

The Visual World
of
French Theory

Sarah Wilson



Figurations

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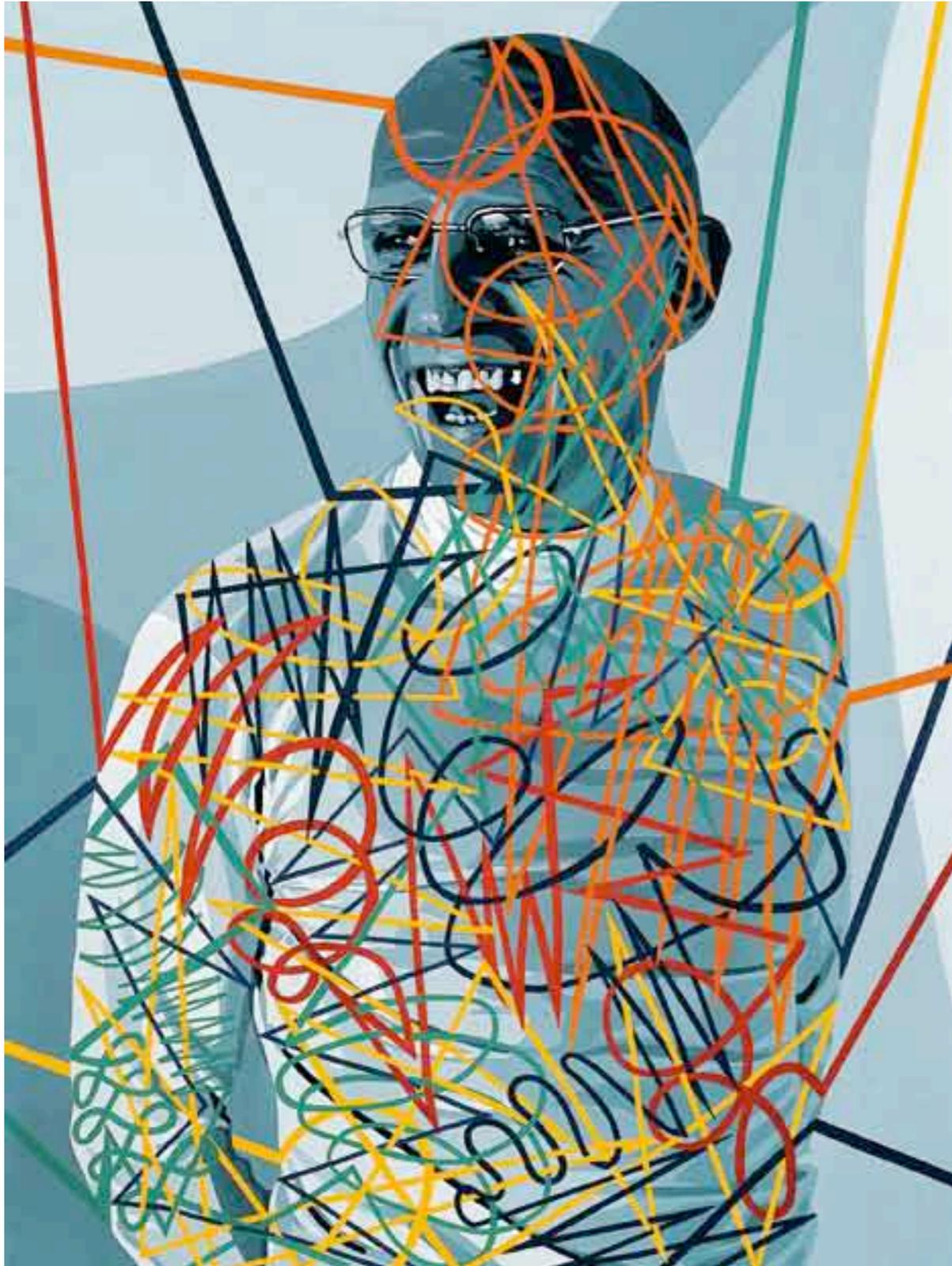
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Preface and acknowledgements

Res severa verum gaudium.

