Destroy, She Said: Remarks on Yve-Alain Bois' *An Oblique Autobiography*

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Book review: Yve-Alain Bois, *An Oblique Autobiography* (New York and San Francisco: no place press, 2022). 376 pp., 6 x 8 in, 31 b&w ills. Paperback. ISBN 9781949484083.

It is a cliché to refer to the long economic boom in France that followed the Second World War—the three decades between 1945 and 1975—as *les trente glorieuses*. The phrase has no satisfying translation, though "golden" hints at the *éclat* thrown off by the final adjective. Adopting this terminology for our ends, we might refer to the 1980s as Yve-Alain Bois' *décennie glorieuse*, a splendid ten years during which the now-celebrated art historian simply could not miss. After spending the decade's first few years in a research post funded by the French state, Michael Fried invited Bois to take a visiting professorship at Johns Hopkins in 1983, as a temporary replacement for the departing Nancy Troy; within a month, he was offered a position as an associate professor. Firmly ensconced in the American academy, he would publish over the next several years a series of magisterial studies which established his reputation. As the 1980s ended, and tenure review loomed, everything was bundled into a book: in a way, the only one he would write. The rest is history. Harvard, then the Institute for Advanced Studies; a three-volume edition of the Barnes' Matisse collection; Ellsworth Kelly's catalogue raisonnée; exhibitions on Mondrian, Picasso/Matisse, and "L'informe" at esteemed institutions. And so on.

In *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), contemporary art polemics of the sort Bois might have read in the pages of *October* on first arriving in the US are, with one exception, held at arm's length. So, too, are the cultural politics of the *gauchiste* seventies in Paris, whose ferocious conflicts, however provincial and aberrant they might now seem, made the "critique or complicity" controversies around Jeff Koons or Haim Steinbach seem like dinner party discussions. We catch a glimpse of Bois as a combatant in this rough-and-tumble Parisian scene, however, in a new collection of "homeless" essays that he has given the teasing title *An Oblique Autobiography* (New York and San Francisco: no place press, 2022). Although they were mostly written during his long exile in the United States—just three of the twenty-plus included here date from before 1983—their "autobiographical" content is largely confined to the years preceding Bois' departure.

Taken together, these texts present a stirring portrait of these years. We encounter essays on Roland Barthes's and Hubert Damisch's seminars, Bois' intellectual debt to critic

Jean Clay, and his close friendship with writer and curator Guy Brett and artist David Medalla. We find hints of the studies that would later make his reputation. An essay on Matisse's writings on art from 1974 is dismissed in a footnote as riddled with flaws, while the impetus for Bois' 1985 essay on Mondrian's New York paintings can be traced back to a charged scene in Lygia Clark's studio when the author was just sixteen, in the course of which the Brazilian artist insisted that Michel Seuphor's 1956 monograph presenting "the Dutch artist [as] the king of…'peinture construite'" had it all wrong: "*Au contraire*, Clark told me, 'Mondrian is all about destruction.'" It was Clark, we learn, rather than his mentors at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, who was responsible for Bois' decades-long preoccupation with the system of non-perspectival spatial rendering called axonometric projection: the subject of his 1977 dissertation (*Lissitzky, Malevitch et la question de l'espace*) as well as a still-promised book on "the modern history of axonometry." But we also learn of episodes that would seem to have little bearing on Bois' future preoccupations: a first monograph on Picabia from 1975, for example, that was pulped by a publisher spooked by a threat of legal action by the artist's family; or, unexpectedly, an essay written that same year for a special issue of the journal *Critique* (on China, "yesterday and today") devoted to the peasant painters of Huxian, whose artistic production was celebrated at home and abroad during the Cultural Revolution.

