the present. By means of its central cybernetics-based notion, *L'Œil moteur* links back up with contemporary intellectual

challenges. Philippe Breton's book, *L'Utopie de la communication*, springs to mind, as does the recent essay by Céline Lafontaine, *L'Empire cybernétique*⁵. In the arena of present-day art, one thinks of science fiction films. It is actually quite pleasant to dream, via cybernetics, of the post-humanist dizziness adopted in *Matrix*.

NOTES

1. Jean Clay, "Victor Vasarely", in *Visages de l'art moderne*, Lausanne: Rencontres, 1969, p.209. The expression here mentioned is already in italics in Clay's text.
2. Nicolas Schöffer, Dijon : Presses du Réel, 2004 (for further details, see notice n°173, in *Critique d'art*, n° 24, autumn 2004, p.93).
3. Michael Baxandall, *L'Œil du Quattrocento* [1972], trans. Yvette Delsaut, Paris : Gallimard, 1985.
4. Reading on this subject includes: Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies", in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler (edited by), *Cultural Studies*, New York, London: Routledge, 1992, p.277-294.
5. Philippe Breton, *L'Utopie de la communication. Le mythe du "village planétaire"* (1995), Paris, La Découverte, 1997; Céline Lafontaine, *L'Empire cybernétique. Des machines à penser à la pensée machine*, Paris, Seuil, 2004 (cf. *Critique d'art*, n°24, *op. cit.*, p.13-14).