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Rosemary O'Neill, *Art and Visual Culture on the French Riviera, 1956-1971: the Ecole de Nice*. Farnham and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2012. xii + 258 pp. Figures, notes, select bibliography, and index. \$119.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-7546-6471-0.

Review by Tania Woloshyn, McGill University.

Scholars of twentieth-century French visual culture and tourism will find O'Neill's *Art and Visual Culture on the French Riviera, 1956-1971* an interesting and important new contribution to the fields. The book offers a solid introduction to the topic of mid-twentieth-century art and tourism on the Côte d'Azur, focussing on a neglected community of disparate contemporary artists native to the region. Falling under the general term of the "Ecole de Nice," this community flourished during the 1960s and was made up of various subgroups: Nouveau Réalisme, which included artists Yves Klein, Armand Fernandez (Arman), and Martial Raysse; Total Art and Fluxus, centred around Ben Vautier (Ben); and Supports/Surfaces, notably led by Claude Viallat.

O'Neill explains that these artists cannot be grouped on the basis of stylistic similarities or "sensibilities," and instead views them as linked by "...conceptual and material objectives, an interest in theatrical modes of presentation, and a keen awareness of place" (p. 3). Noting that the existing literature on the Ecole de Nice has established only vague connections between these artists primarily on the basis of locale, her aim is to situate their artistic production "...in relation to one another on conceptual, ideological and aesthetic—not simply geographical—grounds" (p. 4). She chooses, however, not to arrange her main chapters by theme on such grounds, but rather by artists—case studies, she calls them—in a roughly chronological order. What results is a mainly biographically- and oeuvre-driven series of descriptions, fluidly connected from chapter to chapter.

The book is divided into six chapters, plus a comprehensive introduction and a brief afterword. In her introduction, O'Neill sets the scene: post-war France is experiencing tremendous increases in consumerism or Americanization, as well as tourism, especially on the Côte d'Azur and its cultural capital, Nice. Its regional identity has emerged in contradistinction to Paris and its efforts to produce a unified national culture. Contemporary tourism in the area has created a vibrant youth culture, revelling in kitsch. So too has the local government started to institutionalize the arts, by means of new museums and galleries to celebrate and disseminate the work of modern masters: Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Marc Chagall, all of whom personally aided these endeavors (chapter one). As O'Neill makes clear, these artists brought fame and prestige to the Côte d'Azur, but they were not natives and by the 1960s their authority left little room for young, contemporary Niçois artists to establish themselves.

This is the environment in which the new Ecole de Nice emerged, one subsumed by consumer excess and established artistic traditions. Through provocation, play and irony, she views these artists as challenging and critiquing national culture in their production and, as such, their Ecole representing a "viable alternative" to the avant-garde of Paris (p. 2). In doing so, this Niçois group of contemporary artists had to distinguish themselves both from the artists of the Ecole de Paris and the established modern masters celebrated in their region. These daunting tasks were complicated by diverse interpretations of just what constituted the Ecole de Nice, its definition and unique identity. Founded in

1960 yet fractured throughout the 1960s, and made up of various sub-groups that she aptly terms “artistic tangents” (p. 5), the Ecole appears less a school than a network, and a particularly malleable one at that. Heavily critiqued both internally and externally, it seems that opinions differed widely as to the definition and scope of the group. O’Neill impressively wades through the complex and often-contradictory primary literature and key events to form an understandable narrative in her introduction.

For Yves Klein, the most well-known of the artists O’Neill discusses, the Ecole produced an art of “health” and simple spirit by practitioners on “permanent vacation” (p. 3). O’Neill importantly contextualizes Klein’s definition by discussing perceptions of Nice as a new Eden and the Côte d’Azur as a Mediterranean Hollywood, and throughout her book underscores that this seemingly self-effacing, playful and light-hearted attitude projected by the Ecole artists in their work was, in fact, of the utmost seriousness. Indeed she describes the Côte d’Azur as a laboratory (pp. 18, 103) for their artistic development.