As we move from one essay to the next, we meet a crowd of mentors and colleagues (Jean Clay, Guy Brett, Lygia Clark, Rosalind Krauss, and so on), as well as a group of artists (Christian Bonnefoi, Martin Barré Fabricio Perozzi, Christophe Verfaille, painters all) to whom Bois was close. An attentive reader will be able to piece together a fascinating image of the young Bois: born in, Algeria, where he spent his first seven years before moving to Toulouse; a larger-than-life father (Roby Bois), at once Huguenot minister, friend of Paul Ricoeur, and reader of the journal *Internationale Situationniste*; a teenager from the provinces comfortable with the cream of the Parisian art world, who thought nothing of writing letters to Ellsworth Kelly or carrying on a correspondence with Franz Erhard Walther (which would later be published by the Reina Sofia). Above all, perhaps, we are left with the image of a precocious abstract painter, offered a solo show in Paris—which he refused—at sixteen. An essay on art historian Robert Klein is illustrated with images, dated 1968, of a group of "sculptures corporelles" attributed to "Yve-Alain Bois," who is shown wearing them in the photographs. The transition from a Mondrian-inflected abstracted painting to paper sculptures using the body as an armature no doubt reflects, still again, the momentousness of the author's encounter with Clark, whom he reports having seen "almost every day" from 1971, when he moved to Paris, until 1976, when she returned to Brazil.

For all its insistence on its status as memoir, though, I want to argue that *An Oblique Autobiography* is more fruitfully conceived of as a sustained historical mediation, refracted through the *éventail* of interpersonal dynamics (mentorship, rivalry, dialogue, friendship) recounted in its pages. What emerges over its almost four hundred pages are the clear outlines of an historical epoch: the France of 1968 to 1983. More precisely, we are presented with a particular cultural world, one distinguished by the inseparability of "culture"—visual art, but also philosophy, literary production, "theory," the cinema and so on—and politics, both statist and "revolutionary." Bois conjures two aspects of this world with great clarity.

First, the ruinous conditions prevailing in post-war France's official art establishment. This desolation is laid in no small part at the feet of de Gaulle's celebrated cultural affairs

minister, André Malraux. The post-war French art historical establishment was antiquarian in its concerns and positivist in its method ("stamp collecting"). Only two professorships were authorized to teach the history of modern art in Paris: "They were held by scholars for whom Cézanne represented the beginning of decadence." Public collections were so focused on restoring the glory years of the school of Paris—the regrettable "second school of Paris" and its "landscapist half-baked abstraction"—that they did not hold a single Mondrian, the young Bois' favorite painter, until 1978 (no Pollock until 1972). And, finally, there was the dreadful drift of French critical writing, in which poets and philosophers were mobilized to pour out "sentimental goo on 'the sacred'" in magazines and catalogs. If the three decades after Liberation were marked by historical patterns of sustained economic growth in France, their radiance was not reflected in the art institutions of the period. It is no wonder that the young Bois gravitated, in late 1960s, to Latin American artists like Clark or Mathias Goeritz, or leapt at the chance to study in the United States in 1969-70, where he would meet or correspond with artists working in New York (and read Philip Leider's *Artforum*).

Then there is the political and theoretical scene in Paris, marked as it was by an ambient and distinctly French Maoism. From the fall of 1968 until about 1976, this peculiar political current represented what Bois deems "the most coherent sector of the French left." It attracted the cream of the French *grandes écoles* and many children of the Parisian bourgeoisie, as well as venerable elders, such as Sartre. Originally a pre-1968 tendency within (and against) the French Communist Party, its most prominent post-May variant, the *Gauche Prolétarienne*, developed a provocative, even "anarchist" style of street politics, and either precipitated or threw itself into social movements rooted in the struggles of prisoners, gays and others. The most prominent Parisian avant-garde theoretical journal, *Tel Quel*, for years fascinated with Chinese politics and culture, adopted an explicitly Maoist political and cultural line in the summer of 1971. As late as 1974, long after the Cultural Revolution's worst *dérapages* were known in the West, Bois' teacher Roland Barthes joined a group of *Tel Quel* insiders on a trip to China. Among their many stops on this three-week voyage: the county of Huxian, home to a vibrant and celebrated community of peasant painters.

