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Hannah Feldman, *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945-1962*. Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2014. xvi + 320 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8223-5356-0; \$27.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8223-5371-3.

Review by Tom McDonough, Binghamton University-State University of New York.

*From a Nation Torn* could be hastily described as a book that traces the visual and spatial articulations of historical experience and public memory in France over a fifteen-odd-year period following the end of the Second World War. Its true significance, however, resides in the way its author, Hannah Feldman—Associate Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art in the Department of Art History at Northwestern University—redefines that moment, which we have typically understood and labeled as “postwar,” as one of an ongoing struggle over the disintegration of the French colonial empire, in particular as waged through the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962). In a significant break from earlier work in the discipline of art history, which—inspired primarily by theoretical models provided by the Frankfurt School—saw these years as structured by the consolidation of the reign of the commodity through a renewed dynamic of modernization, she has drawn our attention to the central role of decolonization. The French state’s efforts to render invisible its colonial population’s claims to self-determination have, Feldman argues, been complemented by art history’s own blindness: “we have not seen the carefully constructed articulations of visibility that were developed to alternatively frame and obscure” these struggles (p. 3). Her work aims precisely to redress this occlusion.

She seeks to accomplish this through an examination of the distinct ways in which “the public” was conceived by a variety of players in French culture, from André Malraux (1901-1976)—who, if perhaps best known as a novelist, appears here in his guise as essayist on art and Charles de Gaulle’s culture minister from 1959 to 1969—to avant-garde literary provocateur Isidore Isou (1925-2007), to torn-poster artists Raymond Hains (1926-2005) and Jacques Villeglé (b. 1926), and finally to the activism of thousands of Algerian protesters in the streets of Paris in the fall of 1961. Feldman argues that a range of oppositional practices attempted to restructure “definitions of national belonging ... articulated in relation to a long history of French universalist republicanism” (p. 6)—definitions that had been radically challenged, first by the experiences of the war and, soon after, by decolonization itself. The artists and activists she considers here turned to the public spaces of the city, both literal and metaphorical, in order to combat the silencing of past and current events and to configure potential counter-publics.

The book opens with two chapters on Malraux that establish what the author terms the dominant historicism of French culture in these years, a dissociation of the present moment from the past enacted through the repression of public memory. If this would quite literally be built into the urban space of Paris in the early 1960s with Malraux’s consent and participation as culture minister, Feldman sees it as already forecast in his aesthetic theories as developed in *Les Voix du silence* (1951), in which artworks were “deracinated, dehistoricized, silenced, and so...made the collective inheritance of ‘humanity’” (p. 39).

The following two chapters reread the neo-avant-garde artistic practices of *lettrisme* and *décollage*, both of which attempted to rehabilitate historical memory, as critical responses to Malraux’s official culture.

Through a careful analysis of Isou's writings, Feldman demonstrates how, in the years immediately following the Second World War, "the Lettrists planned to engender new tools of discourse that would enable communication and community beyond the limitations of territoriality, especially as the latter had come to be inscribed in literary language" (p. 78). Theirs would be "a deterritorialized language based on the shared experience of sonic immersion and immediacy" (pp. 12-13), a radical reconsideration of the public in relation to the nation and the national language.

The following chapter, on the *décollage*, or torn-poster works, of Hains and Villeglé, is a major contribution to debates around art and politics in twentieth-century France, and is in many ways the anchor of *From a Nation Torn*, moving the reader from the utopian politics of Lettrism and preparing for the appearance of concrete political actors in the following chapter. Elements of her argument have already found their way into print in a pair of well-received essays, but *décollage* here receives its fullest treatment. [1] Feldman focuses on an exhibition held at the Galerie J in Paris in June 1961, "La France déchirée," whose artworks evoked the events and controversies of the ongoing French-Algerian war. This work, she cogently argues, undertook a project of "representing, experiencing, and ultimately contesting what contemporary political speech and popular discourse tried to dismiss as a non-war" (p. 13). Indeed, contestation of the limitations of the public sphere as manifest in visual culture—questions of visibility and representation—were at the heart of Hains's exhibition strategy: "Through its deliberate use of a physical space to facilitate this visibility, Hains's installation of *La France déchirée* makes of the gallery a portal onto Paris's faceless populations, and, intentionally or not, short-circuits the typical separation of art institution and society at large" (p. 150). The works he exhibited, collected over the previous decade with his colleague Villeglé, consisted of election-year posters and other placards from both ends of the political spectrum that had been defaced by passers-by, torn so that their messages become garbled and transformed into unexpected new constellations of meaning; "the discursive machinery of linguistic propaganda meant to corral human experience into a general and generalizable public" is thus jammed by "the unwitting juxtaposition of words that interrupt each other through layers of buried posters" (pp. 145-146). Hains's work, Feldman states, in removing these torn posters from the city's walls and putting them on display at Galerie J, reinserted "an evidentiary index of the public's existence," while simultaneously recognizing "the epistemological limits of not only the gallery and the art-world, but also the problems of representation upon which they...are based" (p. 155; see also pp. 153-154).

