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“The United States of (French) Painting”: Supports-Surfaces and the Test of Time

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« Les États-Unis de la peinture » française :

l'épisode Supports-Surfaces

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Hélène Trespeuch

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À propos de :

- **Clement Greenberg**, *Ecrits choisis des années 1940 : art et culture – essais critiques*, Paris : Macula, 2017
- *La Surface de la Côte Est : de Nice à new York = The Surface of the East Coast: from Nice to new York*, Paris : Cercle d'art, 2017. Sous la dir. d'Aymeric Mantoux
- **Marcelin Pleynet**, Paris : artpress, 2017
- *Support-Surface*, Paris : artpress, 2017
- **Noël Dolla : restructurations spatiales (1969-2016)**, Paris : Blackjack, 2017
- **Daniel Dezeuze : une rétrospective**, Paris : Somogy ; ADAGP ; Grenoble : Musée de Grenoble, 2017
- **Pierre Buraglio**, *Notes discontinues : écrits 2005-2017*, Strasbourg : L'Atelier contemporain, 2017

In 1992, Bernard Ceysson explained that at the beginning of the 1970s, as the young curator of the Saint-Étienne Museum of Art and Industry, he took an interest in the Supports-Surfaces movement,

because “it was connected with American art, therefore consigning the School of Paris to oblivion.”¹ Following the famous 1964 Venice Biennial, which would officially consecrate New York as the new artistic capital of the Western world, thereby dethroning Paris², the prescribing power of the United States gained influence in the French art world. The young artists of Supports-Surfaces, who created their movement after May '68, were not sorry to see the end of Paris's reign, quite the opposite in fact. They believed then that the situation of French art was deplorable, and that the second School of Paris's post-war abstraction had plunged the country into mediocrity, whereas abstract Expressionism was helping the United States radiate beyond its national borders for the first time. The members of Supports-Surfaces were fascinated by 1940-1960s American abstraction, especially by Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Kenneth Noland. In actual fact they were interested in many other artists from France (such as Simon Hantaï and Pierre Soulages) and abroad (Lucio Fontana for instance³), as well as by Americans living in Paris (James Bishop, Joan Mitchell, etc) and painters from an illustrious past (Henri Matisse, Nicolas Poussin, Jean Siméon Chardin). In this respect, Pierre Buraglio's *Notes discontinues* is enlightening. “In the 60s, we were indeed very little interested in Greek mythology or Biblical stories, but I would go, with Michel Parmentier, Michel Vionnet and others, to the Louvre. So we were less barbaric than we seemed, and we would look at Poussin, Paolo Uccello, Chardin...”⁴

However, at the time, only the interest in the United States seemed noteworthy, because the art world in which the artists of Supports-Surfaces worked was dominated by American artists, movements and discourses. To take interest in American abstraction also meant taking interest in the discourses that promoted it, such as formalist modernism, developed by American critic Clement Greenberg. The group's journal, *Peinture: cahiers théoriques*, which was founded in 1971, published the first French translation of one of his texts in 1974: “Modernist Painting” (1960).

When *Art press* magazine was created in 1972, its goal was to defend the work of these young French artists, while enthusiastically working towards a better knowledge of the American art scene. But sometimes, one of these ambitions stifled the other: when Louis Cane gave Catherine Millet an interview in 1973, most of the questions required that he state his position regarding the American

¹ Ceysson, Bernard. « Bernard Ceysson entretien avec Jean-Paul Ameline et Harry Bellet, octobre 1992 », *Manifeste: une histoire parallèle, 1960-1990*, Paris : Centre Georges Pompidou, 1993, p. 38

² For the first time in 1964, the Painting Prize was awarded to an American artist, Robert Rauschenberg, and not to an artist working in France.

³ Dezeuze, Daniel. « La dernière des avant-gardes ? », Louis Cane, Daniel Dezeuze, Claude Viallat interviewed by Catherine Millet, September 1989, *Support-Surface*, Paris : Artpress, p. 158: “We were already fans of Fontana when there was a miserable exhibition of his works – the exhibition was beautiful, but it was shown in a mere corridor – at L'Arc, in 1970.”