We might describe Bois' response to these aspects of the French cultural politics of the 1970s as "a pox on both houses" or, adopting (parodically?) the language of the age, as a "struggle on two fronts": against the art establishment and the "Maophile frenzy" alike. But what are we to make of his early essay on the peasant painters from Huxian, some of whom were included as special invited guests at the 1975 Paris Biennale? In these pages, Bois confirms his belonging to the generation of '68—"I'd been on the barricades"—and states his political orientation at the time as a mélange of "anarcho-Marxism," "socialism" (Unified Socialist Party, like his father, rather than Parti Socialiste), and Situationist (here, too, a debt to Roby Bois). He makes no secret of his "repulsion" before the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and his contempt for the pro-Cultural Revolution positions adopted by the theoretical wing—especially Marc Devade and Louis Cane—of the Supports/Surfaces group in the *Tel Quel* spinoff journal, *Peinture, cahiers théoriques.* The fascination with "Chinese painting" was, however, much more pervasive in the cultural politics of the period than its recurrence as a trope within openly Maoist publications. The final chapter of Damisch's *Theory of /Cloud/*, published in 1972 during Bois' first year in his seminar (on the Bauhaus, in 1971-72), accords a special place to "Chinese pictorial theory" and "practice," for example. The long and moving

tribute to Guy Brett in *An Oblique Autobiography* closely describes Bois' proximity to the Maoist maelstrom of the period: the way Medalla, a committed Maoist, tried to "convert" the young Bois, and how his close friend, Brett, first became fascinated with the practices of the Huxian peasant painters. Between 1974 and 1977, the latter would publish many articles on these painters; his "Fertile Ground: Field, Agriculture, Decoration," which places their work in a wider discussion of decoration, appeared in the inaugural issue *Macula*. Regarding his (own) earlier essay on these painters, Bois underlines his debt to Brett's analysis, namely, "the idea that in these works ... 'the decorative' (near allover patterns, rejection of a central figure, etc.), is used as a visual metaphor of abundance." The decorative, allover patterns, the rejection of a central figure: we are reminded that Bois' early essay on Matisse appeared in this same journal, *Critique*, only a year before.

The founding of *Macula* coincided more or less with the death of Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution. Brett's essay notwithstanding, the journal was devoted primarily though not exclusively to modernist painting. The first issue included contributions on Malevich, Mondrian and Matisse; Pollock and Ryman would become central figures in the journal's short history. The pro-Chinese wave had receded, but the legacy of '68 remained pressing, not least in the way Bois and other writers associated with it—Clay and Bonnefoi, above all—identified the modernist idea with the figure of *destruction*. It is not by chance that Bois' first meeting with Clark about Mondrian, which assumes such importance in this "autobiography," took place just months after the insurrection of May. Bois' 1985 essay on Mondrian, reprinted in *Painting as Model*, concluded by demonstrating that the chain of destructions carried out by the artist's late New York paintings does not stop at the "surface." The final vanquishing of spatial illusion, the argument went, required the breaking up of the "material identity" of the surface by means of braiding colored strips of adhesive tape. This call to destroy the material consistency of the surface—what Bonnefoi describes as the surface as "entité," as an ontological given—both challenges and doubles down on Greenberg's depiction of modernist painting as a historical process of ontological reduction arriving at a pictorial absolute: a flat, delimited surface. The impetus for this ante-upping was as much the practices of contemporary abstract painting (Ryman and Bonnefoi, ja-na-pa, "analytic abstraction") as it was, say, Meyer Schapiro's contention, in his "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art," that the flat bordered field is a cultural "artifact presupposing a long development of art." In this view, the best painting of the late 1970s takes the surface as an element to be at once produced and undermined. Yet what makes it "advanced" is not the novelty of its formal operations, but the way it clarifies its precedents: not just Mondrian or Pollock, but Matisse, Vuillard, and Seurat before them. For all the play of anticipation and retroaction this temporal pattern implies, their weaving together establishes a single, coherent historical program.

