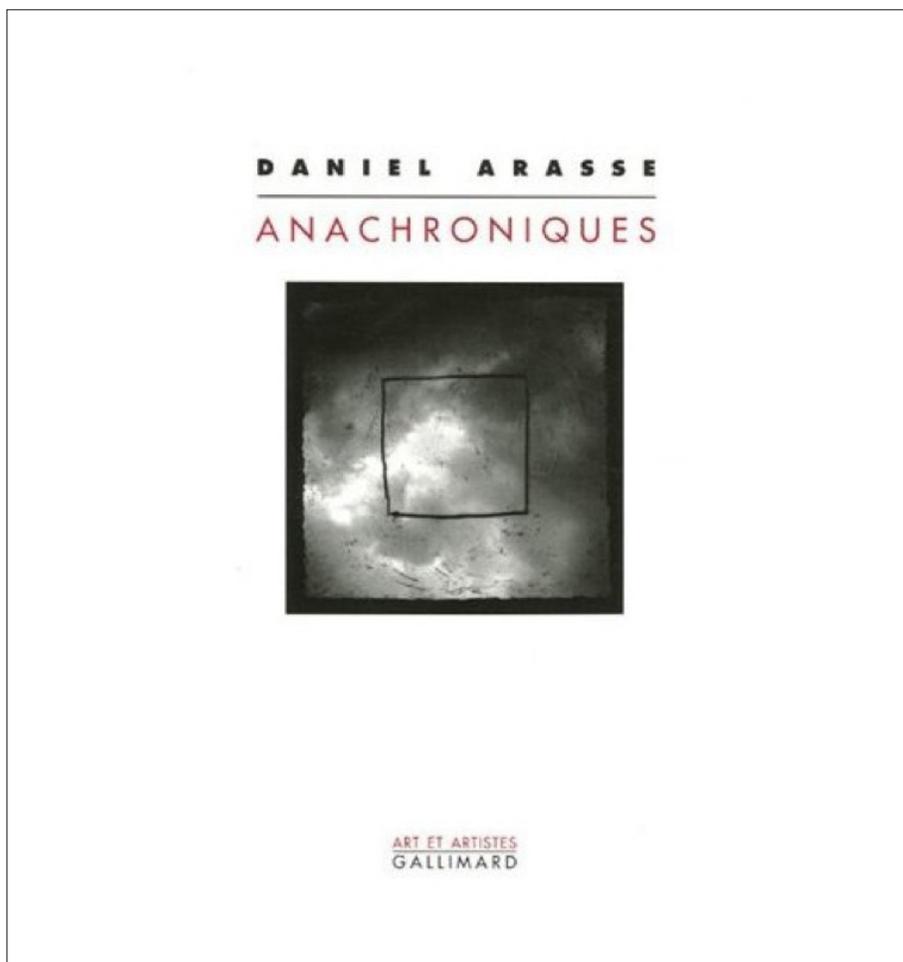


ANACHRONIQUES

Daniel Arasse – Paris, Gallimard, 2006



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Daniel Arasse (France, 1944-2003) was an author who deepened historical and philosophical views on art, his writings focusing in particular the Renaissance period, specifically Italian painting of the 14th to 16th Centuries. Books like *L'Homme en perspective: Les primitifs d'Italie* (Paris, Famot, 1978), *Le détail: Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture* (Paris, Flammarion, 1992, 1998), *Le Sujet dans le tableau: Essais d'iconographie analytique* (Paris, Flammarion, 1997), *On y voit rien: Descriptions* (Paris, Denoël, 2000, 2002), *Histoires des peintures* – a transcription of the series of broadcasts on France Culture during the summer of 2003 – (Paris, Denoël, 2004), as well as the monographs *L'Ambition de Vermeer* (Paris, Ed. Adam Biro, 1993), *Léonardo de Vinci: Le rythme du monde* (Paris, Hazan, 1997) and *Les Visions de Raphaël* (1972/1992 – Paris, Ed. Liana Levi, 2003) served to consolidate a thoroughly in-depth view, and are indispensable reading matter for a specialised knowledge of this subject – although this author does not reject the epithet “specialist”, possibly a rather limiting term... Arasse did not confine himself to the historiographic production of art, in its more restricted, or “orthodox” meaning. An example of its heterogeneous focus is the book – of a socio-political and ideological as much as an historical nature – *La Guillotine et l'imaginaire de la terreur* (Paris, Flammarion, 1992). The stories it comprises show “the theatrical set-up of the revolutionary machine from an analysis of commentaries that gives rise to material neglected by “professional historians” of the Revolution, whose greatest importance Daniel Arasse grasps, with a well-founded and completely original interpretation of the sources of fear and the mechanisms of terror.”¹ This view of the utmost acuity and

1 Cathérine Bédard, “Clair-obscur”, preface to *Anachroniques*, p.6.

excellence – simultaneously creative and demanding – on the dogmas of “conventionalised” history have had an influence in other collaborations beyond direct literary production with the publishing of a book in mind. In the Portuguese panorama, his contribution to Portuguese cinema should be recalled, as he was the co-author – together with Jean-Pierre Tailhade and João Mário Grilo – of the dialogue in *O Processo do Rei*, directed by João Mário Grilo in 1989 (a joint Portuguese/French production).

