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## Combas & Co. or the Figure and the Great Divide

Monique Yaari  
*The Pennsylvania State University*

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## Combas & Co. or the Figure and the Great Divide

### Abstract

The young painter, Robert Combas, leader of the 1980s "figuration libre" 'free figuration' movement, is seen here both as representative of stylistic and thematic trends in contemporary French art, and as illustrative, through the unfolding of his career, of the object "painting" and its sociology in contemporary France. Examined are: first, the "Postmodern convergence" of figurative, indeed narrative art, with the collapse of the "great divide" between elite and popular art forms; and second, traits such as hypertrophic verbal paratext, high erotic content, and political stand. Similar threads are followed in the work of a number of other artists, old and young, established or not, female and male—hence the "& Co." of the title. The essay raises, without claiming to solve, a set of sociologically and politically informed questions: What forces have shaped Combas' sensibility and style? What forces have made him a minor celebrity domestically, one that France's awesome cultural apparatus considers worthy of export? What, in the formation of contemporary mentalities and tastes, may account for the parallels found among artists as diverse as Combas, Quardon, Pierre and Gilles, Ben, and Klossowski?

### Keywords

Robert Combas, figuration libre, contemporary French art, narrative art, hypertrophic verbal paratext, erotic, erotic content, politics, collaboration, Quardon, Pierre, Gilles, Ben, Klossowski

## Combas & Co. or The Figure and the Great Divide

Monique Yaari

*The Pennsylvania State University*

### The Figure and the Great Divide

“Figuration libre, chic . . . et autre, ça marche” ‘Free figuration, chic figuration . . . or any other kind of figuration, it works.’ The catchy heading in the “Market” section of a 1983 issue of *Connaissance des Arts* (FDR 34-35) accurately sums up the situation prevailing on France’s art scene as of 1981-82, when the blank that France once represented on the European map of “new figuration” belatedly filled in, notably with a series of exhibitions titled “Après le classicisme,” “Finir en beauté,” “L’Air du temps” ‘After classicism,’ ‘Ending with a flourish,’ ‘The Spirit of the times.’ The figure and figurative art had in fact by then already returned on the French art scene as elsewhere for over a decade, in part via a renewed interest for the past, in part in view of an art of political commitment; but that return had not yet gained critical recognition from French critics, nor approval by the cultural powers at home, or momentum abroad.<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon the amused quote both celebrates and satirizes is precisely a radical change in this situation, namely the commodification of this trait and the market’s saturation with it in the 1980s. In passing, the little phrase also points to another dimension: the importance of the high art/low art axes within this trend. My own thinking was also informed by these markers, both temporal and theoretical, and it drew on the breadth of coverage and legitimation that a national Biennial provides, namely the Fall 1991 Biennial of Contemporary French Arts held in Lyons.<sup>3</sup>

If the predominant art historical and thematic references of the humorously labeled *figuration chic* are based in elite culture—the great tradition of oil painting and classical, biblical, and literary themes—*figuration libre* on the contrary is anchored in popular

culture; it brandishes a certain “bad taste,” generally uses modest materials (such as untreated canvases or acrylic paint) and bad (scanty) painting techniques, and appears to consider the media as more real than reality itself (FDR 34-35), which leads to a heavily mediated representation of reality, but a figurative representation nonetheless. It is to this category, launched in earnest by the critic Bernard Lamarche-Vadel in the early 1980s and owing its name to the Fluxus artist/critic Ben (Ben Vautrier), that Robert Combas belongs. At the time in his mid-twenties, Combas claims allegiance to this very young movement and is by far its most complex and talented representative.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that the distinction between so-called elite and popular thematics and ways of painting is clear-cut among these groups, or within each and every artist’s work. There are popular tendencies in the *chic* group and elite tendencies in the *figuration libre* group, and Combas’ “J’aime le côté vulgaire de la chaussure” (Cornand 26) ‘I love the tackiness of shoes’ coexists with his avowed nostalgia for abstraction or recent penchant for biblical subjects.

The presence versus the absence of the figure and the distinction between high and low are two of the major axes or criteria used in defining the largely artificial categories of modern and postmodern, historical and neo-avant-gardes, or, as I would rather put it, the various constituent *strands* of each of these categories. A third axis or criterion is the relative valorization of the new versus the traditional.<sup>5</sup> These strands have, in fact, a peculiar propensity to weave their way in and out of more than one category at a given time, in a given domain, or in a given artist’s work. For instance: in one postmodernist current, figuration is reaffirmed; in another is proclaimed the collapse of high and low; but in another still, the two strategies merge, as in Robert Combas’ work. Indeed, for this and other reasons, notably specific issues of thematics and style (characteristic of him as well as of others, hence the “& Co” in my title), and the very making of the *phénomène Combas*, in itself telling, Combas can be seen as a locus for an entire problematics of the object “painting” and of its sociology in contemporary France.

### Meeting Combas, the Postmodern

Robert Combas’ own ambivalence toward the issue of “high” versus “low” art, elite versus popular, good versus bad painting, is significant. Because the underprivileged youth from Sète, a South-

ern town heavily marked by its Spanish and Calabrian heritage, knew more intimately the *zone* (the town's underbelly) and the idiosyncratic *Sétois* slang than art books and museums, the popular and Mediterranean contexts of his home turf were determining factors in the shaping of his pictorial universe (Marcadé 23, 41; see also Brutsch and Moiselet 30-33 and Semin 12-13). His early visual education, acquired solely through illustrated textbooks and television (Semin 12-13), was only later completed at Montpellier's Beaux-Arts School and through the travels he undertook in his early thirties, when he started exhibiting abroad (Marcadé 58). As such it can only be spotty, and his sensitivity and tastes remain indelibly imprinted by the initial mediation. To this day he claims to prefer, even among comic strips, the less sophisticated *Pilote*, *Tintin*, *Capitaine Swing*, and *Métal hurlant* to the "almost artistic" *Bazooka* (Cornand 30; Brutsch and Moiselet 29; Marcadé 33). Indeed, for a time he exclusively chronicled in his work the multi-ethnic, poor, often violent milieu that was the backdrop of his youth, soon followed by a repertoire of historical scenes of recent memory—World Wars I and II, and the East-West and postcolonial conflicts of today. Yet around 1985 he started painting classical themes—*Le Sacrifice d'Iphigénie* (*The Sacrifice of Iphigenia* 1988); *Enée descend aux Enfers* (*Aeneas' descent to Hades* 1988); *L'Enlèvement d'Hélène* (*The Abduction of Helen* 1988)—albeit systematically thwarted through either a parodic title and treatment as in *Les Trois Grosses* (*The Three Fatsoes* 1985),<sup>6</sup> or a transgressive gesture such as the friendship of Achilles and Patrocles metonymically reduced to reciprocal masturbation. Finally, in 1991 he exhibited at two Parisian galleries "The Bible" series (Galerie Beaubourg) and "The Saints" series (Yves Lambert), while at the 1991 Lyons Biennial his subjects drew on the medieval and religious traditions. This collapse of the "Great Divide" between high and low in the domain of the arts is, we recall, in Andreas Huyssen's view, the very definition of postmodernism; or, as I would rephrase it, of one important strand in postmodernism (modernism, as distinguished from the avant-garde, being for Huyssen purist and elitist, more hermetic, often apolitical, and aestheticist).<sup>7</sup>