Valerio Adami inscribed these words by Seneca on the cover of the album-catalogue *Derrière le miroir*, which he created with Jacques Derrida in 1975. This book is the fruit of much joy; it was challenging – and has evolved over more than a decade. My copy of Lyotard's *L'Assassinat de la peinture – Monory* dates to 1985, when I visited his exhibition 'Les Immatériaux' at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris – an institution to which I owe so much. In June 1994, I had the privilege of hosting Jacques Derrida at the Courtauld Institute for his lecture at the conference 'Memory: the Question of Archives', which would lead to his celebrated publication *Archive Fever*. My own work involving Derrida, inspired by Jean Genet's improbable trip to London, began around this time, including a first encounter with the two versions of *Glas*, so important subsequently for understanding Derrida's collaborations with Adami and with Gérard Titus-Carmel.¹ In 1996, at the opening of Laurent Gervereau's exhibition 'Les Sixties en France et l'Angleterre', I met Jacques Monory, and began to explore the link between French political artists of the older generation and their followers of the Pop era.² The exhibition 'Face à l'histoire', the same year at the Pompidou, juxtaposed this 1960s European generation with their American counterparts. Monory welcomed me and my students on several occasions at his remarkable blue and white studio in Cachan (with Ida the dog). Here, he showed us his films and his two superb *boîtes-en-valises*; here, I discovered his catalogue of the *Mural Cuba Collectiva* which had far-reaching consequences.³ With Duncan McCorquodale's support, the 'Revisions' series was conceived with Black Dog Publishing, where Lyotard's complex and desire-driven texts on Monory were presented bilingually; I was honoured to meet Lyotard and to clarify some points in telephone conversations with him, unaware that his last illness was so very advanced.⁴ Our second 'Revisions' series volume was to focus on Gérard Fromanger with texts by Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, his friends. I well remember Gérard's amusement at our first meeting with a bevy of *filles du Courtauld* in his studio near the Place de la Bastille. A second Black Dog volume appeared in 1999, with Adrian Rifkin's splendid introduction; book launches took place in London and the Librairie-Galerie La Hune, in Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The friendship with Gérard has continued

– and has generated not only research work but wonderful shared moments in Paris, at La Seyne-sur-Mer, and in Havana, Cuba.⁵ Gérard has spoken with charisma and passion to Courtauld students and to my students at the Sorbonne, and has visited London more than once, talking at Tate Modern on his relationship with Jean-Luc Godard for the commemorative May '68 anniversary celebrations in 2008. 1999 heralded my invitation by Patrick Le Nouene to Angers for the exhibition 'Monory/Ex-Crime'.⁶ In Paris, Daniel Abadie's major Erro retrospective at the Galeries Nationales du Jeu de Paume that year involved another extraordinarily rich encounter, this time with a non-French artist, and a story ranging from Iceland to New York, work with Carolee Schneemann and with painters from Thailand. Erro's present to me of the precious catalogues *Forty-seven years* (Galerie Arturo Schwarz, 1967; hilarious parodies of Soviet Socialist Realism) and the 'little red book' of his Mao series, 1974, set off very important chains of thought.⁷ The comic-strip misogyny of 'Les Amazones en Proverbe' at the Galerie Louis Carré in 2004 was exasperating but engaging.⁸ Erro's first London show, at the Mayor Gallery in 2008, also launched a definitive study of his life and work in English.⁹ In 2002, as principal curator of 'Paris Capital of the Arts, 1900-1968', I was able to reveal to a London public (and subsequently that of the Guggenheim, Bilbao) the work of artists such as Jean-Jacques Lebel, and the Narrative Figuration generation – Fromanger's newly rediscovered red *Souffle* bubble-sculpture (with its Jeff Koons-like shine), Rancillac's enamel *bleu-blanc-rouge* portrait of the assaulted student leader, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Monory's mirrored and bullet-shattered *Murder*, Erro's *Background of Jackson Pollock*, Henri Cueco's *Barricade* – a surprising discovery as fresh as on the day it was shown in the Vietnam protest show of 1969 – and, sensationally, in the Royal Academy rotunda, the unknown *Live and Let Die. The Tragic End of Marcel Duchamp*, the group work by Eduardo Arroyo, Antonio Recalcati and Gilles Aillaud which has since acquired great celebrity.¹⁰ It did the job of representing Duchamp's *Fountain*, *Nude Descending the Staircase* and *The Large Glass* for our show – works not created in Paris (an essential criterion) – but crucial presences, whatever the roughed-up state of their progenitor. My thanks to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for the short period of leave that gave me time for this major project. Recalcati's retrospective was another wonderful occasion at the Villa Tamaris; Mme Camille Aillaud has received me to talk about her late husband, whose work I have also appreciated in exhibitions at the Galerie de France and the Musée de la Chasse, Paris. While I had been introduced to Bernard Rancillac by my friend Serge Fauchereau, the author of his monograph, my own work with Rancillac, his library and his archives came