Arasse considered himself, as an author, an “Italomaniac”. He lived in Florence between 1982 and 1989, where he was Director of the French Institute, and in which capacity he created the *France Cinéma* Festival. His stay in this emblematic city enable him to experience time as though it were a palimpsest-like experience. His investigative communing with the authors of the past emerged in a climate of modernity which Arasse conferred on these same works, on the ideas and, obviously, the artists. His studies and theories on Renaissance art did not prevent him from venturing into other spatial and temporal territories. His extensive volume dedicated to the German artist *Anselm Kiefer* (Paris, Editions du Regard, 2001) shows the same reflective and interpretative acuity as when his research focuses on contemporaneity.

Anachroniques was also a title chosen, “fabricated”, by Arasse with a certain malice. The French thinker opted, as Cathérine Bédard recalls, for the juxtaposition of two concepts: chronic and anachronism, thus exploring “...the effect of the meaning and the paradox to qualify not only what interested him and called out to him in different groups of works, but also a particular form of writing about contemporary art.”² *Anachronic* is to do, therefore, with the chronological dimension of the works, with their concatenation, as

2 Idem, ibidem, p.23

much as it considers the temporal confusions, disorder and disturbances that occur or arise in them. The term implies a value judgement on the very content it describes – and to which it refers – when it is understood as an adjective rather than in its pragmatic substantivisation.³ *Anachroniques* does not only make inroads outside his beloved field of study – Italian painting – as Cathérine Bédard emphasises in her preface entitled “Clair-obscur”. Even though the writer did not have the opportunity to review the material for this publication, because the compilation of these ten texts (written between 1993 and 2003) was published posthumously, the work is demonstrative of the thoroughness with which he tackled any topic. His methodological choices as far as art theorisation, its ethical responsibility, cultural objectives and singular investment in epistemological terms are concerned become even more evident. It includes short essays on artists working in the second half of the 20th Century, and continuing, in some cases, to the present day. They are texts written to be included in exhibition catalogues or for the contemporary art magazine *Art press*. The final text in the book, of a somewhat testamentary nature, as indeed certain critics have already recognised, was written on the occasion of the project of James Coleman in the Louvre in 2003, which belongs to neither of the two artistic categories mentioned earlier.

In the writing on contemporary authors, Arasse assumed and explained the existing relationship between modern creation and its sources rooted in the classical tradition – consubstantiated in artists like Piero della Francesca, Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael – renewing it and enhancing it. Daniel Arasse was inter-

3 “It functions, therefore, as a trap; it is a manoeuvre to criticise the realm of the preconceived idea, this hurdle that too often entails a consumerist, mundane approach, a hurried look at art.” Cf. Idem, ibidem, p.24



ested, above all, in the confrontation of the past-present, giving scope to both chronologies in all their breadth, through the development of relationships, frames of reference and precise and clear extrapolations. As Cathérine Bédard points out in her preface: "His encounter with contemporary art is a physical, oral, live encounter, with an artist speaking of his own creation, but also of the process of creation in general, of his way of seeing not only the art of his generation but also works from the past."⁴ His focus surpasses both the intersection between space and time, and the correspondence between conceptualising thinking and its subsequent production, extending to terrain where the essential substances emerge through a visionary acuity that is part of his open but conclusive interpretation. His dialogue with the works and the authors – Andres Serrano, Alain Laframboise and Ian Paterson, Michael Snow, Anselm Kiefer, Mark Rothko, Cindy Sherman, Eric Rondepierre, Alain Fleischer, James Coleman and Max Beckmann – all of them the object of thorough study and integrated in *Anachroniques*, takes place in a recent past and in a present that is irreversibly removed to a future from which Arasse will be absent. The artists and their respective works addressed in this book focus predominantly on emblematic cases of contemporary photography (Andres Serrano, Alain Laframboise and Ian Paterson, Michael Snow, Cindy Sherman, Eric Rondepierre, Alain Fleischer), with particular relevance to the two- and three-dimensional complexity of Kiefer, the specific project of Coleman and the unavoidable modern acknowledgment of Mark Rothko. Of these 9 contemporary +1 modern (=10) texts, I have picked out four cases that lead to knowing interpretations about the fate of the others: Andres Serrano (death/life, or *Thanatos* and *Eros*), Anselm Kiefer (memory, blame and