In parallel to this change in thematics from popular, regional, and contemporary to elite, universal (or Western), and mythical, Combas' technique became more complex and his material supports more sophisticated. Beyond the comic-strip inspiration, his style is

now the product of a highly personal appropriation of the history of painting, from Picasso and Matisse, via Chassac and the Cobra movement, to Dubuffet and *art brut*, as critics have pointed out (Millet 50).<sup>8</sup> He himself adds to this panoply Rouault, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Kandinsky (Brutsch and Moiselet 26, 39; Palette 150). To account for his latest work, one should include as well elements of medieval composition and of a Renaissance-inspired treatment of the figure. Indeed, as Semin most accurately observes, the “Combas paradox” is that no model is ever dominant or exclusive, with the result that “[l]a surabondance de modèles ruine chez lui l'idée de modèle” (Semin 12; see also Marcadé 53-54) ‘[t]he overabundance of models destroys in his work the notion of model.’ This blending of styles and techniques, while formally modernist for its dilution of the notions of style and normative art, tumbles into yet another brand or strand of postmodernism known for its flattening-out propensities, and so distances itself from an avant-gardist ethos. “[L]’histoire des images, chez Combas, est une” (Marcadé 54) ‘[T]he history of images, in Combas’ work, is unitary.’ “[Ç]a ressemble à tout, ça ressemble à rien” (Perdriolle 78) ‘[I]t resembles everything, it resembles nothing.’ In addition, the history of painting that Combas takes as a model, not in order to show its obsolescence but rather to highlight its vitality (Marcadé 54), and the acquisition of which in his case was “l’expression même d’une culture mass-media” (Perdriolle 78) ‘the very expression of a mass-media type of culture,’ coexists in his imagination and in his artistic production with a storehouse of mass-media images, in a peculiar sort of “lieu commun de l’imaginaire” (Marcadé 54) ‘common ground of the imaginary.’ We thus come back to the collapse of Huysen’s Divide.

Finally, Combas’ total absence of an avant-gardist ethos or of a bad conscience about this absence is a sign of the times (*pace* Perdriolle [74], there is no authentic desire in Combas to reinvent the “shock of the new” [Hughes] nor to contest social and aesthetic givens). His “désinvolture à l’égard des culpabilités avant-gardistes” ‘casual indifference toward avant-gardist culpabilities’ (Marcadé 16) is widely shared by other artists, who profess either a similarly blasé attitude to the issue or, going further still, a reversed rebellion, i.e., an explicit enmity for the obligatoriness of the new in thematics or style. This is not to say that Combas expresses no claim to “novelty,” but upon closer examination this term means for him “originality,” which is quite a different matter (Brutsch and Moiselet 39).

Another type of ambiguity is present in his response to the reception of his work and in his own sense of identity as a painter.

While high-brow publications have written with interest about his work, notably *art press*, the artist regrets the silence of popular publications closest to his heart, *BD magazine*, *Métal hurlant*, *Pilote* (Brutsch and Moiselet 35), and is quick to reassure his *copains* (pals) that he has not been recuperated by the system or betrayed his origins. The argument he uses, however, based on his “delinquent” use of language in the prose that now accompanies his paintings (slang, misspellings, misuse of grammar and capitalization), can in fact be turned against itself: “J’ai voulu faire de mon écriture, qui me paraissait marginale, mauvaise, ou plutôt moyenne, quelque chose d’artistique pour la faire entrer dans la culture, et j’ai réussi” ‘I wanted to make of my writing, which seemed to me marginal, poor, or rather mediocre, an artistic thing in order to make it part of culture, and I succeeded’ (Brutsch and Moiselet 22-23); “S’ils voyaient mes textes et toutes les fautes qu’il y a dedans, ils verraient que je refuse d’être récupéré” ‘If they saw my texts and all the mistakes in them, they’d see that I refuse to be coöpted’ (Brutsch and Moiselet 22-23). The two affirmations clash. Besides, the grammar in the more recent pieces has deteriorated to an extent that it can only be interpreted as either excessive gesturing in a direction which has—precisely—charmed the art establishment or a kind of poetic artifice. At the same time, his lament that he cannot *yet* paint intellectual themes, paired with his intense nostalgia for and aspiration toward abstraction, that most elitist of forms (Palette 151-53, Brutsch and Moiselet 26-27), make Combas’ “paradox” on a human level rather poignant. As Bourdieu suggests in connection to similar phenomena in popular culture:

Lorsque la recherche dominée de la distinction porte les dominés à affirmer ce qui les distingue . . . faut-il parler de résistance? . . . Et quand, à l’inverse, ils travaillent à perdre ce qui les marque comme vulgaires, et à s’appropriier ce qui leur permettrait de s’assimiler, faut-il parler de soumission?

When the all-out search for distinctions incites the dominated to affirm that which distinguishes them . . . is this resistance? . . . And when, conversely, they strive to rid themselves of what marks them as vulgar, and to appropriate what would allow them to assimilate, is that submissiveness? (Bourdieu 101)<sup>9</sup>



As Semin notes:

Lorsqu'on lit ses déclarations et interviews, on a le sentiment que la peinture joue pour Combas sensiblement le rôle qu'a pu jouer la littérature pour un Jean Genet: racheter une 'faute' originelle—une naissance dans un milieu modeste, une culture faite de musique populaire, de journaux et de contes de fées—non en l'effaçant (ou . . . en la glorifiant naïvement), mais en lui donnant . . . *droit de cité*.

When we read his various statements and interviews, we get the feeling that painting plays for Combas substantially the same role as literature must have played for a Jean Genet: atoning for an original "sin"—modest social origins, a cultural background consisting of popular music, magazines, and fairy tales—not by erasing it (or by naïvely glorifying it), but by bestowing on . . . a certain legitimacy. (13)

Combas' double yearning is most certainly an interiorization of conflicting values, but it may also reflect the fact that, while in France today value can reside in both the elite and the popular fields of culture, the latter at the exclusion of the former remains, after all, problematic.

Perhaps a closer consideration of the verbal dimension of Combas' work is in order, since quantitatively of late his painterly output is almost matched by his verbal output—a "textuality" that some would argue is a modern, and others a postmodern, excrescence. Three types of interconnection between word and image can be found here. One is the word slipping into the canvas and inscribing it with arabesques of writing which the viewer has difficulty deciphering, a fact only partially disturbing given the primarily gestural and visual, as opposed to communicational, interest of this technique. This graphism overtaking painting responds in part to Combas' search for abstraction: "Des toiles entièrement écrites, qui m'approcheraient un peu plus de l'abstraction" 'Canvases covered by writing, which would bring me closer to abstraction' (Palette 152). Related to this practice, as well as to the artist's narcissism and also his artisanal leanings, is his magnified, ornamental, focal signature. Last and most important is the narrative accompanying the pictures, carefully foregrounded in his various exhibition catalogues so as to



nearly equal the reproductions in importance, but prominent as well on the walls of exhibition spaces. Increasingly elaborate and hypertrophic, both diegetic and mimetic, the verbal paratext voices and explains the visual text, while interposing between the viewer and the visual object opinions of, or private information about, the author/painter. The grammatical distortions and the accompanying play on capitalization mentioned above create the codes of an idiosyncratic popular-literature poetics that invites psychoanalytic and sociological analysis, thus distracting from the priority customarily given to the painting as plastic object. Together with the foregrounding of ideology, message, and the naïve or studied faulty technique, these strategies contribute to the devalorization of the purely aesthetic dimension of art. The Foucauldian and Barthesian questions as to what an author is and the death of the author lurk in the background, since more and more the paratexts are not authored exclusively by Combas himself.

#### Reading Combas' World:

##### *Métissage*, History Flattened Out, Religion Sexualized

Combas c'est: le Mexique, l'Afrique, l'Amérique, la Chine, le Japon, l'URSS, l'Espagne, l'Italie. Pourquoi pas mélanger les tulipes hollandaises et un koala en peluche fabriqué au Japon, le tout ressemblant à une publicité marocaine.