But there is another, perhaps competing, conception of history at work within the journal *Macula*, particularly in the writing of Bois' mentor, Jean Clay. In the essay on Clay included in this collection, Bois notes that the "linear trajectory" he had sketched out in previous writings on modernist painting gave way to another shape of history, which Bois describes enigmatically as a constellation-like pattern, or as an "ever-changing moiré effect of threads running in all directions." This recasting of the way historical time is conceived is in turn wedded to a key methodological distinction that will assume increasing importance for

Bois in the 1980s and after. In an essay comparing the way Pollock and Seurat produce their surfaces, Clay writes:

> Even if, *morphologically*, Pollock's meshes have nothing to do with Seurat's little points, *structurally*, they have similar qualities. Despite their diversity in terms of thickness and treatment, these meshes establish between themselves a relation of solidarity that has to do with their continuity, their curves, and, more generally, the physical procedure that made them possible.

Here we see sketched a distinction between two conceptions of form—and two "formalisms"—that Bois would later elaborate in landmark essays from the 1980s and 1990s: between form as style or shape and form as non-mimetic signifying relation. This distinction is at work in his famous account of the influence of the Grebo mask on Picasso's *Guitar* of 1912, which otherwise only vaguely resemble one another, as well as in his criticisms of pseudomorphosis, as when he argues against the claim that Sol LeWitt's systematically overlapping graphite grids were "influenced" by those of François Morellet, despite their visual likeness. Lewitt's grids concern control and completeness, he insists, while Morellet's perform surprise, chance, and the breakdown of order.

This methodology has the virtue of cutting both ways. It allows for discriminating, structurally, between works that resemble one another, and for demonstrating how stylistically divergent works can share the same syntax. In an essay on Rosalind Krauss included in this collection, Bois identifies this procedure in her attempt to demonstrate the shared logics at work in the otherwise stylistically "pluralistic" art of the 1970s (the "index," the "expanded field" of sculpture). His own use of the strategy here and elsewhere follows Clay's historical orientation. It was only after seeing the paintings of Ryman that Bois understood why Mondrian painted his white planes with different textures ("in order for the light to strike those planes differently, so that they would not coalesce into a single surface perceived as empty, neutral ground"). His essay on the painter Christian Verfaille isolates what Bois calls a matte-like "color-matter" that retroactively opens up a historical sequence that unexpectedly pairs Ad Reinhardt with Vuillard's small interiors painted in tempera. And in a well-known 1981 essay on Ryman included in *Painting as Model*, Bois suggests that the painter's 1963 work *Stretched Drawing*—a charcoal grid drawn while stretched, removed from the support, then stretched again—activates a structural or "oppositional" axis that brings his late modernist investigations into line with the supposedly *intimiste* Bonnard, who painted on unstretched canvas, yet whose visual textures and sensibility would otherwise seem worlds away from the analytical probings of Ryman.

The use of this historical method, beyond the local (and often thrilling) revelations it promises, has something anarchic about it. Its point is not to propose a new historical synthesis, a more powerful account of "modernist painting" (cf. the "destruction" of the surface), but to introduce a hint of disorder into the archive, to sow a bit of chaos. In this way, Bois' structuralist formalism confirms its origins in the tumult of post-68 years; here we perhaps glimpse his professed "anarcho-Marxism," however intellectually sublimated. Yet we would be remiss in not asking what relation the shift Bois outlines "from one conception of history to the other" has with a broader "crisis of Marxism" that settled over the European left around

the same time, punctuated by the definitive closure of the post-68 revolutionary project—the death of Mao provides a useful timestamp—and, paradoxically, the electoral triumph of the Left in France with Mitterand's victory in 1981. In what sense, in other words, does the transition from a linear conception of history to one figured as a "constellation" reflect a deeper crisis of historical time triggered by that closure? In what sense does such a method *compensate* for the converging crises of the revolutionary workers' movement, Marxism and the modernist idea alike?

There is, in any case, something poignant in the fact that Bois' eventual exile to the US—however propitious it might have been for his career as an art historian—coincided with the moment the Socialist president, under the pressure of massive capital outflows in response to his government's program of nationalizations, launched his fatal *tournant de la rigueur*. This historical turning point casts its long shadow over An *Oblique Autobiography*. Bois' time in the US will witness the rise of the National Front, a Socialist Party that would one day poll in the low single digits, the presidency in the grip of a former investment banker. It is from this grim distance that this memoir's most tender pages were written.