history), Cindy Sherman (representation and annulment of self-identity) and James Coleman (metaphysics of the image, rigour of the concept). However, almost like a testimony, the text that opens the compilation, dedicated to Andres Serrano, is on the theme of death with regard to the "Morgue" series. The reader of Arasse, like the viewer of Serrano, is confronted with the undeniable *pathos* and, in parallel, redemption that, since the assumption of Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* or of Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, compel an individualised awareness of existence and its ending – in the double human and divine acceptance of the person. In the anonymous transposition of the photographed figures in the mortuary, the aesthetic dignity and sublime ethic that prevail in this series of photographs is recognised. In a conciliatory way with himself, maybe without escape, Arasse faces his projected and introjected death – as an approximation – due to the degenerative disease he suffered. His theoretical construction of the visual (more ontological than anthropological, in my view) combines the narrativeness of the works analysed, surpassing the iconographic surface, to deepen the conceptual rooting that the photographer wanted. Taking on the notion of the "skin ego" (to paraphrase Didier Anzieu), his method of writing on the work of Serrano exposes the entrails of feeling as much as of reason, building on its own self-devouring ...The bodies are never presented in their entirety. The photographer selects a fragment of this body/reality, deciding on a section of the being that ceased to exist in the body. A certain opacity is observed in the appropriation, in this freezing of posture, position, gesture or invincible contracture. The aesthetic dimension, which radiates from extraordinarily limpid configurations, purges the tragedy of death, leaving out the suffering, violence or pain that perhaps preceded this specific death. All this seems to be able

to be transfigured by the direct brutality of the austere, sublime images – as indeed it is sublimity we are talking about – and, as we read Serrano through Arasse, we deduce that the circle closes itself through the charge of this gaze.

Anselm Kiefer, the target of an exhaustive study published by Arasse in 2000, appears in this essay in the concatenation of this approach. He resolves certain historical/ideological ambiguities through very particular models, in a very personal way, gaining for himself and his work the sense of a whole, of an unequivocal unit, demonstrating thus his authorial coherence.

Kiefer is situated in a conceptual approach, belonging to a contemporary territory where archaic recurrences are included, whether mythical or historical. Traces of the past wander between the author's personal memories and the inheritance (as I mentioned earlier) of his German historical roots – in some kind of equivocal assumption between anonymity and the downfall of pseudo-heroes. "Initially, at first contact, Anselm Kiefer pictures offer the spectacle of their substance."⁵ In an almost "unique gaze", the time line that can be followed in/by his paintings – and that internally is inserted/resides in them – transcends a stricter or measurable chronology. Often, in later years, he reverted to themes he had worked on before, that appeared to have been resolved, exhausted or passed over. Such determination, such an attitude, reveals a personal approach to the concept of temporality that is not ruled by linearity, but rather conforms to a density at once physical and transcendental, therefore also ontological. The painting of this German artist, born in the very last year of the war, comprises layers of materials and elements (that are converted, in some cases, into relics of themselves), by analogy to

4 Idem, *ibidem*, p.7

5 Daniel Arasse, "De mémoire de tableaux", *Anachroniques*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006, p.67

the layers of memory, the layers of history that are inscribed in the composition. The titles given to the works carry and reinforce the contents, whether iconographic or semantic of the compositions themselves. On the other hand, the Cabal and alchemy are articulated with philosophy and poetics, the ambiguity of a work, whose essential contents seek to revive the last hidden memory, lingering on. Because all the principles and substances enunciated – the corporeal dynamic of his painting/sculpture (three-dimensionality) and the philosophical conceptuality – contain/collect visual symbols, literary mythologies, differentiated hermeticisms that, carrying the burden of all humankind, enable creation beyond the fall – remission at last? About Cindy Sherman, Arasse reiterates the purpose of the artist as to the iconographic manipulation of herself to be transfigured into somebody else; according to Arthur Danto when, regarding the photographer, he guides his argument to the response to the work as covered by a “thick theoretical layer”.⁶ Her photographs create an effect of physical order in the viewer, with respect to his or her psycho-visual and aesthetic response, preserving a foundation that is peculiar to it. Viewers do not meet self-portraits, as opposed to what, irresponsibly, one might have thought. She photographs herself compulsively, always becoming the incarnation of characters that she decides to fix into images – her “self” supports, in the differentiability and direct identity non-acknowledgment, the subjectless material-subject. Through an effacement of the self-subject, as is the case of the historical portraits (1989/90), that constitute a system of signs, codes and image-models, as Arasse emphasises, following the interpretation of Dominique Baqué. The body is a nausea, the body is a symptom, working towards the effacement of