to fruition for his touring retrospective of 2003.¹¹ In Rancillac's acerbic and polemical account of the 1970s, *Le Regard idéologique*, I was astonished to discover the chapter on Boris Taslitzky, the socialist realist artist and Buchenwald survivor – a dear friend and mentor; we three lunched together decades after Rancillac's studio visit to Taslitzky in the 1970s.¹² At this time, my friendship with Ruth Francken was becoming deeper; I was able to see her exhibition in Hanover, when she was no longer able to travel, and was inspired for my own 'Song of Ruth' by her story, so long after Lyotard's writings on this artist, crucial for his future work such as *Heidegger et les 'juifs'*.¹³ Francken's 'Mirrorical Return' portraits of Lyotard and of Monory link her to the Narrative Figuration movement; my students remember her warm welcome in the Rue Lepic, her adjoining studio in the spaces at the back of the Moulin Rouge – and the strength of her work; her reputation will grow posthumously. The Leverhulme Foundation, which has been so important at crucial stages of my life, granting me time at the Pompidou Centre at the beginning of my career, and in France in 1996-7, gave me another grant for research in Paris in 2004-5. I thank them their continuing confidence in this project. It was following a meeting at the Musée de la Vie Romantique with Madame Madeleine Malraux and the distinguished curator of the Musée de la Ville de Paris, the late M. André Berne-Jouffroy (we were all Fautrier lovers), that he told me of the link between the painter Leonardo Cremonini and Louis Althusser. This lead subsequently to my discovery of Lucio Fanti, still painting in La Ruche – to a whole new bevy of visits with students, Fanti's visit to London, my text on his 'post-Soviet paintings' published in Russian – and perhaps the most surprising chapter in this book.¹⁴ Leonardo Cremonini, Roberto Alvarez-Rios and Fabio Rieti all received me in Paris at that time, Rieti lending me the catalogue which demonstrated the exchanges between European Figurative artists with those in Moscow: many thanks to both for their patience!

In 2006, at the invitation of Anne Dary, curator of the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dole, I joined the veteran critic Alain Jouffroy and expert Jean-Luc Chalumeau to write in her catalogue *La Nouvelle figuration dans les collections publiques, (1964-1977)*.¹⁵ Dole – in the Jura mountains, near Besançon – is the place where so many extraordinary large-scale paintings of the 1970s now have a permanent home – prior to their re-emergence, one trusts, on the international scene, notably the Malassis group's *Le Grand Méchoui*, discussed in my conclusion. This huge work was displayed for the opening in a barn adjoining the museum; the artist Henri Cueco gave a memorable peripatetic talk, explaining its astonishing, aggressive iconography. Alas, the opportunity to show the

work *in toto* for the ‘Narrative Figuration’ retrospective in 2008 was not seized at the Grand Palais, where it had ruled for a few hours only in 1972. Cueco and his wife Marinette – a superb artist whose work anticipates Andy Goldsworthy – have also been warm and generous hosts, and participated, as did Fanti, in my round table discussions at the Ecole Normale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in 2006-7.¹⁶ It was the Dole museum that hosted Lucien Fleury’s retrospective in 2007; thus affording me the opportunity of meeting Fleury’s daughter Mathilde and writing about the history of the Malassis – including their great public *Raft of the Medusa* commission for Grenoble – visible for so many years before consignment to an ‘absestos cemetery’ and recent destruction. The chance to show the Malassis’ work in my conclusion will stimulate greater interest, I hope.¹⁷

I have been a guest of Robert Bonaccorsi at the Villa Tamaris, La Seyne-sur-Mer, near Toulon, for several of the figurative exhibitions and retrospectives that he has staged with such great commitment. I must also thank Serge Lemoine for inviting me to teach at Paris-IV Sorbonne during the academic years 2002-4 and Henry-Claude Cousseau for his invitation to run a fifth-year seminar at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 2007, thus offering me valuable extra research and interviewing time in Paris. Didier Schulmann is a special friend, who with his colleagues at the Bibliothèque Kandinsky at the Centre Georges Pompidou, now runs the modern and contemporary art history library *par excellence*; his colleague Jean-Paul Ameline invited me to write for ‘Face à l’Histoire’ and curated the ‘Figuration Narrative’ retrospective at the Grand Palais, in 2008. Olivier Corpet welcomed me to the magnificent Abbaye de l’Ardenne, home of the Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine (IMEC). Pierre-Philippe Ruedin has also been the most generous host in the rue des Francs-Bourgeois, facilitating so many stays in Paris. Peace and Provençal beauty has framed my work periodically thanks to the hospitality of Kamila Regent and Pierre Jaccaud at the ‘Chambre de séjour avec vue’, Saignon-en-Luberon. Throughout this period Adrien Sina has provided conceptual support, ideas, criticism and so much more; his creative input is now visible in the exciting design of this book; so many thanks.