Twentieth-century developments of tourism on the Côte d’Azur consequently are the focus of chapter one. O’Neill explains how leisure time became democratized with the introduction of the *congés payés* by the Popular Front in 1936, resulting in mass tourism along the Côte d’Azur. This was an important context for the growth of the Ecole de Nice, for as she states, its artists “...responded to modernity (and tourism was one of its primary embodiments) paradoxically—with irony, even disdain, but also by reproducing or celebrating it in their work” (p. 20). The historical precedents for these artists are provided, concentrating on the influx of visiting modern artists spurred on by the neo-impressionists (e.g., Paul Signac) and the fauves (e.g., Matisse) via the work of art historian, Kenneth Silver. In this chapter O’Neill discusses not just paintings, but the diverse visual culture of the Côte d’Azur, comparing films by Jean Vigo (1930), Agnès Varda (1958, 1960), and Roger Vadim (1956), outlining the contested origins of the Cannes film festival, and discussing the posters of Nice by Matisse (1949) and Chagall (1962), as well as the Vallauris ceramics of Picasso. Many of these were directly linked to tourism initiatives, as commissions for the National Tourist Office or advertisements for new museums and exhibitions. Developing an identity associated with youth, freedom, hedonism, health, and beauty (pp. 30-31), the Côte d’Azur provided fertile cultural soil for young local artists. O’Neill concludes this chapter by establishing direct links, through family connections and professional circles, between such famous artists and this emerging group of the Ecole de Nice.

In chapters two and three we are introduced to the leading artists of the Ecole, the Niçois branch of the Nouveaux Réalistes: Klein, Arman, and Raysse. She characterizes the group as simultaneously regional and international, its artists well-travelled, well-educated and internationally-established inasmuch as they were based in and around Nice. O’Neill discusses at length the now-famous monochromes of Klein and the flamboyant ways in which he disseminated and exhibited his work (pp. 53-62) as well as his fascination with voids and spaces, natural elements and bodies. She describes Arman’s theatrical tantrums (*Colères*, pp.110-111) and his mass “accumulations,” assemblages of readymades which could encompass objects new or discarded, that referenced and critiqued the excesses of consumerism he witnessed around him (pp. 66-77). In both chapters she concludes with the work of Raysse, an artist who made the Côte d’Azur a central theme of his oeuvre, especially his installations of readymades associated with the region’s tourist stereotypes, exemplified by his installation, *Raysse Beach* (1962, pp.112-114). All three artists were united in their interests in the “real” (both the reality of everyday life and the materiality of real objects), in the excesses of contemporary consumerism, and its expression through bad taste or kitsch.

Chapter four revolves around the spectacular figure known simply as Ben, the director of Fluxus South, and his shop, Laboratoire 32. Credited with introducing Fluxus (and its motto, “everything is possible,” [p. 144]) to the region, his work and shop became the pivotal sources of dissemination for radical contemporary art in Nice. She describes several of his theatrical public performances, collaborations and

exhibitions (pp. 127-145), including the festival event, *Aliment Mystère* (1963), during which Ben and three other artists consumed unlabelled cans of food at a street café before a captivated audience. These spectacles made him such a local public figure that ironically he was even noted as a point of interest in a contemporaneous tourist guide to the Côte d'Azur (pp. 156-157)!

In this chapter, O'Neill also discusses another shop, La Cédille qui Sourit, run by the Fluxus artists, George Brecht and Robert Filliou, in nearby Villefranche-sur-Mer (pp. 145-155). Like Ben, Brecht and Filliou produced work designed to provoke and humor audiences as a way of questioning everyday experience, and even as a form of pedagogy, while their shop, though rarely open to the public, acted as a site for important collaborations and projects. Significantly, she mines Brecht's notebooks for primary material concerning the shop, his work and those of his collaborators. O'Neill concludes the chapter by stressing the role Fluxus artists played in the larger Ecole de Nice, primarily through the efforts of Ben, and their affinities for theatricality and perception of art as "an activity emphasizing imagination and leisure" (p. 156).

The "new generation" of the Ecole de Nice, featuring Bernar Venet, Claude Gilli, Robert Malaval and the architect, Guy Rottier (chapter five), and the Supports/Surfaces artists, Claude Viallat and Noël Dolla (chapter six), are the subjects of the book's last two chapters. We learn that Venet painted with tar, while Gilli "painted" with snails (by painting their underbellies blue and placing them on paper), that Malaval produced textured surfaces in replication of organic decay, and Rottier proposed a helicopter-cum-vacation-home known as the *Maison de Vacances Volante* (1964). Privileging found, natural materials local to the area, and concepts over the object, they produced imaginative and even fantastical works. Viallat's distinctively "geographic perspective" is likewise explored by O'Neill, his "free canvases" marked by repetitive shapes produced by sponges or foam rubber and then hung to dry like laundry in the open air (pp. 193-195). With other artists, Dolla among them, Viallat participated in *plein air* exhibitions in villages such as Coaraze (1969), in which their free-flowing fabrics hung as active interventions or "occupations" of the villages, but which were simultaneously festival-like (pp. 203-206). She defines the Supports/Surfaces group as unified by "a vision of art that critiqued its own practice, rejected the notion of originality and single authorship, and envisioned art as a social form of work integrated into the everyday experience" (p. 207). Collaborative projects such as exhibitions, films, public events and business ventures discussed throughout the book demonstrate the dynamic nature of the Ecole, its permeability, flexibility, and interconnections.