Combas equals: Mexico, Africa, America, China, Japan, the USSR, Spain, Italy. Why not mix Dutch tulips and a plush koala made in Japan, the whole thing resembling a Moroccan ad?<sup>10</sup> (Palette 19)

This is the Combas recipe—variegated, infantile, infectious—to which we should add: irrepressibly soaked in sexuality. Italy, Spain, and Africa came to him directly via Sète and the Barbès neighborhood in Paris (Marcadé 42). The rest reached him through print and visual media. The result is a lively *métissage* (hybridization), but also an overall leveling of values, hierarchies, registers, and *pudeur* (reserve) which can be experienced as charming or liberating by some, but, when lodged in memory-laden historical events, can hardly be inoffensive or unobjectionable for more informed and invested viewers. The following statement, for instance, from the caption to his 1988 *Les taxis de la Marne* (*The Taxicabs of the River*

*Marne*), can apply to much of his storehouse of images in terms of formation process and result: “Moi, je l’ai vu à la télé avec les bonhommes qui marchent comme Charlot dans les films muets” (Palette 130) ‘I’ve seen it on TV, with those guys who walk like Chaplin in the silent movies.’ French history, he states, has acquired thanks to this episode “un de ses plus beaux souvenirs visuels de guerre” ‘One of its most beautiful visual memories of war’ (Palette 130). World War I, then, through the mediation of the tube and its subsequent transposition onto canvas, has become as absurd as a farcical comedy, and as pretty as an image.

Two of the themes prevalent throughout Combas’ work are at once related and polar opposites: childhood and military battles. To the extent that the latter is any boy’s game, indeed presented as such, without a trace of tragic dimension, the two can appear related. To the extent that the world of Mickey Mouse, teddy bears, and slipper-wearing television sets is devoid of mass violence and blood, being shown rather as private and even sentimental, they are polar opposites. In between the two stand scenes of “urban juvenile violence,” in which overly heated macho youths, their ethnicity in full display, barely escape disaster thanks to the presence of a whimsical white angel. “Ça existe en vrai, ces conneries” (Palette 50) ‘It’s for real, all this garbage,’ comments the witness Combas, with childlike sadness and resignation *Bagarre de foire (Scuffle at the fair 1981)*.

The appropriation and flattening out of the twentieth century’s historical metanarratives is achieved also through reduction of scale to trivial or personal thematics, or through erotic, if not outright pornographic, imagery. These are just as often placed in the verbal paratext, that is, in the captions accompanying each painting, as in the visual text itself. In *Cow-boys contre Indiens (Cowboys against Indians 1980)*, the “cow-boys”—“tirés de souvenirs de jeunesse” ‘drawn from youthful memories’—are ambushed by an Indian tribe while the sole onlooker, a bison, is “touching its GLAND,” presumably with pleasure (Palette 46; Combas’ capitalization). In *Pearl Harbour (1988)*, the implied satire of war in a statement such as “[les] fous de dieu . . . se sacrifient pour leur empereur” ‘god’s crazies . . . sacrifice themselves for the emperor’ is nullified by its juxtaposition with another, more pedestrian sacrifice: “Moi je me sacrifie bien pour ma peinture because [sic] j’ai une varice à l’articulation de ma jambe droite” ‘I sure sacrifice myself for my painting parce que [sic] I have a varicose vein in the joint of my right leg’ (Palette 114). In *La*

*République de mon coeur, la raie publique de ta soeur* (*My heart's republic, your sister's public furrow* 1988), the Republic, who is leading men in combat against invading monsters, ironically has been alerted by David Vincent, "vedette du feuilleton des envahisseurs" 'star of the invaders' serial' (Palette 117-18). French history is thus reduced to the dimensions of a television *feuilleton*. In the painting, abundance of ornament and detail, figure, and ground are confused and the darker aspects of the message are blurred by a search for prettiness and abstraction, which soon becomes unsettling. Perhaps French history never lifted itself from the printed page and into Combas' consciousness? If we follow Bourdieu's sympathetic reading of broader sociological issues (102), and, from a different perspective, Finkelkraut's scathing critique of post-1960s education (172-73), this may indeed be the case for someone with young Combas' economic, class, and ethnic background. The real key, however, is most likely in the vicariousness associated with a consciousness formed by the mass media: "Simulation enables us to understand . . . how contemporary collective memory is made up of television programs instead of a shared notion of history" (xix), as Olalquiaga shows in her study of "contemporary cultural sensibilities."<sup>11</sup> Be that as it may, gestures of this nature surely fuel the charges of "cool cynicism" commonly brought against postmodernism.

On the other hand, on current events and on familiar, lived, directly relevant aspects of reality, Combas' commentary adheres much more closely and unambiguously to the issues. In *Les Russes contre les Afgans* (*The Russians against the Afghans* 1988), he notes with almost Voltairean deadpan humor that "[Les] paysans afgans . . . ont un beau chapeau de laine sur la tête, très à la mode cette année dans les pays d'Europe" '[The] Afghan peasants . . . are wearing fancy woolen hats, very fashionable this year in Europe' (Palette 120). By highlighting this Western appropriation of the fashion of the underdog who daringly took on the Communist bear, Combas problematizes Europe's attitude toward the conflict, and what he likely perceives as socio-political and ethnic indifference. On such a sensitive subject as *La perte de la Smala d'Abd El Kader par les troupes du Duc d'Aumale* (*République française*), 1983 (*Rétrospective* 1985 n.p., cat. nr. 40 bis) (*The Fall of Abd El Kader's smala at the hands of the Duke of Aumale's troupes [French Republic]*), he explains: "Tous ces types qui sont venus tuer les arabes,

les arabes qui sont venus travailler pour la France et le bordel qui en résulte” ‘All these characters who came to kill the Arabs, the Arabs who came to work for France and the resulting mess’ (Brutsch and Moiselet 27); while in a related canvas (cat. nr. 40) the Algerian Emir’s portrait sheds spirals of tears. The first painting was intended for exhibition in Marseilles, where North African immigration is substantial; ironically, it was eventually shown instead at London’s Tate Gallery. In a similar vein, Combas excels at depicting, not without humor, the “resulting,” swarming immigrant population with which he mingled for years. Here is *Le Champion* (1982) (Palette 54-55), “roi des muscles, catcheur de ces dames,” “des fois il se pique aux hormones, c’est dégueulasse mais esthétique” (*The Champion*—‘king of muscle, the ladies’s wrestler,’ ‘sometimes he shoots up hormones, it’s disgusting but aesthetic’)—Brassens/Renaud in palimpsest? Here are Gérard and Nicole, 1986 (Palette 82-83), lying in the summer sun with “Andalou leur chien, d’origine basque” ‘Andalou, their dog, of Basque origin’—learned allusion, topical precision. Here also is Mohamed Ben Barka, waiter in an Italian restaurant, who has a weakness—an understandable one according to Combas’ expressive stereotyping—for a “blondasse du type Germanoaryen” ‘a tow-headed broad of the Germanoaryan type’ (*Les espaghettis à l’aïoli* 1986, Palette 78-79 [*Spaghetti with garlic and mayonnaise*]).

