

540 Seminar 2007

Around 1956: Slouching Towards post-modernity

The seminar will compare different reactions to the tumultuous year 1956 in the cultural field of France, England and the US. Not only did RCA that year produce Elvis Presley's hit record, "Heartbreak Hotel", but the western world was abruptly passing from a world fascinated with WWII and its economic and psychological consequences, to a new environment where cynicism ran parallel to the development of a booming market oriented economy and where a series of political events in the east as well as in the west brought simultaneously a sense of liberation and a feeling of uselessness. After years of privations, consumerism became a powerful engine with many repercussions on the cultural sphere. If Pollock, Rothko and Barnett Newmann in the U.S. and Wols, Bram Van Velde, Soulages and Hartung were the icons of the immediate post-war in the arts, around 1956 their anxiety and pessimism, seen as passé by the younger generation, were replaced by coolness and detachment. This tactic was a way to show, through humour, that the arts could also be at the heart of the reorganization of culture but along opposite lines of thinking than the ones that had just been canonized by critics, galleries and museums. The monochromes of Yves Klein, the electric machines producing abstract expressionist drawings of Tinguely, the abstract painting produced with guns by Niki De

St Phalle, the abstract expressionist paintings made by machines and sold by the meter presented by Pinot Gallizio as well as the white paintings done by Rauschenberg, all insist on the loss of credibility of modernism while it is clear that they also show a forceful return of avant-garde strategies (even if it was a neo avant-garde as it is still fashionable to say these days). What is fascinating in all this is that around 1956 the western world is beginning to reorganize itself, after a long period of mourning and readjustment, through a dismissal of its immediate past. Youth culture became an important factor of destabilization of authority through its alienation and violence against well established rules. It is indeed the time of “Rebel without a cause”, of Little Richard’s Tutti-Frutti, of ‘Be-Bop a Lula’ by Gene Vincent and ‘Hound Dog’ by Elvis. All this rage was being displayed while their elders were still trying to dominate other cultures abroad for economic reasons (Suez crisis, Algeria, Indochina, cold war etc..) The loss of innocence around this time will produce, so it seems, a post-modernity *avant la lettre* with the introduction of important segments of popular culture into the everyday without the need to integrate it into a modernist canon. This year, 1956, presents a fascinating moment of oscillation, of questioning old values, still dear to an older generation. The rhythm of life is suddenly accelerating and everybody, not only notices it, but also experiences it as Jackson Pollock and James Dean die dramatically in car accidents. Speed being the factor which will for ever shake up western culture as Dean’s accident robs a generation of their youthful icon and as Pollock’s death symbolizes the end of a generation which has been able to push art and its seriousness to the limit with ambiguous success. This new generation that can laugh at the elders by erasing one of their drawings, as did Rauschenberg with a work of De Kooning, is also prepared to

transform manners of living, the way of relating, like Brigitte Bardot and the writers, Françoise Sagan and De Beauvoir (in different ways) managed to do in portraying a new liberated woman, full of strength and insouciance.

The move from existentialist painting to proto pop in the art is paralleled in the high fashion industry-the cultural sign par excellence- which moves from the Dior **New Look** to Balenciaga's "Sack Dress": from controlled sexiness to baggy "*inform*" (unformed or shapeless) freedom.

It is all these permutations, transformations and fierce debates populating the year 1956 that we will investigate in England , France , the United States (and maybe Canada and Spain).

Readings:

Clement Greenberg: "American Type Painting", Partisan Review Spring 1955 and response from Fairfield Porter. Published in John O'Brian: *Affirmations and Refusals*, University of Chicago Press, 1993, P. 217-239.

Thomas Crow, The Rise of the Sixties , Orion, 1996, p. 15-67

Benjamin Buchloh: "Hantai, Villeglé, and the dialectics of Painting's Dispersal", October, Winter 2000, No 91, p 25-35

Hannah Feldman: “Of the Public Born: Raymond Hains and La France Déchirée”,
October, Spring 2004, N0 108, p. 73-96

Greil Marcus: “The Long Walk of the Situationist International”, , in Guy Debord, ed.
Tom McDough, MIT, 2002, p. 1-20.

Suzan Weiner: “Fictions of Female Adolescence”, in Enfants Terribles, John Hopkins
University, 2001, p. 67-106

Kristin Ross: Fast Cars, Clean Bodies, MIT, 1995, p. 71-122.