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Catherine Dossin, ed., *France and the Visual Arts since 1945: Remapping European Postwar and Contemporary Art*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019. \$130.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781501341526; \$39.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781501355752; \$35.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781501341533.

Review by Natalie Adamson, School of Art History, University of St Andrews, Scotland.

French art (or rather, art made in France) holds a highly privileged place in the broader field of study of Western modernity, modernism and the avant-gardes. But for the “postwar” decades after 1945, it has been persistently defined as the weak and decidedly un-heroic contrast to the power and innovation of American art and its histories. *France and the Visual Arts since 1945: Remapping European Postwar and Contemporary Art* aims to redress that imbalance. Indeed, editor Catherine Dossin suggests “another template” is needed in order to “rewrite the whole story” (p.13). That said, the overall narrative largely amplifies the general routes taken by a socially oriented modernist art history with its avant- and neo-avant-gardes, its rejection of painting after 1960 and the move to postmodernist practices, this time placing France and French art firmly at the centre. As such, the volume as a whole makes an invaluable contribution to our knowledge of French art worlds.

The seventeen compact essays are founded upon richly informative archival research and pay attention to many little-known artists, groups and artworks. It is obviously impossible for a single volume, even with such a number of essays, to encompass every artistic medium, artist or event between 1945 and the present day. Photography is here marginalised and architecture is largely absent. Painting and traditional sculpture, like photography, are sidelined in favour of essays on film, cybernetics, objects (static and kinetic), situationist urban critique, performance and happenings, graphic design, and conceptual art. Many of the French and Anglophone authors are early career, with their essays delivering fresh, close-up case-studies of singular figures, artworks and key group formations (with a limited number of small-sized black-and-white illustrations) in their specific historical situations.

The starting point is the conventional one of “since 1945.” The significance and persistence of cultural symptoms and memories of the Second World War and the *années noires* of the Occupation are an important thread of analysis throughout the book, and the notion of being “postwar” is not taken for granted.[1] In “Beyond the Clichés of ‘Decadence’ and the Myths of ‘Triumph’: Re-Writing the History of France in the Stories of Postwar Western Art,” Dossin seeks to correctively arrest the continuation of the hegemonic Anglo-American presentation of modern art after World War II, in which French art is seen as belated, uneven and in decline,

while American art takes the victor's podium. Dossin efficiently sketches a clear and telling schema of historical relations between France and the United States, highlighting that the triumphalist narrative of American art was constructed largely in the 1970s after critic Clement Greenberg's denunciations of French painting and sculpture of the 1950s. With Germany playing third fiddle to French and American authors, Dossin compares art history survey texts to demonstrate that art history is very often written from a national, if not downright insular, point of view.[2] The stance taken is defensive (as though in response to Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*)[3] and hence tied to an over-determined cultural face-off between the two nations and some outdated truisms about the art of the period. In a book announcing the remapping of European art, for example, one might note that such "vertical" accounts of modern and modernist art have also frequently given France and Paris much more attention than, say, Spain, Italy, Germany, Scandinavia or the countries of East and Central Europe.

Dossin's opener is followed by an un-illustrated essay, "Art and Communism in post-war France: The Impossible Task of Defining a French Socialist Realism" jointly written by Cécile Pichon-Bonin and Lucia Piccioni. Though the authors refrain from an in-depth analysis of artworks, the essay establishes socialist realist painting as an integral part of the Parisian art scene during the early years of the Cold War between 1947 and 1953. It calls attention to crucial mediating figures such as the art writer Madeleine Rousseau, and outlines the problems in both theory and practice of realism in terms of the relationship between France and the USSR, making a useful addition to a less fashionable domain of study.[4] In comparison, the three essays that follow treat two movements—Lettrism and the Situationist International—that already command a significant amount of attention in the literary, art historical, architectural, cinematic, theoretical and philosophical domains. Marin Sarvé-Tarr examines the "art of community" in the film *Traité de bave et d'éternité* (*Treatise on Slobber and Eternity*, 1951) by Isidore Isou and his Lettrist colleagues. The cinematic project is situated as a challenge to commercial and state-sponsored cinema, as well as the burgeoning ciné-club scene. It moreover presents a convincing portrait of Lettrist protagonists as a "provisional micro-society" (p.51, Guy Debord) on the margins that sought to bring into being a public form of social life with radical transformative intentions.

