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Narrative Figuration: Two Ways of Seeing Things

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Gassiot-Talabot, Gérald. *La Figuration narrative*, Nîmes : Jacqueline Chambon, 2003, (Critiques d'art)

Bernard Rancillac : rétrospective 1962-2002, Issoudun : Musée de l'Hospice Saint-Roch ; Saint-Etienne : Musée d'art moderne ; Dole : Musée des beaux-arts, 2003

- 1 At some exhibitions, people have on several occasions and implicitly raised the issue of the status of New Figuration with regard to certain trends of the 1960s. The aim being to know whether we should see in its manifestation the French version of Pop Art or, alternatively, the dynamics of an “ideological eye”¹, to borrow Bernard Rancillac’s terminology, presenting images of everyday life in the manner of an ironical commentary on the state of the world. In a nutshell, is New Figuration to be interpreted as a formalist variant of an art of the real or as an attempt to give a certain subjective cheekiness back to representation? After re-reading a certain number of writings appearing at the present time—general studies and monographs alike—it would seem that the second hypothesis is the more persuasive.
- 2 Gérald Gassiot-Talabot’s choice of texts, penned between 1964 and 1995, covers both the definition of the outlines of a movement for which he acted as enlightened theoretician, and monographic approaches devoted to the leading figures in the figurative game associated with narration. On reconsideration, at times more than thirty years on, and whatever the nature of these writings, they reveal through the precision of their analyses, and the keenness of the viewpoints they defend, what constituted the loftiness of their author’s activity: the need to convince and enlighten. G. Gassiot-Talabot’s writing itself has a clarity which makes it readily persuasive. Probably because the actual

qualities of what is said combine with a fondness for intellectual sedition which, in the name of an individual morality, does not separate the activities of creation from the current state, and even from History in a more general sense.

- 3 The book includes three texts essential for an understanding of the challenges of the narrative principle, in which we see, between 1965 and 1967, the concept of this figuration attached to the temporal factor being introduced, developed and organized as precise categories. In 1967, G. Gassiot-Talabot pointed out: “Narrative covers all visual works referring to a representation depicted in time, by their writing and their composition, without there being any ‘narrative’, so-called”. This definition, as he noted, is fairly “narrow in order to get rid of traditional figurative representation focusing on an isolated scene and object”, and broad enough to “make it possible to study together artists who have intentionally chosen time and those whose work closely overlaps with this concern”. If the need to shed traditional forms is common to a whole generation calling for help from photography, film and the comic strip, the commitment of painters to decipher reality conveys the ambitions of a young—and essentially Parisian—artistic community which, in the age of Roland Barthes and Alain Robbe-Grillet, understood that if the intent of the picture was to invent a new way of seeing, the picture itself had to produce a linguistic labour in us.
- 4 This language presupposed an answer to the question: what is the object underlying painting? G. Gassiot-Talabot does indeed talk with such nicety of the images which exercise him, and this because, in addition to bringing to our awareness the movement of forms, and the tricks of cutting and editing, he links the images in question with the problem-sets that they raise, thus re-encompassing the various discussions of the day, as well as the interplay and challenges of political commitments. These outlooks lead the author to accommodate many salient figures in the figurative discourse over the years. Alongside the two emblematic men, Hervé Télémaque and B. Rancillac, architects, with him, of the movement, we find those who added strength to it from the word go: Erro, Peter Klasen, Jacques Monory, Jan Voss, Öyvind Fahlström, Arroyo, and Groupe Cronica. Not forgetting artists describable as independent, whose original writing has a calling to equivocation which resides in the very nature of the language of images.
- 5 For G. Gassiot-Talabot, the narrative principle ends up describing a form of expression that is being forever reappraised. So much so that the texts brought together here—the bulk of them prior to the author’s death—prompt a reconsideration of the limits of a movement which, though very closely associated with the combative activism of the 1960s, goes beyond what we might call “68 thinking”. It is possible that a side-effect of this accompaniment in time was to distort the spirit in which the movement opposed stylistically formatted tendencies, as a means of capsizing the data of the real with the cahoots of the real itself.
- 6 The *Bernard Rancillac* catalogue, with its text by Sarah Wilson, helps towards a re-examination—from a different angle—of some of the challenges of Narrative Figuration. B. Rancillac makes the most of the occasion to rectify, from his viewpoint, the truth, and remind us in passing that the exhibition of *Everyday Mythologies*, announcing the role of narration as a new critical instrument, was put on as his and Hervé Télémaque’s brainchild, and that merit therefore did not go to G. Gassiot-Talabot alone. Having gone through the artist’s archives with a fine toothcomb, S. Wilson recalls press reactions of the day to the arrival of a kind of painting whose references veered in large part towards the comic strip, then the various controversies which, a few years later, surrounded

paintings depicting Red Guards in China or Albania. A most defined visual backdrop to the works was provided by the ideological clashes within a France torn asunder by politics, combined with the difficult relations between a fairly anarchically-oriented artistic milieu and the American scene. The very rich, and particularly well selected, illustrative material helps to gauge what makes the painter's language so special: a very controlled interplay of random flat tints, a sense of rhythm, and visual syncopations permitting this "image of the image" to put itself back together again in compliance with inventive demands. The author has preferred to re-read in depth the relations between the work and the current state of things, rather than focus on formally deciphering pictorial spaces. The result, however, is a brisk and lively tale, which allows us to see a painter deeply involved in his day and age and involving himself in a patient interweave of things visible and things readable, so that painting becomes a critical instrument of a global system of the visible.

NOTES

1. Rancillac, Bernard, *Le Regard idéologique*, Paris: Mariette Guéna/Somogy, 2000