My major criticisms revolve around references and structure. Regarding references, and in relation to my own expertise, O'Neill's sources on regional tourism are somewhat dated, the most recent a publication from 2003. Considering that the main aim of the book is to provide a historically-specific cultural context for the Ecole's production centred on consumerism and tourism, which she argues is fundamentally connected to the locale, I find the lack of current sources surprising. Strangely she also never defines the geography of the Côte d'Azur, historically a contested terrain,<sup>[1]</sup> while also inconsistently switching between calling the region "the French Riviera" and "the Côte d'Azur" (even within the same paragraph). For some this may seem trivial, but for an historian analyzing French regional identity the vocabulary is paramount: the name, *La Côte d'Azur*, was given to the region in 1887 by a regional French poet, Stéphen Liégeard (1830-1925), defining it with clear geographical boundaries, a uniquely French name, and a phrase based on a perceived regionally-specific aesthetic--its azure-colored coastline. O'Neill mentions the significance of this color to the work of Klein and his patented "International Klein Blue" (1957, p. 54), of Raysse (p. 117) and of Gilli (p. 173), but sadly does not develop this further. If, by the 1880s, locals were already attempting to define the region in opposition to its English-speaking visitors and their so-called colonization of the coast, then surely by the 1960s--a period O'Neill tells us was characterized by the Côte's comparison to California and Florida (p. 28) and by anxieties over the Americanization of France--the two different phrases must have been profoundly culturally loaded, not least for local French artists? Attention to vocabulary and the cultural

meanings embedded within the very name, the Côte d'Azur, might have enriched O'Neill's analyses of the region's visual culture and the tensions manifested by attempts to define its Ecole.

Regarding structure, the arrangement of the book by groupings of artists emphasizes description over argument. In some of these instances, comprehensive descriptions for the reader prove essential when the artist's biography needs to be understood or the artistic work itself was never reproduced or recorded (pieces by Ben are exemplary, including conceptual purchases of living people, a conceptual film, and various public performances, chapter four). At other points in the book, descriptions of artists' works become almost list-like in format, leaving the reader to question their purpose within the text. O'Neill tantalizes us in the introduction by declaring she will analyze connections between these artists and groups on conceptual, ideological and aesthetic grounds (p. 4) yet they do not drive her discussion; each chapter begins with and flows from biographical facts and events.

Through that discussion, fascinating themes intermittently surface from chapter to chapter, including shared interests in: the sun/the solarized, first introduced with mention of Claude Rivière's founding article on the Ecole de Nice of August 1960, "La Charge Solaire de l'Artiste" (p. 3; p. 93), then Raysse's "solar obsession" (p. 185) and use of "solarized" color (pp. 77, 111-113, 116), the critic Jacques Lepage's ideas on "solar thought" (p. 174) and the work of Claude Viallat (pp. 209-210); theatricality and provocation, evident in almost every artist she discusses and especially that of Arman, Klein (chapter two) and Ben (chapter four); materiality, whether absent (such as the "air architecture" of Klein [p. 62] or the absent grounds and frameworks of Surfaces/Supports artists [chapter six]) or in excess (such as Arman's accumulations [pp. 70-77]); and health, mentioned constantly in relation to the Côte d'Azur as a perceived site of health and even of "homeopathic medicine" (p. 117), and in citing Klein's art of "health" (pp. 65, 104-105) and the "cleansing" art of Raysse (p. 79). These are but some of the many interesting themes linking these artists, suggesting to me that, had the book been arranged thematically, it might have presented more dynamic arguments for re-evaluating the Ecole's interconnections and a far more engaging structure. My overall sense of the book, however, is that it leaves the reader wanting to discover more of O'Neill's work and ideas.

For non-specialists—whether art historians or tourism historians—O'Neill's book remains highly readable and clear. She is undoubtedly an expert on the subject. References to interviews she has conducted since 1991 with the artists and personal photographs and notebooks from their archives attest to her experience, involvement and commitment. This primary material on the artists, their production and its dissemination is surely the book's greatest achievement. Despite any criticisms of mine, I believe the book is an essential and deeply interesting source on the neglected topic of the Ecole de Nice and its diverse artists, and recommend it to historians of contemporary French tourism, art and visual culture.

#### NOTE

[1] Tania Woloshyn, "La Côte d'Azur: the *terre privilégiée* of Invalids and Artists, c.1860-1900," *French Cultural Studies* 20/4(November 2009): 383-402.

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