Sander Gilman has sustained me throughout this enterprise, and with Michael Corris offered indispensable support and pragmatic advice at a crucial stage. My colleagues in the Modern Department at the Courtauld Institute of Art. Mignon Nixon and Julian Stallabrass, have read and evaluated student research work in this area. The Courtauld Research Committee not only contributed to the financing of the

Black Dog bilingual volumes on Monory and Fromanger, but have been more than generous in supporting research work in Paris in the summers of 2006 and 2007, with a final grant for visual material in 2009; thanks to the committee for their patience and faith as well as generosity. Karin Kyburz has been a warm and sympathetic reader, so efficient in procuring images for me; Elizaveta Butakova has given all-round assistance in the final stages of editing.

Together with the artists named above I must also thank Eduardo Arroyo, Denis Masi, Malcom Morley, Jacques Pavlovsky and James Rosenquist, and artists’ associates and families, so many of whom have helped with images and fee waivers: Roberte Alvarez-Rios, Jérôme Bourdieu, Elisa Farran, Lucie Fougeron, Marguerite Derrida, Anna Kamp, Denise Klossowski, Christine and David Lapoujade, Dolores Lyotard, Florence Miaillhe, Paule Monory, Christine and Jacques Dupin, Nathalie Rancillac, Isabelle Rollin-Royer, Evelyne Taslitzky, Sylvie Zucca.

I am finally able to offer tribute to Gillian Malpass of Yale University Press for her belief in my work. And thanks once more to Germain Viatte whose initial invitation to work at the Pompidou Centre has had so many consequences on my life, leading to so many friendships, such intellectual richness. *Le travail continue.*



Introduction

Witnesses of the future Painters of their times

In 1974, Gérard Fromanger was the first French painter to visit Mao's China. His photograph-based history painting *In China, Hu-Xian*, exhibited in 1975 with a catalogue by Michel Foucault, was rapidly acquired for France's national collections. Chinese peasant painters from the Houhsien district were special guests at the Paris Biennale of 1975.¹ In 1976, Pontus Hulten, director of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, sent the Icelandic painter Erro's *Nine Chinese paintings* with a show of contemporary French art to tour American university art galleries, for the US bicentennial celebrations.² The Chinese paintings series were first exhibited in Lucerne and toured Europe, with a parody of Mao's *Little Red Book* as a catalogue. They appeared in New York in 1976, in the wake of Mao's death, before travelling to Berkeley, Houston and Purchase.³ Erro subjected icons of Mao's revolution by Red Guard artists, such as Liu Chunhua's *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* (1967), to a deadpan *détournement*: the young Mao appeared in Venice (pl. 2), while Tang Xiaohe and Cheng Li's *Follow Closely our Great Leader Chairman Mao, Ride the Wind, Cleave the Waves, Fearlessly forge Ahead* (1972), appropriated by Erro became, simply, *In front of New York*.⁴

Following his discovery of Chinese propaganda posters during the shooting of Martial Raysse's film *Le Grand départ* (1970) and his visit to a show of Chinese socialist-realist painters in Hong Kong, Erro began making collages which juxtaposed socialist realism with Western magazine images. These were found in American military bases in Thailand during his visit, and it was with the aid of professional Thai poster painters that the collages were enlarged and transformed to smooth-finish paintings.⁵ Today, the Russian AES+F group use Photoshop to achieve a parallel effect in their remarkably similar series, *Witnesses of the Future, the Islamic project* (1996-2003). Rather than Mao in front of San Marco in Venice, a nomadic encampment is installed in front of St Peter's, Rome; in *Beaubourg*, (the Pompidou Centre's nickname), Islamic architecture invades the museum's structure, now draped with rugs (pl. 3). Only the 'enemy' has changed: the critique – the political ambivalence – remain the same.⁶



