

## Experience and the Eye (Varieties on Current Art)

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Translator: Simon Pleasance

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- 1 With regard to the upsurge of recent books, whose sole shared aim is to deal with the (vast) subject of today's art, one might imagine a series of concentric circles, proceeding from the most general to the most specific. A rather mediocre criterion. These books do not actually all answer the same question, nor do they even raise the same issues. Over and above inevitable frustrations and irritations, they do nevertheless offer food for

thought, analysis and commentary, and at times provide references to do with an approach to and appraisal of the state of the art of our period, and of the historical, aesthetic and philosophical challenges for which it is the arena. The most general of these tomes is thus Alain Mons' book. This is an anthropological attempt (with a sharp dose of phenomenology) at what the author calls a "generalized aestheticization", an analysis, from a communicational standpoint, of this image-world where the pointers of the visible and the very notion of the real are having a hard time. It is a dense piece of writing, at times very dense indeed, with an uncertain style, but one which well describes the "diffuse forms" whose appearance/disappearance hallmarks the period, with art representing one of the paradigms. Isabelle de Maison Rouge's slim volume is intended to give us one or two keys to today's art. The *Idées reçues* collection deals with an area of study by dismantling the prejudices therein. But in addition to the odd silly blunder (muddling "individual mythologies" and "imaginary museum", and claiming that the term "artist" is now being replaced by that of French *plasticien*, or "visual artist"), and an awful synoptic table, this is an ambiguous book and, in the end of the day, one that is obligingly open to those who, it just so happens, have fuelled the debate over accepted ideas: Jean Clair, Jean-Philippe Domecq, Pierre Souchaud, etc.

- 2 There are overviews and there are overviews. The one that Taschen has published is, whatever one might say, a reiteration of the "hit" *Art at the Turn of the Millennium*. A hundred and thirty seven artists, with four pages each, a few introductory lines of text and beautiful colour illustrations, to which targeted information has been duly added: glossary (elliptical to say the least), places that matter in the world's art capitals (including trendy *cafés*), and, needless to say, the prices artists are fetching. This is a coffee-table book which does not have a great deal to say about art and which, despite its avowal of being modestly subjective, ill conceals its aim: to act as an echo and standard for the market.
- 3 In more serious vein, Robert Fleck and Paul Ardenne attempt to give a description of art at the turn of the century. R. Fleck's critical bases are the issue of the vague modern/postmodern break with reference to the end of the 19th century, a penetrating analysis of political correctness in 1990s' art, a survey of art in the post-communist countries, a quizzical look at the French case (institutions and art market) and lastly one or two thoughts about the painting thing. This at once aloof and committed analysis probably does not answer the question posed by the title, but it is a stimulating book all the same.
- 4 Paul Ardenne, for his part, attempts to theorize and historicize an essential swathe of present-day art which, by rejecting representation, has striven to reinstate a form of realism in the direct link with the real: performances, attitudes, participatory art, urban and natural landscape experiments, etc. Despite a certain straightforwardness (artist as redeemer) and one or two ulterior motives (response to Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics), readers will appreciate the clarity and the author's concern to present an historical perspective. In art, as elsewhere, there is no such thing as spontaneous generation. *Panorama*-overview sounds better in English—is the goal announced by the Aquitaine Regional Contemporary Art Fund [FRAC] in the sub-title of the catalogue of its collection (the title itself is somewhat biblical: *Le Livre/The Book*): the public (and regional) collection as an agency of legitimization and as a discourse on the art of the day, but also on art in time, as is confirmed by the choice of a sociological investigation by way of preamble. However, approaches to art can take on more specific forms, those of the photographic medium, for example. But this specificity may in turn see itself in the form

of a panorama or... overview. This is so with *La Photographie contemporaine*. One or two works, precisely described, form the core of each chapter devoted to a thematic issue. Other artists and other images round off or enlarge the subject. Laying no claim to be exhaustive, the book offers a good look at the place occupied by this medium in present-day art, even if its limits reside in the very choice of an approach by medium. With Régis Durand, photography is broached neither as an autonomous sphere nor as history, but rather as a series of examples, pretexts for thinking about it within the general system of signs (Barthes). What might have been no more than a compilation of writings (it still is this, at times, and, what is worse, it is shored up by visual props) here becomes a stance, nurtured by an attentive study of artists championed by the writer (Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, Thomas Demand, Hannah Collins, Tracey Moffatt, Georges Rousse, etc.).

- 5 What about the status of the body in contemporary artistic imagery (photographic, above all) if we reckon that the idea of eroticism, as advanced by Bataille, is dead? After getting bogged down, like so many others before her, in the distinction between eroticism and pornography, Dominique Baqué describes, via art, advertising, etc., the cold smoothness of the bodies depicted, the inferno of extreme practices, and, lastly, the future development of changing, mutant bodies. The author may not add anything to what we already know about post-humanism, but she does focus on what art says, and even anticipates, about these developments and these changes and mutations.
- 6 We started this review with phenomenology, so let us wind it up under the aegis of Merleau-Ponty. And since we referred to the many varied viewpoints on art, let us conclude with the most unusual, that of the art-beholding author represented by Luc Lang. Lang places the venue of his “narratives”, in particular the one about Gerhard Richter—“La Main du photographe. Phénoménologie et politique”—at the heart of this interplay of the visible (as the special form of experiencing what is perceptible) and the invisible (the need for screens which are the visible mark of the invisible).