personal singularity to assert the “abolition” of the figure of the author; to deconstruct the stereotypes of feminism in an almost reversible critique...Through identity simulations that could refer back to historical period divisions or exacerbate in concrete contemporary mythemes, his series have a duration, not exhausting themselves completely, but being rather resumed, given continuity, even when worked in parallel and in thematic superimpositions over the years. One would ask what the level of implicit narcissism is, amplified by psychic, societal and literary concurrences. In the words of Arasse: “Sherman’s ‘narcissistic game’ echoes that of the child who, in the ‘mirror state’, sees in the reflected image (of himself or another) a form in which he anticipates (joyfully) the corporal unit that he was lacking.”⁷ A wounded Narcissus, unequivocal testimony to the present day, staged through metamorphoses, allegories and metaphors of the body itself, aware of his manipulation in favour of the vision and the scatological subterfuge, giving rise to singular fabrications in each possible viewer. *Ostinato Rigore* is the title of the short essay on James Coleman. The project made for the Louvre was intended not to leave any visible vestiges, durable in themselves, nor any pictorial residue, as Arasse recalls from the start. The project was developed alongside the temporary Leonardo da Vinci exhibition, having remained on show and been “respected” until it was struck. The duration of Coleman’s project corresponded to the length of someone else’s exhibition, thus promoting an awareness of the ephemeral and of unique “dependency”...Only the images-memories remained, retained by all those who, on the occasion of this event, had visited the *Napoléon Hall* in the Louvre museum. The simultaneous attitude of exigency and bareness that characterises the artist is emphasised in the analysis drawn

by Arasse. Coleman’s disregard for photographic reproductions of his works is well known, because he believes that these betray and twist the value of his images. Through a refined graphic description, those who did not have the opportunity to visit the Louvre at this time, *only* by reading *Ostinato Rigore*, could imagine how the project fitted into the architecture and what were its repercussions in terms of receptivity and aesthetic experience: “He installed five “works” – in fact, reproductions of two paintings and four drawings by Leonardo – grouped together in two places. (...) For each work by the Florentine, Coleman associated images and texts, four large screens presenting the museum’s index card of the original work, the whole set, a detail and, in the last case, a partial transcription of the text written by Leonardo on the page or its reverse side.”⁸ Light, time, space, duration, memory, path, end...are concepts that Arasse evokes and expands, allowing us to walk between titles of works by Leonardo that have always populated our *imaginary museum ...* by teleological analogy to the last work by Coleman: the projection of the *Last Supper*, transfiguring the painting by using technological procedures in a room plunged into the densest darkness, with an immense chromatic multiplicity and a great irradiation of light emanating from the “canvas”. Once again, it should be stated that Arasse leads the reader in a superb way, generating as his words meander, through the *ekfrastic* outburst, the reconceptualisation of the Irish artist. Daniel Arasse sought, through the foundations, problems and reflections consolidated over decades, and through his vast bibliography, to deepen the most complex questions directly related to the gazing condition – implicit observation, contemplation and vision. These are the realms of the primacy of the gaze over understanding. A gaze that, as

6 Cf. Danto quoted by Arasse in “Les miroirs de Cindy Sherman”, p.95

7 Arasse, op.cit., p.101

8 Cf. Op.cit, p.152

it rests on the works, always takes them as contemporary of the one gazing. Hence, the interpretative presentification on photographic productions, because they are substances of the image in its most profound essence. The image understood as an entity that preserves the memory and supposing the demands of duration, exponentialising the complex psycho-aesthetic experiencing of time.

Think about a “paradoxical” contemporaneity, assuming the indirect co-presentiality between a viewer of the “present” and an enthralled transmitter in his chronologically irreversible past... Arasse revealed how the work could be an a-chronic unit that “induces “founded” interpretative anachronisms.”⁹

To look at what is beyond what is seen at first glance; to see (read understand) what is not seen with the naked eye; to unveil what the effect and play of light (in an exhibition, for example) is then revealed in propitious conditions ... what the most sophisticated technologies allow to be revealed, despite the transformations that the passage of time inflicts on works of art ... well, in different senses, to uncover, therefore enabling a greater and more lucid capacity of looking, of seeing, of understanding. It is not about unveiling what is invisible to the eye – the secrets of the invisible, in the privileged terminology of Madeleine Hours – but rather to transpose into the visible what, existing in a state of “naked eye”, is still to emerge until the viewer-subject appropriates it.

Finally, the density of Arasse’s writing seduces, revitalising the weight of heritage that works from an ever-present past – be it far or near – hand down to us, since it affords us new, conscientious appropriations in their minutest “details”, surpassing this state of “not seeing anything”...