In Shanghai, Guangdong and Beijing in 2005, the Pompidou-organised show 'Nouvelles Vagues' emphasised New Wave cinema's connections with the Narrative Figuration movement to which Erro and Fromanger belonged. Painting and artist's films of the 1970s were set up to dialogue with contemporary Chinese figurative painting and video. The Narrative Figuration movement's politicised work had hitherto been suppressed at all costs: French painting was deliberately excluded from the showcase exhibition 'Premises', held at the Guggenheim Soho in New York in 1998. 'Nouvelles Vagues' was devised for a different public and a world which has radically changed.⁷ The show celebrated France's long relationship with China. Under Mao's rule during the 1970s, an estimated 900 million copies of *Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan* were printed for propaganda purposes. In 2005, for millions of television viewers, and for an art public of 360,000 people in Beijing and 250,000 in Shanghai, Narrative Figuration became one of the most visible aspects of France's artistic self-representation. The link between the movement (whose images had long been plundered on the internet) and contemporary Chinese painting (like that of Zhang Xioping's *Bloodline* series, now fetching millions of dollars) was not only suggested by the French, but explicitly avowed by the Chinese.⁸ 'Nouvelles Vagues' followed the Chinese exhibition in Paris 'Alors la Chine?' held at the Pompidou Centre in 2003, the key exhibition of the 'Year of China in France'. The major diplomatic initiatives were lucrative: notably for France's involvement in Shanghai's metro contract and important programmed extensions planned for their EXPO 2010. By coincidence, 2010 is the year that the celebratory *France-Russie, année-croisée*, will make similar political, cultural and economic gestures of friendship between France and Russia, again insisting on a long history of mutual involvement.⁹

Today's new, then, is old. Contemporary Chinese and Russian artists who work with – and through – the socialist realism of their once terror-filled heritages in fact had their European precursors. 'Moscow conceptualism' (the work of Eric Bulatov or Ilya Kabakov, first shown in the Galerie Dina Vierny in 1973) dialogued with its European contemporaries in the aftermath of the revelations of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*.¹⁰ Modulated by a Europe-wide response to American hyperrealism, the high point of these exchanges was visible in Venice at the Biennale of 1976, and in 1977 when a show of Soviet non-conformist art accompanied a meeting of intellectuals from East and West. Communist ideology and Soviet repression were under intense international scrutiny. That crucial moment had a long history. Moreover, beneath the painted surfaces of Narrative Figuration was concealed a repertoire of themes and



practices linked back to France's own Communist histories and memories and its socialist realist painting: a story from the 'former West' which is gradually seeing the light.¹¹

Figuration narrative, Paris 1960-1972, held in Paris's Grand Palais in the spring of 2008 – the fortieth anniversary of the May, 1968 revolution – marked the culmination of the movement's new visibility.¹² The show ended symbolically in 1972, the year of the exhibition *Douze ans d'Art Contemporain* at the Grand Palais itself, and Harald Szeeman's watershed Documenta V exhibition in Kassel – but before the publication of Bernard Lamarche-Vadel's *Figurations 1960-1973*, where Jean-Francois Lyotard's first writing on Monory appeared.¹³ My own narrative continues to 1977, and the first group exhibition at the new Centre Georges Pompidou, which only now has taken on the responsibility for presenting the movement's history. Its contemporary 'look' has generated its renaissance – a spate of recent retrospectives, higher prices for historic pieces, museum displays and acquisitions. Narrative Figuration was positioned on the very cusp of postmodernism: it exemplified the last moment in France of a grand history painting and the tradition of revolutionary romanticism. Its works are rich with critical satire, strategies of appropriation and a post-Situationist *détournement*. It contained not a trace of cynicism about the value of its own painterly and critical enterprise.