Emmanuel Guy's "Their Paris, Our Paris: A Situationist *dérive*," dovetails neatly with its dual interrogation of both the historiography of Situationism (amply footnoted, as is Sarvé-Tarr's paper) and the question of *style* (my italics) as a way of understanding "the means and ends of their project" (p. 60). Guy offers an example of topography as method (modelled upon the Situationists' own tactics), with a map of central Paris on which the lodgings, events and actions, bars and meeting-places, cinemas, galleries, bookshops, printers, presses and magazines are all located. This evocatively shows the social structure of Situationist activities, their experience of the city, and their Parisian insularity. Debord is privileged as more radical and critical than his contemporaries, while Guy provides a neat, historicised account of what he sees as the three key phases of Debord's work. It is not obvious that Guy achieves his intention to write something dialectical and different, but the ambition is admirable, especially in tandem with the warning against engaging in a "mimetic discourse" (p. 60), a caution that could usefully be applied more broadly. Sophie Cras's essay on "Pinot Gallizio's Cavern: Re-Excavating Post-war Paris" deploys a drawn plan by Debord of the Galerie René Drouin, where Italian artist Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio's first Parisian exhibition took place in May 1959, in a careful archival "rebuilding" of a well-known event. Cras draws out Debord's key goal to "orchestrate a shocking scandal" (p. 86)

with the collaboration of the art dealer Drouin in the context of the multisensory trend of avant-garde exhibitions and the ideological and spatial economics of a Parisian art gallery.

We travel from Paris to the sunny south of France in Rosemary O'Neill's deft investigation of Agnès Varda's commissioned film in "Agnès Varda's *du Côté de la Côte*: Place as 'Sociological Phenomenon.'" O'Neill pays close attention to experimental picture sequencing, colour, the use of still photographs, script and music lyrics, to show how Varda simultaneously constructed a compelling narrative for her survey of the identity of the south and its "shared cultural meaning" (p.103), while equally deconstructing its geographic and touristic clichés and the role of the region in structuring work and holiday time for post-war modernity.[5] A contrasting analysis of another ambient environment, the reform of modern society, and the tacky seduction of the Edenic south, follows in Hervé Vanel's "Cybernetic Bordello: Nicolas Schöffer's Aesthetic Hygiene." In an alternative vision to Situationist urban and architectural plans, and also contrasting to the "nihilist" or de-constructionist approach to the technological machine-world of Swiss-born artist Jean Tinguely (featured in chapter eight and the key figure in chapter nine), the Hungarian-born Schöffer proposed a cybernetic and aesthetic programme for reorganising collective life.[6] While pleasure and liberation were key features of his utopian dream of a synthesis of the arts that would enable the "harmonious regulation of life" (p. 119), Vanel demonstrates how the controlling "hygiene" of this putatively visionary program bore within it both suspicious historical antecedents and an equally frightening auguring of the future.

In "Nouveau Réalisme in its 'Longue Durée': From the Nineteenth-Century *Chiffonnier* to the Remembrance of the Second World War," Déborah Laks supplies us with an historiographical and contextually rich perspective on these artists as historians, rather than sociologists. The link to surrealism (alongside Dada), as well as Fluxus and the Situationist International in a vibrant constellational field of avant- and neo-avant-garde activity, is asserted with conviction. The role of junk, refuse, and worn materials is analysed as the bearer of the social reality of the everyday and a telling symptom of post-war traumatic memory of World War II, and Laks concludes in a brief discussion of the work of Niki de Saint Phalle, a contemporary memorial to the violence of the Algerian War of Independence. A similar question of duration, and specifically of time lag and slow-down, is the central thread of analysis in Noémi Joly's essay "Decelerating *Le Mouvement* of Paris with *Vision in Motion--Motion in Vision* of Antwerp: Movement, Time, and Kinetic Art, 1955-1959." Joly traces a lively international network of artists and exhibitions via Antwerp, rather than Brussels or Paris, and in so doing highlights the "plurality of views regarding the issue of motion" (p. 138). Slowness, anachronism, the instant, vibration, and repetition are the temporal hallmarks of artists such as Tinguely, Pol Bury, Soto or Robert Breer, in contrast to futurist speed. In turn, this immaterial art of discontinuity is framed as a potential "withdrawal from history in favour of a continuous, post-historical present" (p. 150), setting up a seeming opposition to the Nouveaux Réalistes' habit of dwelling on the past. Joly's emphasis on intertwined temporalities would perhaps argue for a less fixed conclusion.