So far, Combas’ ideological allegiances have been predictable.<sup>12</sup> He is, however, also capable of speaking his mind with genuine verve in a more unexpected fashion. Against, for instance, what he perceives as an exaggerated and perhaps not altogether innocent pursuit of *négritude*: “Daniel l’Africanos aimerait être noir comme NINO FERRER . . . devenir sorcier dans un VILLAGE d’indigènes . . . avoir plusieurs femmes, un chien, un chat, et une maîtresse, *le vrai beauf en somme, mais africain*” ‘Daniel the Africano would like to be black like NINO FERRER . . . become a sorcerer in a VILLAGE of natives . . . have several wives, a dog, a cat, and a mistress, *the true middle-class jerk, in short, but African*’ (*Portrait stylisé de Daniel*, 1987, Palette 108 [*Stylized portrait of Daniel*]) (my emphasis, Combas’ capitalization). Refusing to idealize, Combas satirizes in both the European and the African cultures the same—equally questionable—psychological needs and social goals. In his opinion, “Il vaut mieux qu’il reste comme il est”—“sans racisme de ma part” (108). ‘It would be best if he stayed as he is’—‘no racism on my part.’ He is also against “Pierro Lavender, fils de prolo . . . devenu facho, il s’est

pour chien" (*Pierro Lavender* 1983, *Rétrospective* 1985, cat. nr. 44) 'Pierro Lavender, a prole's son . . . turned fascist, he cropped his hair and wants to kill everyone except his hairdresser, a dog groomer.' In *Exotique* (*Exotic* 1986), he takes on the Germans of today, whom he seems to suspect of militarism, by erasing a positive appearance and visual representation with a negative interpretation in a quick turn of phrase: "Les jeunes boches font une figure de gymnastique représentative de . . . l'avenir, le soleil, les beaux jours, la paix. . . C'est bizarre qu'ils représentent la paix, ils ont des POLOS avec Wafhen et ils ressemblent beaucoup aux tricots des jeunes sportifs Hitlériens ou alors c'est des punks" 'The young Krauts are doing a gymnastic figure representative of . . . the future, the sun, the beautiful days, peace. . . It's bizarre that they should represent peace, they are wearing T-SHIRTS with Wafhen and they look a lot like the shirts the young Hitlerian sportsmen wore or else they are punkers' (Palette 80-81).<sup>13</sup>

The all-embracing theme of the last few years though, since his present companion, Geneviève, entered his life in 1987, is love—LOVE, as he would put it. More tenderness and softness started then to permeate his work, and his paintings became in their material concreteness more sensual in both drawing and color, more painterly, "plus peinture" (Palette 145-46; Marcadé 57-58). Sweeps of color drench these canvases, and the black or two-tone outlines of figures have disappeared. Echoes from his trips are also noticeable—Geneviève, now ubiquitous, represented for example as a "primitive madonna" (Palette 92-93), though swelled with sensuality (*Robert et Geneviève se prélassent*, 1987) (*Robert and Geneviève sprawled out*). The captions accompanying the paintings reach an intense, if still juvenile, lyricism: "Aujourd'hui tu me sauves, hier je t'ai sauvée, et demain, j'espère, nous nous sauverons . . ." 'Today you're saving me, yesterday I saved you, and tomorrow, I hope, we'll save each other . . .' (*Pensée d'amour et de problèmes*, 1988, Palette 136 [*Thought of love and problems*]).

In his most recent work, his February 1991 exhibitions at the Beaubourg and Yves Lambert galleries in Paris, Combas took on a seemingly different range of subjects, the Bible and the Saints, respectively, which were later complemented at the 1991 Lyons Biennial by other mystical and religious themes (cf. *AdA*, 208-11).<sup>14</sup> The new canvases, large and reminiscent at once of expressionism, psychedelic art, Mexican palas, African totems, Byzantine icons, medieval books of hours, tapestries, and stained glass windows, do

not altogether renounce the earlier techniques inspired by children's stories illustrations—*Sodome et Gomorrhe* (*Sodom and Gomorrah*) (Beaubourg)—or the comic strip, the angels of today recalling the elf-like triangles from the past (*Ada* 210). *La Vierge d'anniversaire* (*The Anniversary Virgin*) (Lyons Biennial), one of his most accomplished canvases to date, vaguely reminiscent of Rouault, is possibly pointing toward a significant pictorial renewal (Fig. 1).

Blood and gore are still abundant in these last paintings, together with an insistent and prurient sexuality. The temptations of Saint Anthony and the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are vividly interpreted and suggestively illustrated, while Mary Magdalen's and Mary the Egyptian's past lives as prostitutes are explicitly depicted (Fig. 2). In fact, religious themes coexist here with an eroticism bordering on the obscene in both visual representation and verbal commentary, reminding us, beyond Rabelais, of today's—closer in age and in world view to Combas—cinematographer Pedro Almodovar or performer Madonna. Buñuel is not far either. Let us take for example, from Marcadé's monograph, the juxtaposition of an inside title page that reads, in Combas' words and handwriting above a painting of a crucified Christ, "L'art de dieu, c'est sérieux!" 'God's art, that's serious!' with such images as the Salomé-incited beheading of Saint John the Baptist where Salomé is rendered as a homoerotic Geneviève (154). This strategy is closer in spirit and deed to the kind of spite and provocation against the Church characteristic not of modern, post-revolutionary France but at most of early France (medieval farce and fabliau, Panurge-like Rabelaisian spoof); or, more likely still, of Spain, with its extreme anti-clericalism and eroticization of the religious prevalent in its culture from the dawn of Christianity until today. Other, frontally-exposed and explicitly enticing Genevièves appear "blasphemously" in the same chapter, glossed as "madonne à tête de sérieux" 'madonna with a serious air' 1989, or *L'icône ostensor*—"la femme divine et son rayonnement, tel un ostensor d'église" (*The Monstrance icon*, 1990)—'divine woman and her radiance, like a church monstrance' (156-57). One wonders what is the meaning, in the context of contemporary France and beyond sheer provocation, of this ambivalent return of religion, already corroded and turned inside out through eroticization, like an old fetish glove.

And yet, globally, the problematization—if not outright demolition—of the sacred that occurs in Combas' work is not nearly com-



Buñuel's *Viridiana*, or Almodovar's *Dark Habits*, or, for that matter, Madonna's *Truth or Dare*. Most sacred themes, from both the Old and the New Testaments—the Calvary “façon Combas” ‘Combas-style,’ Abraham’s sacrifice, the Tower of Babel, the martyrdom of Saint Francis—are treated with apparent respect. The subversive seems to have lodged itself, thematically and visually, in the obscene representation of the Virgin Mother (a virginity, we will recall, more lightly mocked centuries earlier by Rabelais) and of the other two Maries; as well as in the intimate linking of the pornographic representation of sexuality with those chapters in the narrative of the sacred that are most vulnerable to it because desire, temptation, and their awesome power are already inscribed in them. The Saints’ lives, for obvious reasons, are prime contenders for such treatment. The subversive is also lodged, to the extent that the jocular and the mundane, even in the absence of sexual elements, do diminish the sacred, in virtually all the verbal descriptions of even the most innocent images. While the visual representation of Saint Theresa of Avila is relatively sober, the caption reads in the ludic mode, “sainte Thérèse était une grande mystique et toute vieille a eu des extases Hallucinantes et des visions fantastico symboliques. . . . Une . . . fois un volatile ressemblant à une poule d’eau se transforme en colombe d’or c’est de là que vient le nom du restaurant de vence bien connu de césar . . . le sculpteur. . . .” ‘Saint Theresa was a great mystic and in her old age she had Hallucinatory extasies and fantastico-symbolic visions. . . . One . . . time a feathered creature resembling a moorhen changes into a golden dove that’s where the name comes of the vence restaurant well known to césar . . . the sculptor. . . .’ (Yves Lambert Gallery files, 1991). In fact, local legend seems to associate Saint-Paul-de-Vence’s *La Colombe d’Or*—‘The Golden Dove’—less with the sculptor César than with the late singer, actor, and activist Yves Montand.

