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This is "Fresh Cream"

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Traducteur : Simon Pleasance



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RÉFÉRENCE

Fresh Cream : art contemporain et culture, Paris : Phaidon, 2001

Voici, 100 ans d'art contemporain, Amsterdam : Ludion ; Paris : Flammarion, 2000

- 1 *Fresh Cream*, which is conceived as "an exhibition in a book", and presented as playing "the role of a contemporary art Biennale", is a sequel to *Cream*, which was also published by Phaidon in 1998. Based on the same principle, the book brings together 100 artists chosen by nobody in particular, but more exactly by 10 curators in general. The whole, per force, produces an impersonal result, and makes it possible, once again, to confirm the old adage that "a dromedary is a horse designed by a technical committee". The whole thing does not really look like very much, and as such it reflects the general state of present-day creative work as well as its promotional methods. The resort to an inflationary number of curators and critics (which we shall again see at the next Lyon's Biennale) encompasses a sort of average and necessarily unsigned taste—nobody says "I"—, and the formation of a whole, in which a real way of looking at things is expressed, is banned. Nothing, in the final analysis, unites these artists—just a sweeping overview to be looked at like a tourist ticking off a list ranging from very young "candidate artists" who will very probably not even show up for the exam, to Paul McCarthy.
- 2 Unsurprisingly, 10 non-French curators have chosen not a single French artist (in the previous book, *Cream*, they numbered four (Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Thomas Hirschhorn, Pierre Huyghe and Fabrice Hybert)), which, *per se*, gives us a good enough idea about the reliability of this work, which is nevertheless being published—and this is where the irony lies— in a French edition. *Fresh Cream* does not spare us any of the *clichés* of these circles, which have really turned a page—not even the "Internet conversation" between the six curators, a chattering and futile text skimming subjects as novel as New

York conservatism and the policies of Giuliani, Charles Saatchi's programme, and multiculturalism—which really shows us how it's sticking its neck out. Every effort is made “not to create another dominant trend clashing with the already existing one” (Poshyananda), and, to say it like it is, political correctness and intellectual correctness are sat at the same table. On the other hand, Gilda Williams (the volume's editor) had the excellent idea of asking each of the 10 “curators” to choose a text, or an excerpt from a text, by an author depicting “a cultural context”. This is the most interesting part of the book: all these writings (with just a few exceptions) are quite marvellous. Liam Gillick's piece, first and foremost, which, in eight points, sums up the mechanisms whereby present-day art is constructed and propagated, then the essays by the writer Hanif Kureishi, and the Muscovite philosopher Valery Podoroga, with a special mention for *New York Times* journalist Douglas Rushkoff's “The Children of Chaos, Surviving the End of the World as We Know It” (1997). This latter offers a heartening analysis of the evolution of play dough designed for children (from *Play-doh* and *Silly Putty* to the hilarious *Slime*) and more generally of the choices made by children of such and such a type of game. It's a brilliant and thrilling piece, and it's a pity that it's not quite simply translated in its entirety—it would thus have most fruitfully replaced this *Fresh Cream*, which is thick and not very fresh.

- 3 It should be added lastly that the whole publication is not helped by a weak layout: a disproportionately tall book, when the previous one was irrationally “Italianate”, i.e. wide format; captions in tiny type face n°4 pointing up the preeminence of the illustrations; and, last but not least, a list of artists in pale pink on a very pale pink ground, perfect for discouraging any temptation to read it.
- 4 By contrast, the catalogue for the exhibition *Voici* is nothing if not spellbinding, and also shows, not without talent, the most absolute kind of classicism in its page layout. By contrast, too, somebody in this volume says “I”—Thierry de Duve, it just so happens, whose name is boxed on the cover. He duly if somewhat clumsily expounds his much heralded theories about Manet and Velasquez. The book opens with an extremely pointless digression about the title of the show, which makes a point of flaying the exhibition *Voilà* put on by the City of Paris Museum of Modern Art—but this is child's play, indeed! “Suffice it to imagine that the exhibition is titled *Voilà* to understand why it is called *Voici*”, and hold forth about the preemptory and authoritarian nature of *Voilà* as opposed to the “open and unpretentious” character of *Voici*. Fine, none of this is very sophisticated stuff, but we do appreciate the division into three parts, “*Me voici*”, “*Vous voici*”, “*Nous voici*”, a methodical way of kneading the age-old spectator issue in a different way. The catalogue is meant to describe the whole exhibition, and if this is the case, there is something slightly disappointing about this embryonic (yet stirring) idea of associating works, but without complying with any chronology or movement, and, rather, introducing another kind of link (a personal narrative). As expounded (at least in the catalogue), it simply looks like a rather poor series of theme shows (the great scourge of our day and age); the mirror, the body, the display case... The text, for its part, is often diffuse—but perhaps just a book of pictures would have sufficed, because, as it happens, what is involved here is a visual comparison of different works (at times the comparison is really poor and doesn't go beyond the visual fact, to wit: Didier Vermeiren's *Chariot*, Giacometti's *The Cage*, and Jeff Koon's *Basketball in an Aquarium*).
- 5 Between *Fresh Cream* and the exhibition catalogue for *Voici*, it is indeed the place of the “I”, in the reading of contemporary art, which raises issues. Thierry de Duve answers

them in the affirmative (by the by, visitors to the show could walk through it wearing headphones and listening to the curator make a personal presentation of it—a highly seductive idea). The Phaidon book answers these issues by a collective consensus, the model for which ends up by being a highly active irritant. In the plethora of more or less artistic proposals, while the world seems authorized to speak and exhibit, and while the art market is satisfied with everything and nothing, with supply and demand mutually slapping each other's backs in a more or less serious race, it is more necessary than ever for "readers of art", like Evelyne Thomas, to force themselves to say: "It's my choice".