Although Tinguely worked and lived in France for some two decades, Elisabeth Tiso's essay "The Public Art of Jean Tinguely 1959-1991: Between Performance and Permanence" continues the move outwards and away from Paris, as well as further highlighting the theatrical and performative as generators for a new type of monumental art. Performance, public spectacle and Tinguely are again at the heart of "Jean-Jacques Lebel's Revolution: The French Happening, Surrealism, and the Algerian War" by Laurel Fredrickson, where the story is told of the ritual torture, execution, burial and mourning of a Tinguely assemblage, *La Chose* (The Thing, c.1960).

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The implications of the Algerian War of Independence for art practices are explored via Lebel's intention for his inaugural happening to be a transgressive refusal of silence and a protest against colonial violence. The roles of eroticism and death, in addition to the significance for Lebel of both Dada and Surrealism, are mapped here in valuable and demystifying detail.

Lebel's rebellious stance can be contrasted to the attitudes taken by the artistic actors in four essays that follow, two of which examine collectives—"Reimagining Communism after 1968: The Case of Grapus" by Sami Siegelbaum and "*Autogestion* in French Art after 1968: A Case Study of the Sociological Art Collective" by Ruth Erickson—and two focusing on individuals, "André Cadere's Disorderly Conduct" by Lily Woodruff and "Places of Memory and Locus: Ernest Pignon-Ernest" by Jacopo Galimberti. All four essays show that art was far from being in flight from politics after 1968. Siegelbaum's analysis of the graphic design collective Grapus, founded in 1970, is a fascinating and informed parable of the group effort to articulate a new political language in graphic design for the PCF in light of its changing status and concerns through the decade of the 70s. Though the events of May and June 1968 are not the explicit focus of any essay, the supposedly "post-radical" (Erickson citing Terry Eagleton) 1970s-1980s, and especially forms of group and collective activism and socially engaged art, are currently a rapidly expanding and dynamic field for historical reconstruction and analysis in both exhibitions and archivally-driven scholarship.[7] Erickson's presentation of the formation of the Sociological Art collective in 1974 as a self-managing group with avant-garde intentions is another incisively drawn portrait of a hitherto little-known French artistic formation that adds density and detail to our image of the period.

The general picture is further deepened in comparing the trajectories of the overtly politicised "street" artist Ernest Pignon-Ernest to the Romanian-born conceptual artist André Cadere. Lily Woodruff probes the challenge that Cadere made to institutional artworld codes and boundaries through the display of his brightly painted, portable, round bars of wood in venues to which they had not been invited (numerous of these bars were recently displayed dotted around the rooms of the MNAM at the Centre Pompidou). In part, Cadere's interventions into artistic autonomy were strategically informed by his East European origins and his understanding of differences in democracy and freedom on either side of Cold War frontiers. Alternatively, Galimberti's portrait of Pignon-Ernest's street interventions shows how this relatively little-known artist developed theatrical large-scale works dedicated to the memory of events such as the Commune of 1870, the Algerian War of Independence and the experience of WWII in France. If Cadere and Pignon-Ernest are shown to have quite different approaches to the question of a site- and issue-specific art practice, both authors also convey the idealism and hope that is a compelling residue of their work.