Outside of and prior to the Saints’ lives and the Bible scenes, sexuality is manifest in all of Combas’ work, in nearly adolescent guises. Everything, including his elf-like triangles, inanimate objects, and decoration, is sexualized (see Millet 64-66). “Je dessine une main, et pour m’amuser j’ajoute une bitte dedans” ‘I draw a hand, and just for fun I put a cock in it,’ he explains (Cornand 28). In the caption to the *Trois Grosses*, 1985 *Three Fatsoes*, (Palette 68, he teases our hypocritical bourgeois minds with a warning and an intertext: onlookers will be “démangés par des envies champignonnières” ‘itching with fungal desires,’ echoing Rabelais’



call to his readers, “buveurs infatigables, vérolés très précieux” ‘un-tiring drinkers, much precious syphilitics.’ But when the caption to two almost mystical twin portraits of Geneviève and Robert, 1987 (Palette 86-87), specifying that their absorbed concentration is in fact an erotic gaze, explains this expression with autobiographical platitudes (“Portrait de Geneviève avec un polo rouge en train de me montrer sur elle la jolie petite culotte de soie que je lui ai achetée”) (‘Portrait of Geneviève with a red shirt showing me how good the pretty little silk panties I bought her look on her’), one suspects an excess of self-indulgence in this total collapse of the “smaller” divide, between the private life of the artist in its most minute details and his public production which commodifies it. Do we have here a version of the *mise-en-scène* of the self, easily sliding toward promotion of self, that seems to characterize those “postmodern” autobiographical forms which have their precursors in Dali and Duchamp, full-blown developments in Le Gac and Jeff Koons (or, with a critical twist, in Cindy Sherman), and arguably a crowning, thanks to the aura of theoretical discourse, in Roland Barthes?

... & Co.

Several aspects of Combas’ work find ample echoes in other contemporary artists, both young and established, as the 1991 Biennial confirmed: the sexualization of religious themes and primarily of Saints’ lives; the intermingling of painting and writing, be it through juxtaposition, where the written text rivals in importance with the visual text, or through the actual colonizing of pictorial space by writing; and the artist as witness, from the margins, of contemporary society.

The sexualization of Saints’ lives was very much present at the Lyons Biennial. Two young photographer-painters, who jointly sign their collaborative work as “Pierre et Gilles,” staged in the large enclosed space at their disposal a most spectacular show, recalling at once Almodovar’s profaning, sexy, and goofy party scene in *Dark Habits*, Salvador Dali’s *Last Supper*, and Jeff Koons’ (with Cicciolina) glossy polish. In the pitch-dark room, the walls were lined with painted photographs lit from behind, recalling so many small cinema screens, and creating an enclosed, self-sufficient, parodic universe. These represented a panorama of saints, some authentic (Joan of Arc in armor), some not (Sainte Affligée crucified), and the last two miming a second-degree, enacted, self-reflective signature: “Saint” Gilles

flanked by, in the upside-down position of a tarot or a certain sexual act, "Saint" Pierre in scant attire and apparently crucified (see *Ada* 226-29). The costumes, poses, and staging all play with traditional iconography, which is either slightly thwarted or undercut by a Hollywoodish treatment. Some images carry homosexual connotations (young brothers Saint John and Saint James with their fishing net, much flesh exposed); others are ambiguous in a variety of ways, whether they follow conventional hagiographic iconography (a martyred Saint Agatha coolly offering on a platter her two sectioned breasts like two pieces of fruit) or not (a Saint Martin resembling the leading character in *Star Trek*); or else they evoke an overly eroticized starlet worship (an alluring Saint Magdalena at the foot of a suggested bloodied cross, her ample upper body denuded, the studied makeup and red nails of a screen celluloid doll; Saint Blandine and the lion visually recalling the young Bardot in a Magrittean setting, while today Bardot's save-the-wildlife crusades mentally cancel out Blandine's martyrdom). These slick but kitsch strategies of representation are reminiscent not only of the contemporary, popular, and satiric cinema already alluded to, but also of a certain New York camp (see Calinescu 230) and of commercial worship items and street art. As such, they are related to the appropriation of Latin-American *altares* by what Olalquiaga (approvingly) analyzes as "third-degree kitsch" in American culture (46-55). They may echo as well a less "popular," recently revived vogue in the French capital, that of the *pompier* painters of the nineteenth century—a kind of reversed avant-gardism of an *arrière-garde* bad taste.<sup>15</sup>

Similar themes inhabit, though in a radically different manner, the work of the artist, writer, and philosopher Pierre Klossowski. The bringing together of relatively unexperienced newcomers with a learned, accomplished artist of some renown should not surprise in this context: the points of contact sought are more cultural than aesthetic, and large group exhibitions elicit parallels. Just as hieratically and ironically distant as Pierre and Gilles' photographs, and in this respect diametrically opposed to Combas' acrylics, Klossowski's understated, mannered pastel drawings exhibited an even more elaborate narrative dimension than either of the former artists at the 1991 Biennial. Next to the life-size drawings and a sculpture of the artist's "signature," Roberta (mascot, muse, model, actor, subject, playmate, and wife), there was Saint Nicholas. A series of

suave drawings (1987) recast the story of the Saint's saving of two prepubescent boys from the hands of the butcher about to take his pleasure in aggressing them. While in the legend the Saint resuscitates them after the deed is done, here he saves them while they are still alive, exposed in their helpless nakedness to the knife of the menacing ogre and the gaze of the onlooker (*Ada* 8-11). At the conclusion of another series of drawings—*La Punition au réfectoire*, *Dispute*, *Chorale*, *Repentir du médisant*, *Le Songe criminel*, and *Retour à la mère*, (*Punishment in the refectory*, *The Argument*, *Choir*, *The Slanderer's repentance*, *The Criminal dream*, and *Return to the mother*) 1991—Roberta reappears as a nineteenth-century mother figure picking up her boy from the boarding school where frocked masters offered him a peculiar education. An uneasiness of technique, “la technique malaisée,” corresponds, according to Bataille, to Klossowski's “pensée malaisée,” “la pensée sortant des limites” ‘uneasy thinking,’ ‘unbound thinking’ (Grenier 17). Transgression—erotic, religious, as well as religious via the erotic—is ever present in Klossowski's art, as in his writing. Displaying none of the joyous vitality and jocular impertinence characteristic of the younger and popular vein Combas represents, it seems to suggest almost ritual perversion and to subtly seduce the viewer, in turn, into the rôle of voyeur and therefore of transgressor. This too may correspond to a not altogether subterranean trend, if we note the fall 1991 exhibition at the Grand Palais, “Eros grec: les amours des dieux et des hommes” ‘Greek Eros: The Love Affairs of Gods and Humans’ organized by the French and Greek Ministries of Culture, and the nearly back-to-back publication several years earlier by *art press* of two dossiers entitled, respectively, “Théologie” and “Obscénités” (January 1982 and May 1982):

Why . . . ? Paradox? Inconsistency? Provocation? Perhaps not: in a cultural world increasingly invaded by right-thinking and conformism, there is doubtless no better way of resisting than adopting a position of (“upward” or “downward”) excess. . . . [R]eligious puritanism [is] today supplanted by the puritanism of our societies and of our “lay” ideologies. Let us not be deceived by the apparent permissiveness of morals and representations: we are still living in a time of profound repression . . .

(“Obscénités,” *art press* 59 [May 1982]: 3)

This may not be everyone's opinion, nor is it mine, but it is that offered by the leading contemporary art and theory journal in France.