In a period in which an attempt to contextualise Marxist theory was seen as urgent, the Narrative Figuration movement sought to 'mirror' or reflect the society of its times.¹⁴ Militantly figurative, its broken narratives anticipated Jean-François

Lyotard's very definition of postmodernism as based on narrative collapse and a critical analysis of the *grands récits* and the *petits récits* of the times.¹⁵ Narrative Figuration was, 'filmic', political and engaged with contemporary popular culture including the issue of Americanisation. It was involved with dialogues with its contemporaries: not only the *dialogue des sourds* ('dialogue of the deaf') undertaken with the abstract Supports-Surfaces artists, but the more problematic engagement with the Americans, demonstrated, for example, in the exhibition 'Hyperréalistes Américains et réalistes européens' held at the Centre National de l'Art contemporain in 1974... Narrative Figuration, then, as 'revolutionary romanticism' – innately French, a continuation of the tradition of Gericault and David? Or a 'weak' French version of hyperrealism? It did not export well – yet at home could look could look too American; it was '... often interpreted as no more than an emanation of an imported culture, or of an aesthetic derived from Anglo-American culture and foreign to French "sensibility"...'.¹⁶ An extraordinary irony is in operation here. For it was precisely Narrative Figuration's close connection with the May'68 revolution and its aftermath, its explicit political imagery, intransigent group practice and ultimate economic failure, that led to its fall from grace. And this because of a belief that politics could and should have a role in painting; that painting was indeed the arena in which to act, and that a *praxis* of a political painting that could communicate with the 'people' was vitally contemporary. In today's climate of global political and economic crisis, this political engagement and wariness of the art market deserves a new look.

Only a few of the artists were affiliated members of specific Communist or Maoist groupings, but all would have defined themselves as anti-fascist in this tense period of colonial wars and Cold War confrontations, extending from Cuba to Vietnam and China. The artist Jan Voss makes a crucial point: 'There was also that unbelievable brotherhood of all the émigré artists in Paris who originated from countries with fascist governments: Haiti, Spain, Portugal. Not to mention Eastern Europe, Christo for example.'¹⁷ To which one might add Vladimir Velikovic from Yugoslavia (now Serbia) – or Peter Klasen from a divided Germany. Paris and the French language offered an intellectual meeting place linked to the international exchanges of Western Marxism. Other outposts were also important, such as the Korcula summer school in Yugoslavia, which artist Bernard Rancillac visited in summer 1965. Its Zagreb-based trilingual review *Praxis*, (international edition 1965-73), demonstrates the depth and urgency of debates transmitted instantly back to France's own networks of colloquia – particularly

those held in Royaumont and Cerisy – in and discussion forums, universities, ateliers and publishing houses.¹⁸ It is in Korcula that the Romanian Lucian Goldmann, a disciple of Gyorgy Lukács and key theoretician of the Parisian *nouveau roman* would meet Herbert Marcuse – who would become Jean-François Lyotard's colleague at the University of San Diego, California.¹⁹ The international mobility of philosophers mirrored that of artists and curators in the new era of air travel. These networks once again forcefully demonstrate the importance of German philosophy at the time, the renewed input of the Frankfurt School past and present, the presence of Eastern European Marxist thought – and above all, the retrospective misnomer of 'French Theory.'²⁰

By definition, the artists linked to these currents of thought were anti-capitalist. The promotion of Narrative Figuration in an international arena confronted problems not merely of language or symbolic content (the politics and pictorial languages of huge group projects such as *The Great Méchoui* (1972), or *Guillotine and Painting* (1977) now require patient elucidation) but of values: values not only political, but innately hostile to careerism and the commercial art market, which in France was in crisis.²¹ Looking back at this period through the lens of Jack Lang's reforms and the cultural metamorphoses of the 1980s, the militant artist Henri Cueco and Pierre Gaudibert, a key critic and curator of the previous two decades, came to grim conclusions: 'A certain self-criticism – neither contrition nor masochism, leads us to see that blaming the lack of economic support is not enough to explain a position of retreat: neither the artists nor their different partners travelled beyond France's frontiers or made visits abroad for professional reasons, nor were they good at languages, particularly English.'²² A later passage evokes the suspicion, even repulsion, with which intellectuals of the left regarded commerce, money and profit. At the very moment of Jean Baudrillard's anatomy of consumer society, Cueco – a Communist, faithful to his home region of Corrèze and its Resistance past – evoked a common Judeo-Christian heritage and 'the cult of money experienced as something unclean'.²³ Astonishing as it may seem today, this refusal to collude with the art market (despite welcome State support and commissions from trade unions or local municipalities) is one of the outstanding reasons for the intransigence and exceptional character of the movement in its early years.