Finally, in "Questioning the Void: Sophie Calle's Archival Subversions," Rachael Boate examines two projects from the 1990s by this internationally known contemporary artist, both of which focus on archiving and personal recollections to establish alternative forms of historical narrative. In *Last Seen...*, the museum is the focus of her critique, while in *The Detachment* of 1996 Calle asked people to describe the objects/monuments that had once fuelled now empty spaces in former GDR East Berlin. Boate here offers a reading of Calle's work as far from "merely" personal or whimsical in its pursuit of subjective interpretation; rather, the two artworks discussed are dedicated to the interrogation of the ways in which narratives for the "history of art works and a nation" are constructed (p. 268). The final essay by Liam Considine takes us into the terrain of the "neo-conceptual" and almost to the present day with an examination of another collective,

known as Claire Fontaine, and their works *Redemptions* and *Some Redemptions* (2013). As Considine details, Claire Fontaine is a “ready-made” artist who with the help of two assistants exploits the century-long legacy of Marcel Duchamp to re-iteratively and inventively engage with avant-garde traditions. One might say, in referring back to the terms of other essays in this volume, that the weak, but obdurate and vital, resistance of the aesthetic work endures.

Not for the first time in the art practices discussed in this book, impasse and delay are here registered as significant elements of the art work’s structure and the producer’s decisions; and perhaps implicitly these are features of the writing of history that require critical reconstruction and interrogation.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Cécile Pichon-Bonin and Lucia Piccioni, “Art and Communism in Postwar France: The Impossible Task of Defining a French Socialist Realism”

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Liam Considine, “Claire Fontaine, *Redemptions*”

## NOTES

[1] Natalie Adamson, “Serge Guilbaut, ed., *Lost, Loose and Loved: Foreign Artists in Paris, 1944-1968* (review),” *H-France Review* 76/20 (May 2020). Several essays in the book attest to Hannah Feldman’s argument that there is no “postwar” for France after 1944-1945 and we should rather speak of “art *during-war*”—see Hannah Feldman, *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945-1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

[2] One recent attempt at the challenging task of an expanded and relational account of artworks made on both sides of the Atlantic is Alex Potts, *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013). A handful of artists garner repeat attention in the art historical literature, such as Jean Dubuffet, while from a medium-driven perspective Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Yve-Alain Bois have supplied artist-specific studies on selected figures such as Martin Barré, Daniel Buren, Yves Klein, Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé. Women artists remain conspicuously absent from the story.

[3] Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

[4] For close studies of artworks, see Vivian Rehberg, “Realism and Ideology in André Fougeron’s *Le Pays des Mines*,” in V.Mainz and G.Pollock (eds.), *Work in Modern Times: Visual Mediations and Social Processes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 150-172; and Lucie Fougeron, “A Case of Imaging: Socialist Realism in the Plastic Arts in France (1947-1954),” *Sociétés & Représentations* 15:1 (2003).

[5] We find another illuminating treatment of specific films by Varda in Rebecca J. DeRoo, *Agnès Varda between Film, Photography and Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

[6] Schöffner’s programme is contextualised more broadly in Larry Busbea, *Topologies: The Urban Utopia in France, 1960-1970* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).

[7] In a rapidly expanding field of emerging new work, see Jacopo Galimberti, *Individuals against Individualism: Art Collectives in Western Europe (1956-1969)* (Liverpool University Press, 2017); Sami Siegelbaum, “The Riddle of May ’68: Collectivity and Protest in the Salon de la Jeune Peinture,” *Oxford Art Journal* 35:1 (March 2012): 53-73; Philippe Artières and Éric de Chasse (eds.), *Images en Lutte: la culture visuelle de l’extrême gauche en France (1968-1974)* (Paris: ENSBA, 2018); Jenevive Nykolak, “Supports/Surfaces, Scission, and the Structure of the Avant-Garde,” *Art History* 43:1 (February 2020): 94-119; Guillaume Desanges and François Piron, *L’Ésprit français: Contre-Cultures, 1969-1989* (Paris: La Maison Rouge, 2017); and Rakhee Balaram, *Counterpractice: Psychoanalysis, Politics and the Art of French Feminism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

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