As to the practice of writing in painting, not only has it reached an apex in the past decade, it has become as well an important area of critical inquiry. Artists such as Valerio Adami and Cy Twombly brought it to prominence on the international scene, as did the interest that deconstruction, and notably Derrida, has taken in this aspect of the textuality of painting (Derrida 167-209; Norris and Benjamin 48-54).<sup>16</sup> In some artists' work, for instance that of Anne and Patrick Poirier, writing and painting coexist as two distinct, physically separate, yet conceptually interrelated practices. Closer to Combas and carrying the practice to its perhaps logical, perhaps absurd extreme, is Ben Vautrier, the Swiss artist who grew roots in France. For several decades, out of his eccentric hut/shop/studio in Nice, Ben filled the museums and the world with his oracular statements, in his by now familiar white, yellow, or red on black primitive calligraphy: "Je doute"; "L'art, ça existe"; "à bas moi" 'I doubt'; 'Art exists'; 'down with me.' At the Lyons Biennial, he saturated his exhibition space with cardboard figures carrying double-sided signs inscribed with real and apocryphal utterances by the gurus of contemporary culture from Cocteau to Levinas, and the walls and rug with his own: "tout se passe entre moi et les autres"; "le jour où je m'arrêterai de mentir, je ne ferai plus d'art" 'everything takes place between me and others'; 'the day I stop lying, I will make no more art.' In Paris, a forgotten street corner in the 20th arrondissement displays, thanks to the "1% law," two large-scale works, one of which is Ben's.<sup>17</sup> Drawn on a tri-dimensional blackboard by a tri-dimensional painter on a scaffolding, the message reads: "il n'y a pas d'art sans liberté. Ben" 'there is no art without freedom. Ben' (Fig. 3). Thus, at the other end of the spectrum from Combas' newly found painterliness, Ben endlessly spins out to us his non sequiturs. His hut, no longer in Nice, can now be seen on permanent display in the contemporary collection of the MNAM at the Centre Georges Pompidou, while we would look in vain, on the animated square in front of the same institution, for that shrine of modernism that used to grace it with its presence, the studio of the sculptor Brancusi, which apparently has been damaged and removed. Chance played masterfully with art history.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, there is the artist as witness, from the margins. Political critique is still practiced today, notably with comic-strip verve by

Adami's early companion in arms, Erró. Social and environmental concerns are expressed as well. Given Combas' thoroughly masculine point of view, his privileging of the public realm and his eroticization of that realm, as well as, conversely, the public display of his own private world, a woman's view here might better complement his. Among the women who have come to the fore in French art in the past three decades, one artist whose work stood out at the Lyons Biennial, who belongs to the same generation as Combas, and whose interweaving of aesthetics and ideology appears most felicitous, is Françoise Quardon (see *Ada* 20-23).<sup>19</sup> The titles of her pieces, ironic and litotic statements, alternately in French and English, speak of woman's experience in the private domain of everyday life, her partner inscribed only by implication or as the addressee: *Désir (Desire)*, *Forget me not*, *Please leave me alone*. Woman in her roles of perfect homemaker, mother, and lover emerges as experiencing these roles at best ambivalently, often unhappily, but under the label "The Happy House," which was the title of Quardon's show. The pieces themselves, emblematic and evocative, condensed views of feelings and social conditions, were displayed in a series of small "rooms" which took the viewer through that private universe, each staging one facet of that experience. The bed as emblem appeared twice. An ornate, Belle Epoque specimen with all its connotations had carved into its mattress a sinuous metal groove with the inscription "Stand by your man," echoing incongruously a Tammy Wynette tune: pain and delight, horizontality and duty, femininity and endurance. The denuded X of a spring platform was affixed on the wall—crucifix-like or wasp-like, depending on the beholder, while "pretty" pastel flowers superimposed on it the words "Forget me not" (Fig. 4). Each work seemed to carry a measure of paradox. Critique was overwhelmingly present, at times stinging as in *Tu me fais mal (You're hurting me)*, but tenderness did not altogether recede. Absent, as in so many other heterosexual women artists's work, was the representation of the erotic, through a woman's gaze.

Quardon's installations, achieved through assemblages of everyday objects on which photomontage techniques, video, and sound projections operate an estrangement from the quotidian that the Situationists would have called *détournement*, have a strange evocative or critical power. One may find some of her pieces too explicit. Other pieces however are hauntingly allusive, their meaning

used over another background in palimpsest fashion. One such projection on a large white wall seemed to suggest, but barely, being in fact nearly abstract, a lace of superposed x-rayed tissues—eyes, breasts, the lips of a vagina—into which anything else fragile and organic might be read as well. In this show, as in other women's work, there was a seeming disinterest for the high art of painting. This, of course, can be tagged as lack of expertise. In fact, it is more likely either a syndrome—the refusal to display, or acquire, the accepted and commonly valorized mastery—or the feminization of an avant-gardist, Duchampian ethos, far removed from Combas' preferences on the issue. Be that as it may, Quardon is a consummate multimedia artist and a sensitive spokesperson, in a postmodern perspective, for “modernism's ‘other’ ” (Huysen 44). As such she inscribes herself into the contemporary French art scene by way of counterpoint.

### Perspectives

Critics have rightly compared aspects of Combas' work with similar features in Rabelais (Marcadé 20-21, 38-39, 54) and Jarry (Marcadé 35, 54; Millet 64, 66) via, respectively, Bakhtin's and Béhar's readings of the two French authors. This perspective, however, needs to be nuanced. The mixture of genres and registers was in Rabelais a natural prolongation, into the Renaissance, of medieval practice, an innocence no artist of the post-classical era can claim; conversely, as a contesting snub at classical tradition, it has been exhausted by the avant-gardes and modernism. The comparison holds for a certain privileging of the vernacular and a constant transgressing of theme, image, and style. In Combas' work, however, to the extent that these aspects are linked to popular culture and *terroir*, they are less expressions of folk culture, as in Rabelais, than of urban, pop, punk, youth and *métisse* culture; indeed, on the linguistic level they have been manipulated to the point of turning into a simulacrum.<sup>20</sup> The parallel also holds for the “culture potachique” ‘schoolboy culture,’ that confluence of “culture scolaire . . . culture populaire et . . . culture savante” ‘school culture . . . popular culture and . . . learned culture’ (Béhar 80) that Combas does indeed share with the Jarry of *Ubu Roi*. But the Jarry of *Surmâle* and *César Antéchrist* seems to display a symbolic perversity, intensity, and dramatic dimension pointing to an almost romantic avant-gardism that Combas the postmodern no longer shares.



A more theoretically fruitful perspective for elucidating the Combas phenomenon and placing it on the postmodern “map” comes from critics who are unacquainted with either Combas or *figuration libre*. In Calinescu’s latest redefinition of postmodernism (1987), the continental historical avant-garde grows closer to modernism because of a shared perception of time and ethos of the new, while postmodernism distinguishes itself from both through its parodic, i.e., both valorizing and ironic, revisitation of the past—when past equals at the same time tradition, modernism, and the avant-garde (276). In Huyssen’s view (1986), the continental break between the avant-gardes and modernism remains important, because his litmus test uses a different axis; postmodernism is seen as displaying a greater affinity with the historical avant-gardes, given their shared valorization of mass culture, as in French surrealism, Brecht, and American Pop (vii-x). While distinguishing between the aesthetically valid use of mass culture and an aesthetically corrupt one, labeled kitsch (ix), Huyssen does not dwell on the latter. Calinescu studies kitsch at length (223-62) and interprets its use by the avant-garde as critical and ironically disruptive (254-55). Mass culture seems to be largely assimilated either with kitsch or with the “culture industry” and thus the media; therefore, it is of necessity ruled by the “pleasure principle” and plagued by mediocrity (240-42), contrary to folk art (243). At this juncture the argument can be said to intersect Baudrillard’s concept of simulation (16). For some critics, this concept carries the negative value associated with the emptying of meaning (Finkelkraut), while for others it can be reinvested, through a reversal, with meaning and thus value (Olalquiaga). Together with the “pleasure principle” and a privileging of emotion via the senses, as opposed to intellect, it nearly defines the postmodern as a culture of “feeling,” surface, and images, rather than reason, depth, and writing; a culture which Finkelkraut (149-67) holds responsible for “la défaite de la pensée” ‘the defeat of thought’ but which Olalquiaga celebrates, in part precisely for its regenerative use of kitsch, which she equates with postmodernism (xi-xxi). Combas undoubtedly belongs to this culture. Negatively or positively? Surely, his sometimes “easy” moral and stylistic solutions, his media-inspired and overdetermined imagery, his exaggerated expressiveness, his almost obscene sexualization of reality, art, and the sacred come dangerously close to “first-degree” kitsch. Surely sometimes he seems to have put us in Woody Allen’s “orgasmatron” for a mindless, efficient encounter



with superficial pleasure. As we have seen, however, there is more to his art, ethics, and sensitivity than meets the eye, and my position on Combas remains for now suspended, which is to say schizophrenic, although closer to partial endorsement than outright rejection.