⁴ Buraglio, Pierre. « Le Pêcheur à la ligne. Notes éparses sur Nicolas Poussin réunies l'hiver 2002 », *Notes discontinues*, Strasbourg : L'Atelier contemporain, p. 66

scene⁵: “What do you think of all-over painting [...]?”; “Can one compare your large-scale works with the gigantic canvases of American painters?”; and “What do you think of Reinhardt’s black paintings, Ryman’s white paintings, and of some painters’ search for a ‘non-colour’?” As a result, this exchange, which was recently republished in *Art press*’s great interviews dedicated to the movement, will teach its reader more about American painting and sculpture than about Louis Cane’s production, although he tried to point out what distinguished it from American practices.

Over the years, the artists’ various positions regarding the American model changed, as shown by recent publications about the protagonists of the movement, which have the merit of comparing documents and/or works from different periods. The *Art press* interviews dedicated to Supports-Surfaces and Marcelin Pleynet – the critic who was closest to the artists – show that disappointment and irritation, along with the will to compete, followed the artists’ initial fascination.

Thus, in 1991, when a few ex-members of Supports-Surfaces were asked to revisit the group’s history, they mentioned its “isolation [...], in France and in the international context”, and Daniel Dezeuze concluded: “We [...] payed for New York’s revenge on the School of Paris”⁶. Marcelin Pleynet also displayed this orientation. At the end of the 1960s, he was one of the few (including Daniel Dezeuze⁷) to be able to base his approach of American painting on a deep knowledge of the works. In 1966, he was visiting professor of Literature in Chicago, and therefore was able to gain direct knowledge of Abstract Expressionism instead of through the reproductions published in *Cimaise, Les Lettres françaises* or *Le Prisme des arts*. But the United States’s expansionist strategy on the art scene probably convinced him to qualify his initial enthusiasm, which had led him to “wax mythological”⁸, claiming that nothing was happening in France, and that everything important artistically was taking place in the United States. In 1977, he declared he was part of the generation “that had started thinking in post-war France, and that had had to grapple with an exacerbated nationalism”⁹ which needed getting rid of. This probably helps understand the title of the book he dedicated to the major figures of American painting in 1986: *Les Etats-Unis de la peinture* (Paris: Le Seuil). The critic’s project was to refer to the country in which the painters that interested him had developed their work, but also to point out that painting “is done everywhere in forms that are always different, but which are never completely foreign. United States: a general confederation of the states of painting”¹⁰. In his book, he also highlighted American artists’ debt to European artists, such as Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso,

⁵ Cf. Millet, Catherine. “Louis Cane: le plaisir de la connaissance”, Interview with Louis Cane, March-April 1973, *Support-Surface, Op. cit.*, p. 15-35

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 144

⁷ In the 1960s, Daniel Dezeuze lived in Mexico, then Canada. He discovered abstract Expressionism and Minimalism during a stay in New York in the Spring of 1965.

⁸ Cf. Pleynet, Marcelin. “L’inquiétante étrangeté de l’art en France”, interview with Catherine Millet, November 1983, *Marcelin Pleynet*, Paris : Artpress, p. 98

⁹ Pleynet, Marcelin. “In progress”, interview with Jacques Henric and Catherine Millet, June 1977, *Marcelin Pleynet, Op. cit.*, p. 53-54

¹⁰ Pleynet, Marcelin. “Les Etats-Unis de la peinture”, interview with Catherine Millet, May 1986, *Ibid.*, p. 103

Marcel Duchamp and Alberto Giacometti. This open vision of the Western art scene led him to argue, in 1983, that French contemporary works should be judged “according to their specificities and not external criteria which have no relevance to the French context.”¹¹ He also added: “Although the Americans believe, rightly so for a while, but wrongly for the past few years, that what they do is more interesting than what is happening in Europe, when you meet one of them, they never fail to say that their family comes from Europe, that they are not Indians or savages [...]. We hate France, which is a way of loving it. We say nothing happens in France, which is a way of terribly wanting to exhibit here.”¹²