The fifth chapter of *From a Nation Torn* returns to these claims of representability through an examination of a series of photographs taken by photojournalists during a demonstration by Algerians that took place in Paris toward the end of the War of Independence, on October 17, 1961—a protest subsequently made infamous by its violent police suppression, which has been the subject of a great deal of historical scholarship in France over the past twenty years, as well as by its perceived erasure from public memory. Feldman's attention is, however, drawn less by representations of the brutality of forces of the French state than by the processes through which the protesters' claims to representability were articulated visually. "How better to understand how things 'appear' or are made to 'disappear' or the mechanics of 'sight' that determine such phenomena?" she asks rhetorically (pp. 161-162). The photographs she studies become specific visual traces of this event that allow her to theorize a kind of counter-politics of picturing, one she poses against the amnesiac tendencies of spectacle-culture: "the model of photographic possibility that I develop here encourages a reconsideration of the politics of picturing in a period largely understood to be coincident with the spectacularization of everyday life and which, as such, is associated with a presumed need to denigrate the claims of certain genres of photographic practice" (p. 14). In line with the reconsideration of "the image" adumbrated by philosopher Jacques Rancière in his work of the past fifteen years, Feldman insists that the photograph is not simply a site of alienation but a means of contesting the distribution of a shared world of sensory experience. If the concept of "spectacle," as developed by Guy Debord, understood spectatorship and looking to be a means of subjection, she counters that these photographic documents provide evidence of "the kind of appropriative [imagistic] tactics" utilized by the supporters of Algerian independence "to

wage a war from within the mechanisms of spectacle and in contradiction to the supervisory surveillance of the state” (p. 169). The demonstration of October 17, 1961 constructed a provisional public sphere “in plain sight”—a refusal of invisibility, as well as of the strictures of French national subjectivity imposed by the state. In this manner, the chapter forms a suitable response to the official, state-sanctioned models of photographic and spatial practice outlined at the opening of the book.

*From a Nation Torn* makes an important historical and methodological intervention in our discipline. Crucial here is Feldman’s insistence that calling the post-1945 era a “postwar” blinds us to escalating violence in the Western powers’ attempts maintain their colonial holdings. This move places her squarely within the globalizing forefront of art history—while at the same time, I should note, maintaining that the adoption of a decolonial perspective entails not just a geographic expansion of the field at the “periphery,” but a reconceptualization of the art history of the “center” as well. In this way, her book marks a logical development beyond the revisionist accounts of postwar art developed by a previous generation of scholars like Benjamin H. D. Buchloh —one of her mentors at Columbia University—and Serge Guilbaut, who had read the artworks produced in North America and Western Europe through the lenses of the dialectic of modernization and the geopolitical gambits of the Cold War.

That said, one might note certain hesitations. Although Feldman subtitles her book “Decolonizing Art and Representation in France,” we are nevertheless left with a cast of rather familiar (white, straight, male, European) characters; for all intents and purposes, the only Algerians who appear here are the unnamed protesters of 1961. While the reader might recognize that she did not set out to write a history that would encompass contemporaneous developments in Algerian art—which, after 1962, underwent its own process of decolonization—one cannot help thinking that her account would have been that much richer had it acknowledged events occurring across the Mediterranean, or for that matter their echoes in the former metropole (already in April 1964 the Musée des arts décoratifs in Paris had hosted an exhibition of “Peintres algériens,” which had originally been organized in Algiers to mark the anniversary of the start of the War of Independence). Somewhat surprisingly, the recent scholarship on this material by academics of Algerian origin—like Bouayed Anissa, Nadira Laggoune Aklouche, or Fanny Gillet-Ouhenia—is not even acknowledged in her bibliography.[2] A decolonial account that leaves us with largely the same canon of works, even if we must see those works differently in its wake, has perhaps not interrogated its own premises as deeply as it might have.

## NOTES

[1] Notably in Hannah Feldman, “Of the Public Born: Raymond Hains and *La France déchirée*,” *October* 108(2004): 73-96; and “Words, Actions, Inactions, and Things: Reality Between *La Résistance* and *L’Insoumission*,” in Julia Robinson ed., *New Realisms, 1957-1962: Object Strategies Between Readymade and Spectacle* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, and Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 2010), pp. 41-52.

[2] See Bouayed Anissa, *L’art et l’Algérie insurgée: les traces de l’épreuve, 1954-1962* (Algiers: ENAG Editions, 2005); Nadira Laggoune Aklouche, “Structures de la réappropriation,” *Rue Descartes* 58(2007): 111-117; or the brief but important essay by Fanny Gillet-Ouhenia, “Pratique artistique et régime de l’image dans l’Algérie postcoloniale (1962-1965),” *Quaderns de la Mediterrania* 15(2011): 71-77.

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