Finally, having compared Combas to artists from a variety of cultures, including American and Mediterranean, there seems to be little of the traditionally “French” in Combas’ art. This artist, however, has come to represent France at important events abroad. What might “French” mean in stereotypical art historical terms? Perhaps a Poussin/David-like classicism, an impressionist palette, or an Ecole de Paris abstraction, when it is not the surrealist or cubist avant-gardes. Historically, notions of distinction and tradition have been either valorized or iconoclastically smashed to pieces in French art as in French society and thought, and there are still good artists today in France who more or less fit into these categories. They, too, have represented France abroad, but the Combas phenomenon is new in France. Indeed, critics have pointed out the significance of the selection of *figuration libre* artists by curators Jean-Louis Froment and Catherine Strasser as the very definition of the “French Spirit Today,” for a 1984 exhibition thus titled that travelled abroad. Something is changing in France as a whole, in the direction indicated by Combas and *figuration libre*, and in a broader sense, for better or worse, by such political-cultural figures as Jack Lang. This change may only be a passing fad, or it may be here to stay, on a complex sociological and artistic stage. Combas’ contribution to the current cultural idiom, which I propose to call the French *après-moderne*, consists in part of the use he makes of the “Great Divide,” of figuration, of the new versus tradition, and of the cultural sensibilities of the day. At the same time it consists also, and perhaps durably, of the specifically formal qualities of his art, an art which is still searching but which, even in the eyes of those partial to an art of allusion, like myself, has brought successful plastic solutions to a formally deadlocked scene.

### Notes

I would like to thank here Denis Grandet for introducing me to the work of Robert Combas, Vera Mark for bringing to my attention Pierre Bourdieu’s and Celeste Olalquiaga’s studies, Barbara Bullock for checking some of my translations, and Solène Merzeau at the Gallery Yves Lambert

for her gracious assistance. Cultural context will best be understood if readers keep in mind that this text was written in April 1993.

1. Specifically, Bernard Ceysson's "Après le classicisme" (Musée d'Art et d'Industrie, Saint-Etienne, November 1980), Bernard Lamarche-Vadel's "Finir en beauté" (the critic's apartment, Paris, June 1981), Suzanne Pagès's "Ateliers 81-82" (ARC, Paris, January-February 1982), "L'air du temps" (Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain, Nice 1982, ELAC [Lyons] 1983). At the same time, galleries on both sides of the Atlantic rushed to invest in the emerging artists: Templon, Paris—notably in Alberola; Yvon Lambert, Paris—in Combas; Castelli, New York—in Blais. All translations are mine.

2. With the exception of several artists a generation or two older than Combas—the painters Gérard Garouste and the adopted Italian Valerio Adami, as well as the sculptors Anne and Patrick Poirier, whose success was international. These were individuals, however, not trends, and abstraction continued strongly with, among others, Daniel Buren and the *Support, Surface* group. The concepts of "narrative figuration" and "new figuration," developed in the 1960s and 1970s on the international scene, had their echo on the French scene as well, spurred by the spirit of '68. The somewhat related *nouveau réalisme* 'new realism,' closer to Pop Art, was taking shape in Nice in 1960 around the critic Pierre Restany.

3. The catalogue of the Biennial, *L'Amour de l'art (Love of Art)*, carries much documentary, if not critical, value. Its illustrations correspond only in part to the works shown in the exhibition.

4. The others are Hervé di Rosa, Boisrond, and Blanchard. Combas was born in 1957; his first important exhibition, ARCA, Marseilles, took place in 1984.

5. For nuanced definitions, see Calinescu and Huysen. Jean-François Lyotard's work offers perhaps the most philosophically complete and aesthetically informed account of the complexities of the postmodern. If in this paper I privilege Huysen's perspective, it is strictly because it sheds the most light on my subject.

6. Palette 124-25, 126-27, 128-29, and 68-69, respectively. This modest book features a generous collection of reproductions, although it cannot compete with the quality of illustrations in Marcadé's sumptuous but prohibitively expensive 1991 monograph.

7. "What I am calling the Great Divide is the kind of discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture" (viii). "Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consum-

its radical separation from the culture of everyday life, and its programmatic distance from political, economic, and social concerns was always challenged as soon as it arose . . . Courbet . . . cubism . . . naturalism . . . Brecht . . . Madison Avenue . . . [yet without] lasting effects” (viii). From Huyssen’s and other studies, the paradigm of “modernism” emerges as including, after Baudelaire, such authors as Eliot, Pound, and Proust, and the increasing drive in the arts toward abstraction. I would add Le Corbusier’s aesthetics and ideology of “purism” as quintessentially modernist in this sense. I shall stop short here of the debate that assimilates post-World War II phenomena, such as structuralism and/or poststructuralism and the French Nouveau Roman, to either modernism or postmodernism. Huyssen continues: “The most sustained attack on aesthetic notions of the self-sufficiency of high culture . . . resulted from the clash . . . with the revolutionary politics arising in Russia and Germany out of World War I, and with the rapidly accelerating modernization of life in the big cities of the early 20th century . . . : expressionism and Berlin Dada in Germany; Russian constructivism, futurism, and the protocult . . . ; and French surrealism, especially in its earlier phase. Of course, this historical avant-garde was soon liquidated or driven into exile . . . and its remnants were later retrospectively absorbed by modernist high culture even to the extent that ‘modernism’ and the ‘avant-garde’ became synonymous terms in the critical discourse. . . . Th[e] second major challenge in this century to the canonized high/low dichotomy goes by the name of postmodernism; and like the historical avant-garde though in different ways, postmodernism rejects the theories and practices of the Great Divide” (vii-viii). For the sake of accuracy, let us note Calinescu’s definition of postmodernism, which privileges the axis of the ethical and aesthetic relationship to time: “Abandoning the strictures of the avant-garde and opting for a logic of renovation rather than radical innovation, postmodernism has entered into a lively reconstructive dialogue with the old and the past” (276). The two positions respectively correspond to Robert Venturi’s and Charles Jencks’s theories of postmodern architecture.

8. Millet’s “Robert Combas: l’enfance de l’art” ‘The Childhood of Art’ is perhaps the best piece of scholarship on Combas to date, followed closely by Didier Semin’s “Paradoxe.” See also Hervé Perdriolle 74, and Marcadé 17-19.

9. Bourdieu refers here not to art, but to a form of social behavior—the use of popular language, particularly slang. He thus describes a blocked situation: “[the] affirmation of a counter-legitimacy . . . is possible only within the limits of *enfranchised markets*” (103); a situation which, by contrast, Combas the talented artist manages to break through. His success is due in part to the complicity of the “official,” “dominant” art market, and in part to his own commercial flair: “I know that the galleries are preparing and

will soon launch a new abstract art. That's obvious and I want to be able to compete . . ." (Brutsch and Moiselet 27).

10. Quoted from a letter by Combas to Palette, 31 August 1991, published in *Libération*, 29 September 1991.

11. She continues, "Such a distant reception . . . is best described as vicarious sensibility . . . one where experience is lived indirectly . . . [displaced by] technology" (xix). Of course Olalquiaga borrows her notion of simulation from Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacres et simulations*, with the change of signs I highlight in the concluding paragraphs of this paper.

12. Cf. Millet's outstanding, if succinct, analysis of the stereotype in Combas (57-58).

13. The word *Wafhen* probably stands for *Waffen* 'weapons'; although the painting itself seems to be displaying only an eagle on the musclemen's shirts.

14. A few of the pieces are also documented in Marcadé's monograph, but to my knowledge there were no catalogues accompanying the exhibitions at the Beaubourg gallery and the Yves Lambert gallery.

