

'Face A L'Histoire:' Centre Pompidou.

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The title, "Face a l'histoire" tries to say it. On one side art, a great linear, chronological survey of its many practices from 1933-96, displayed in rooms devoted to such diverse themes as anti-Semitism, the civil war in Spain, Vietnam, or Algerian independence. On the other side, history, or rather a spine of materials designated to stand in for it - magazines, posters, pamphlets, novels, some scanty panels of text and so forth. The facing is all in one direction. Art broods on history, occasionally trying to act upon it. History, wretched, terrible, destructive, never outfaces art from its position of passivity as mere event.

This idealized relation, while it maintains the very separation between history and the historicity of art that it is supposed to overcome, nonetheless furnished the exhibition with its principle of selection. Andre Masson's Andalusian Reapers, 1935, and Salvador Dali's The Enigma of Hitler, 1938, follow unproblematically from Marc Chagall's White Crucifixion, 1938, and on to Andy Warhol's Atomic Bomb, 1965, or Art & Language's Portrait of Lenin . . . , 1980. You get the point, Jews, Spain, cold-war anxiety, and postmodern reflexivity - history as an alibi or a fall guy for style. As if in such works artists do face history, and elsewhere they face only something else, such as other art.

Yet this monstrous vagueness is a fitting tribute to the exhibition's dedicatee, the late and for many of us unlamented arch-Gaullist, Andre Malraux. In "Face a l'histoire," with its willful, end-of-ideology confusion of political or economic difference, its refusal to allow distinction (between left and right, for example), the idea of an outside-the-museum is as muddled as was Malraux's. So there, in the vast central runway, we find covers and news spreads from illustrated magazines - AIZ, Regards, Vu, Paris Match, Picture Post, etc. - encased in bright vitrines, our specimens of "history." Yet little care is taken to contextualize this "context." Not to see that for every front page Vu or Regards ran of Nazi atrocities, they featured many more on entertainment or scandal, or that the internal layout of those periodicals is itself a paradigm of modernist communication, blurs the specificity of these selections and eclipses the complexity of art's being in history.

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Moreover, if Paris Match's abusive and racist coverage of the Night of October 28, 1961, the great demonstration for Algerian independence, is taken without question as it is here, then the exhibition itself reinstates the magazine's elision of one of the most violent examples of state violence in our age. In the vitrines devoted to literature, fascist, socialist, communist, resistant, or collaborationist opinions or literary commitments jostle each other as just so many preferences. So what relation, if any, does the nearby, right-wing painting Lenin-Stalin, 1948, by Auguste Herbin, have to either colonial brutality and its (mis)representations or to communist politics? Its situation as art is quite unlike that, say, of the iconographically and ideologically fascinating Collective Anti-Fascist Painting, 1961, by Enrico Baj and others. That strange attempt at aesthetic and political riot, made in defiance of mainstream modernism and official, pre-1968 communism, was released from confiscation by the Italian state only in 1988. Such differences should pose an open-ended multiplicity of histories, of stories of art's being. Yet the hang insists on its fruitless concept of facing which, in the end, seems to be overdetermined by an implicit refusal to take on any aspect of art's critical histories as they have developed over three decades. It remains a rather stale reiteration of Western, male modernity, here in its more tragic mode.

Yet, starting with the genuinely fascinating juxtapositions of Alexander Deineka and Mario Sironi, Oskar Kokoschka, John Heartfield, and Max Beckmann, the exhibition is also full of surprises. It's interesting to note how Graham Sutherland and Henry Moore's trips to record wartime London look meretriciously stylish alongside Philip Guston's 1937-38 Bombardment, or the subtly elliptical politics of Joan Miro or Antoni Tapies. And while painting and mass representations stay side by side in the early period, from the '70s onward, installation, photography, video, and text progressively take over. With Wolf Vostell, Joseph Beuys, Victor Burgin, Hans Haacke, or Conrad Atkinson, external documentation stops. Art, criticizing old claims to its autonomy, is now, ironically, fully autonomous as it both faces and documents history.

This tendency is confirmed in a separate gallery for 1980-96. Magnum photographs and works by Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, Jeff Wall, Gerhard Richter, among others, celebrate what by now look like the more obvious triumphs of mechanical reproduction. And there's an air of kitschy moralism and technological determinism all this work that was less evident ten years ago. These images are more or less like opinions. The only art here facing history with paint is Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's [Eurydice](#), 1996. Ettinger alone is allowed to make a link with the disturbing achievements of Beckmann's Departure, 1932-33, with Felix Nussbaum's uncategorizable realism in his images of the Saint Cyprien camp (1941-42), with Jean Fautrier's deeply problematic disturbance, in his Hostages, 1944, with art's signs in relation to art's meanings as a mode of being historical. A subtlety met also by Susan Meiselas' elaborate use of shadow to unsettle technological discourse in her

Digging/Evidence/Identity, 1996, or the undertones of dark pleasure in Luis Camnitzer's photographic series "Uruguayan Torture," 1983. The present then, so much a matter of opinions, looks dated; more like the conscientious legatee of Edouard Pignon's clumsy ouvrierism than of Otto Freundlich's tensely aporetic My Sky Is Red, 1933, or Equipo Cronica's disconsolately humorous The Visit, 1969.

But if the exhibition is a mess, the catalogue is quite remarkable, though unhappily too unwieldy to be a guide. Once past the unctuous dedication to Malraux, it deals brilliantly with more or less all the issues occluded by the show, often calling its bluff. In some sixty-two short essays it offers an encyclopedic review of current thinking on the arts and the writing of art history with contributions from Marcelin Pleynet to Hal Foster, from Jacques Ranciere to Griselda Pollock. Indeed with Ranciere's exquisite essay, "Sens et figures de l'histoire," the catalogue opens with an exploration of the poetics of history so deft in its placing of history's relation to figure and material in art, that the whole enterprise is redeemed.

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