Cueco and Gaudibert continue: 'The isolation of the generation that broke with the past, that of the years 1970 to 1975, was doubtless provoked – if not wished for by the artists themselves. We were frequently aggressive and it required the persistence

of certain curators, journalists, critics etc., to end this solitude...²⁴ Yet the stirring conclusion to this passage underlines the intimate relationship with the intellectual and the real encounters which gave a remarkable exhilaration to the period. ‘With our “theory-based” radicalisations, born in a climate of structuralism, Tel Quel, the works of Althusser, Lacan, we contributed to the heating-up of the cultural field before and after 1968. Joining up with a movement exterior to art, participating in a seismic moment of history, we were living our times’.²⁵ The passions of the barricade, (pl. 1), were followed by the “theory-based” radicalisations’ – ‘radicalisations “théoriciques”’ – and the intimate encounters between artists and philosophers at the heart of this book.

Yet the visibility of political messages and contexts in some of the work became retrospectively embarrassing. Beyond the euphoria of 1968, Communist ideology (in the aftermath of *The Gulag Archipelago* (1974) and Maoism’s political and cultural expressions in France) retrospectively signified a massive ‘communal error’ and an intensification of what was named, as early as 1950, *la guerre franco-française*.²⁶ This ‘franco-french warfare’ (coming after the *épuration* purges following French war-time collaboration) meant an internecine pitting of left against right, class against class. The controversy is constantly reignited, never so intensely as when *The Black Book of Communism. Crimes, Terror, Repression* was published in French for the eightieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution in 1997.²⁷ It re-emerges with each new obituary, notably that of Alexander Solzhenitsyn himself in August, 2008, between the two stages of the Narrative Figuration retrospective. Paintings which evoked the political debates of the 1970s had associations which account for the French State’s decades-long reluctance to promote them nationally or internationally. Indeed, Nicolas Sarkozy came to power with the mission to ‘liquidate the heritage of May 68’; the May revolution was celebrated across France in 2008 in a muted way, nostalgically and peripherally.²⁸ Political work was present, but rendered effectively silent and almost invisible in the 2008 Grand Palais retrospective, with its abrupt 1972 ending, multicoloured walls and emphasis on a young ‘French Pop’.

Philosophy of the encounter

How did theory become ‘theory’ in America? An event of 1966 that had vast repercussions was a conference organised at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore: ‘The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man’.²⁹ This precipitated the first encounters

between thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Paul de Man. Freed from their native academic and ideological territories, the neutral ground permitted an exchange of ideas constrained in Paris by the very success of structuralism: Hegelians and Marxists became more open to ideas about structure; Roland Barthes and Derrida, associated most closely with structuralism, now for the first time took critical distance from the movement.³⁰ François Cusset describes this generative moment of ‘swerve’, resulting in the metamorphosis of postwar French philosophy into ‘poststructuralism’ on American campuses in *French Theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze et Cie*, 2003.

Cusset presented to a French public the ‘mutations of intellectual life in the United States’. He describes the ‘veritable world-wide political-theoretical arena...gradually formed, nourished with French theory and centred on the American University...’ while in France, he noted the lack of translations or commentaries on analytic philosophy or any convergence between pragmatism and ‘Continental philosophy’; the absence of postcolonial thought and gender theory, notions of multiculturalism, or deconstruction in literature.³¹ However harsh his judgement, the ‘mutations’ he notes over a thirty-year period are irrefutable. More pertinently, America’s power and creativity since 1945, as well as its domination of the art market, has been corroborated by a bias within the discipline of art history and wider critical discussion. The cultural division, the split in postmodernism itself between Europe and America, has a history still waiting to be written.

Jean-François Lyotard’s *La Condition postmoderne*, published in 1979 has a critical currency as far as European usage of the term ‘postmodern’ is concerned. Yet it was in the art magazine *Opus International*’s fiftieth issue, in 1974, that the art critic Jean-Clarence Lambert, confronting the problem of critical practice with stylistic multiplicity announced: ‘1967: the post-modern era has already begun’.³² I argue both directly and implicitly that it was the confrontation with the explosion of the art world and its discourses – as well as events on the street and the barricades – that released a generation of the philosophers from the ivory tower of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, and that their engagement with contemporary art played a crucial role in formulating the new postmodern mindset.

An extraordinary paradox operates at the heart of this book: it is via the philosophers – names as familiar to an international public as the names of impressionist or cubist painters – that the art of 1970s France must be introduced to the audience it deserves. For despite the lessons of ‘deconstruction’, art history functions, mnemonically at least, via a series of heroic narratives. The problem was postulated by the critic Otto Hahn in the summer of 1964, when the exhibition *Mythologies Quotidiennes*, its title an homage