Bernard Ceysson also wanted to defend French art, and particularly Supports-Surfaces. He is currently the art consultant for the Ceysson & Bénétière gallery, which his son François Ceysson and his partner Loïc Bénétière co-direct. From the start, in 2006, the gallery developed a strong connection with the ex-members of Supports-Surfaces, and it now wants to work, from its recently opened New York gallery, towards the discovery (for can one truly speak of re-discovery?) of the work of Supports-Surfaces in the United States. In 2014, a Supports-Surfaces exhibition co-organised with the Canada Gallery in New York laid the ground for the conquest of the United States, which would be launched in the summer of 2017. The exhibition took place with the help of Wallace Whitney’s mediation. He is one of the co-founding artists of the Canada Gallery, and represented in Europe by the Ceysson Gallery. This event served as an impetus for a 2017 exhibition in Nice (France) which showed Supports-Surfaces works alongside pieces by young American painters with similar practices: *The Surface of the East Coast: from Nice to New York*. In the catalogue, interviews with ex-members of Supports-Surfaces and the younger artists are printed side by side. Up until then, the younger generation knew nothing of their predecessors, but they seemed interested by this new discovery. The book dedicated to Noël Dolla’s (1969-2016) *Restructurations spatiales*, is also representative of the reevaluation of Supports-Surfaces’s historical contribution. Although Fabrice Flahutez and Rachel Stella remark, in the wake of others, on the (fortuitous) similarities between Noël Dolla’s actions in nature and those of American Land artists, Fabrice Flahutez judiciously suggests that Dolla displayed more integrity, as the documents recording his works “were never used or spotlighted by the artist for commercial reasons or even shown in exhibitions, as was the case with American artists.”¹³ However, this should not eclipse Noël Dolla’s simultaneous work as painter and producer of objects.

Although many of these publications help shed light on the complex relationship with the American art scene, which changed from deference to competition, one book in particular offers a more indirect, but nonetheless fascinating, reflection on the other interest that shaped the group: sociopolitical

¹¹ Pleynet, Marcelin. “L’inquiétante étrangeté de l’art en France”, art. cit., p. 96

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 98

¹³ Flahutez, Fabrice. “Noël Dolla – Michel Foucault : rencontre sur le terrain”, *Noël Dolla : restructurations spatiales*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2017, p. 147. Therefore, the exhibition at the Ponchettes Gallery in Nice was his first.

commitment. In the Cold War context that opposed the capitalist and Soviet blocs, Supports-Surfaces had a distinctive feature, often criticised as one of the movement's great paradoxes, that of drawing artistic inspiration from the United States and ideological inspiration from China. As an avant-garde, Supports-Surfaces tried to combine their artistic ambitions with a strong political and social commitment, blending Marxism and Maoism. Of course, the discrepancy between artistic formalism and the desire to conceptualise painting as a form of activism rooted in its time was not specific to Supports-Surfaces. Knowing how to combine these two ambitions is an issue that spans the history of Abstract art ever since its beginnings (Kasimir Malevitch for example). Clement Greenberg also reflected on this.

In her introduction to a new edition of a collection of articles by Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (1961), expanded by a selection of writings from the 1940s, art historian Katia Schneller offers a precise and erudite reading of the evolution of Greenberg's positions. In her in-depth analysis, taking into consideration the intellectual and political context in which the critic's thought was developed, she shows how Greenberg, a Trotskyist, became convinced in the 1930s that the best solution for avant-garde art, under the threat of totalitarianism and capitalism, was to concentrate on purely formal questions, which would guarantee its freedom. Schneller then offers several arguments which could help qualify what was considered for a long time in the United States as a radical shift, an abandoning of the critic's sociopolitical ambitions in the 1940s. However, she does recognise that Clement Greenberg "hardened his defence of the autonomy of art by evacuating from his analyses all understanding not connected to the form and materiality of the considered artwork."¹⁴

Although Supports-Surfaces was fascinated by American abstraction and tried to understand Greenbergian formalism, the fact remains that they were separated by a gulf. Different periods, different places, different issues. However, it is interesting to note that the American critic and the French artists reflected on similar questions: on the way to reconcile artistic and sociopolitical ambitions. Although they all shared a similar interest in abstraction and the ambition to defend the autonomy of art, their answers to these questions were different. Greenberg was reproached with renouncing Trotskyism, and the artists of Supports-Surfaces were criticised for unconvincingly attempting to bridge the gap between a practically decorative formalist abstraction and a Marxist-Maoist discourse that is not easily understandable today. Nowadays, these different positions may seem surprising, annoying or laughable. But above all they must be situated in the context that created them.

¹⁴ Schneller, Katia. "C'est Athènes que nous voulons", *Clement Greenberg, Ecrits choisis des années 1940: art et culture - essais critiques*, Paris : Macula, 2017, p. 37

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