15. See Thérèse Burolet's article on Bougereau, 34-41, and the following comment by Catherine Strasser in an accompanying inset: "The rediscovery of the *pompiers* is linked with a taste for bad taste. It is not kitsch but an aesthetic of the corny retro, which started with pop art. . . . To make of Bougereau a great master borders on the reactionary, but to associate him with bad taste, that's fun" (39).

16. In "+ R par dessus le marché" Derrida privileges writing and drawing, as opposed to color, in Adami's work. Numerous exhibitions have treated this question in the past decade.

17. The law reserves 1% of all government subsidies of public architectural projects for public art. The results are mixed.

18. This was the situation in the fall of 1991, and two years later it had not changed.

19. In the fall of 1991 Quardon's work was handled by a Lyons gallery. Other names worth noting are: Sylvie Blocher, Sophie Calle, Annette Messager, Gina Pane, Orlan, Françoise Vergier, Aline Ribière.

20. As Baudrillard understands it: "l'image [here, the text]. . . est sans rapport à quelque réalité que ce soit: elle est son propre simulacre pur" 'the image . . . has no relationship whatsoever to any kind of reality: it is its own pure simulacrum' (17).

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### List of Illustrations

Fig. 1: Robert Combas, *Vierge d'anniversaire*, 1990, Biennial of Contemporary Art in France, Lyons, 1991, photo Monique Yaari

Fig. 2: Robert Combas, *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, 1990, "The Saints," Gallery Yves Lambert, Paris, 1991, photo K. Ignatiasis, courtesy Gallery Yves Lambert

Fig. 3: Ben Vautrier, *Il n'y a pas d'art sans liberté*, rue de Belleville, Paris, photo Monique Yaari

Fig. 4: Françoise Quardon, *Forget Me Not*, Biennial of Contemporary Art in France, Lyons, 1991, photo Monique Yaari

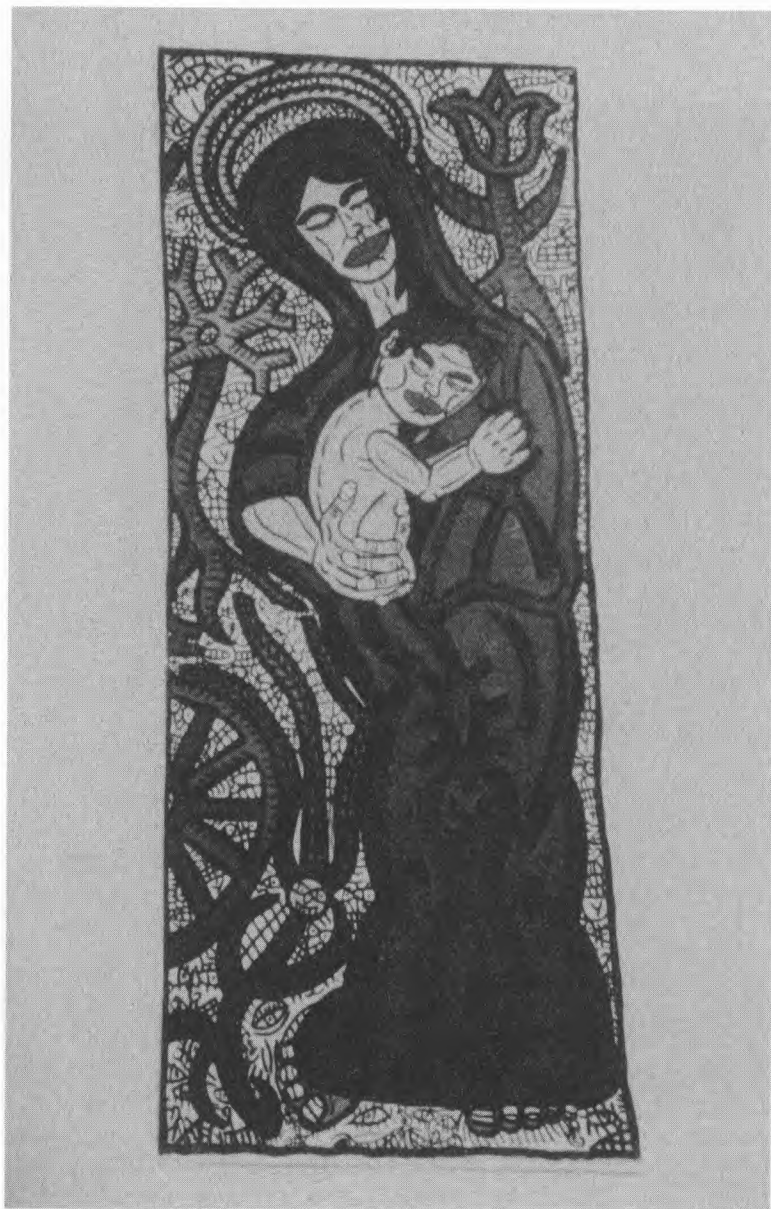


Figure 1

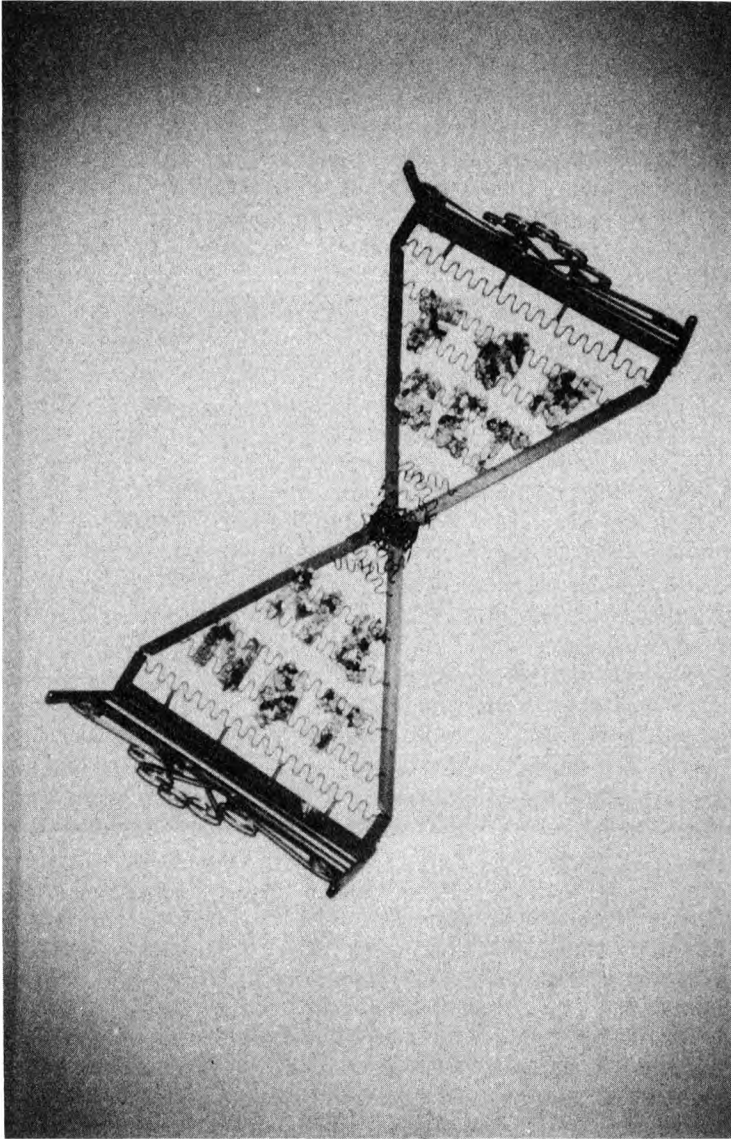




Figure 2



Figure 3



**Figure 4**