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The notion of the real in the fine arts of
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The phlegm and fire of Gilles Aillaud

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The phlegm and fire of Gilles Aillaud

Clément Layet

“[Life] in animals is patent and obvious”¹
(Aristotle)

A retrospective of the works of Gilles Aillaud was presented at the musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes between 17 January and 17 May 2015.² The exhibition brought together a great number of drawings, paintings and lithographs executed by the artist between 1950 and 2000, but also included works he had produced in his capacity as a theatre decorator, playwright and poet. In the catalogue, Anne Dary explained that the stimulus for the exhibition was the presence in the museum’s collections of the canvas titled *La Fosse* (ill. 1). Like the great majority of Gilles Aillaud’s works from the 1960s and ’70s, the image is of the interior of a zoo – not of a cage in this case, but an enclosed space suggestive of a prison courtyard.

In the upper part of the painting, the eye is first struck by the three ochre-coloured walls, with their armoured doors, tree trunk and mesh netting. In the lower half, the black taches give the orangey-brown ground the appearance of an abstract painting but the presence of two platforms reveals that they are in fact stains that have run down the face of a wall. In the middle of the yard we notice a lioness or young male lion, initially not apparent among the false rocks. The sleeping animal becomes the centre of the painting. The absence of movement, the warmth of the tones and the light seem conducive to its siesta. Visualizing it awaken, bound from one rock to another, and climb the tree, our imagination halts before the pit and considers the undergrowth at the top of the scene. This, the other living principle in the image, green and black speckled with blue, seems inaccessible at a distance of just a few metres.



1 Gilles Aillaud, *La Fosse*, 1967, oil on canvas, 200 × 250 cm, FNAC 29065, on deposit from the Centre national des arts plastiques at the musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes © ADAGP, Paris; Cnap. Photo: Jean-Manuel Salingue – Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes.

In 1967, the year that he painted this canvas, Gilles Aillaud took part in the creation of the “great spiral” in Havana, an immense wall painting created as a tribute to the Cuban revolution, to which Arroyo, Recalcati, Rancillac, Adami, Bertholo, Lourdes Castro, Erró and Monory among others also contributed. It was also the year in which he depicted a female Vietnamese soldier directing an American soldier in *La Bataille du riz* (ill. 2). Gilles Aillaud’s political leanings were then Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. For him, as for the members of the Salon de la Jeune Peinture that he directed between 1965 and 1969, art was above all a militant act: “the only dimension that interests us”, he wrote in June 1965, is “the one that relates art and history”.³ And, in 1969, “our fundamental design” entails giving priority to “political criteria”.⁴ The ultimate sense of artistic activity is determined by ideology: “On an ideological plane, that is to say on our territory, we consider ourselves to be at war”.⁵



2 Gilles Aillaud, *La Bataille du riz*, 1967, oil on canvas, 200 × 200 cm, priv. coll. © ADAGP, Paris, with the kind permission of the Galerie de France (Paris) and the beneficiaries of Gilles Aillaud.

But what exactly is there that is political in a canvas like *La Fosse*? What relation do Gilles Aillaud's paintings of enclosed animals have with history? With what tangible action can they be credited? The answer is initially as unapparent as it seems evident in his rare, explicitly politicised paintings like *La Bataille du riz*. In the 1960s and '70s, critics did not fail to quiz the painter on this subject, and the artist himself explained it in numerous articles that he published over this period. However, it was as though his answer fell on deaf ears. An interview given in 1997, in which he refers to points of view given by different commentators, confirms this difficulty rather than helping to overcome it:

—“Critics have often interpreted the recurring presence of animals in your work. What’s your opinion about it?

— Yes, yes. There have been endless theories about their enclosure and a whole load of nonsense based on the propensity to consider the animals a portrait of man. That's not at all the case. It is man who has put the animals on view in the zoo, to turn them into a spectacle. But that has nothing to do with the human condition.

— *Is your refusal of the metaphor real or are you afraid that it will come to attract all the attention and that the painting will thus be ignored?*

— Yes, but maybe that's not the reason.

— *Doesn't the animal, which has been shut up by man, show us a mirror of ourselves?*

— Of course, there is a dialectical reason that is somewhat more complicated."⁶

How are we to understand this "dialectical reason"? Gilles Aillaud declares both that the animals that he shows in the zoos are shown as they really live there, that they do not simply represent humanity and our suffering, and that they nevertheless suggest other forms of oppression than the one they are subjected to. The painter thus rejects the strictly metaphorical interpretation but not especially in order that we focus on his painting. Through the medium of this painting, a human perspective and the presence of an animal disavow one another and yet imply positivity.

The recurrence of the questions addressed to Gilles Aillaud and the difficulty his answers had in being heard are revealing of the assumed presence of a political dimension. An outlook formed during the Cold War was prone to create a dichotomy between works manifestly dependent on ideology, like *La Bataille du riz*, and others independent of it, like *La Fosse*. During the years that Marxist-Leninist doctrines were progressively abandoned, up until the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the painting of Gilles Aillaud was approached – in the monographs and exhibitions devoted to his work – from a more phenomenological standpoint, focusing on the conditions of appearance. During the 2000s, a few articles returned more explicitly to the subject of his political commitment, often to reduce it to being the result of historical context or, more rarely, to reveal its internal logic. Today, his paintings, drawings, poems, plays and political articles are being shown as a complete body of work. Since Gilles Aillaud's production was based on an understanding of the conflict that was not restricted simply to the class struggle, but already concerned the relationship of mankind with all living things, it can once more be seen as a political tool.

Salle verte

Every year since 1950, the Salon de la Jeune Peinture has brought together the great names in French and international painting, initially in galleries, and from 1954 in the musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris. The dispute that had set the upholders of abstraction against those of figuration during the 1930s was given new impetus by the shock of the war and the ideological opposition between the great powers. A strain was introduced between formal freedom and the description of a reality that was not immediately visible on the one hand, and the faithful description of everyday existence and the transformation of social reality on the other. Until 1956, the Parti communiste français, which was very influential at the Salon, just as it was in the rest of society, relayed the Zhdanovist doctrine of socialist realism. Following the death of Stalin and the invasion of Hungary by Soviet tanks, the directives became more flexible and the ruling body of the PCF opened up to other conceptions of realism. The current that prevailed from that time at the Salon de la Jeune Peinture was that of "poetic realism", which placed emphasis on rural scenes, landscapes, still lifes, joy and solicitude. The most representative figures were, among others, Éliane Thiollier, who chaired the Salon between 1957 and 1964, and the painters Paul Bardonne, Hélène Girod de l'Ain, Albert Zavaro and Jacques Petit, who were regularly endorsed by the communist critic Georges Besson. But following the escalation in contention during the Algerian war, the far-reaching changes in mores that had been maturing since the start of the 1960s, and the arrival of new forms of art from the United States, the 1964 Salon marked a return to the political debate and a distancing from the Communist party. A deep divide separated two groups of artists, which focused respectively on perceptible experience and activism, but which also reflected two generations. With regard to the subjects, the treatment of the light and the importance given to the figure, the critic Jean-Jacques Lévêque described the Salon as "torn between Bonnard and Bacon".⁷ The painter Eduardo Arroyo, a self-exile from Francoist Spain, became a leading figure on the scene. The interview he gave to Jean-Jacques Lévêque heralded the developments that would take place over the decade that followed:

"After fifteen years of non-participation in the spectacle of the world, informal experiences and extreme narcissism, we are now entering a

new phase – art that involves the spirit of art more than its vocabulary. We intend to involve ourselves completely in reality. That is to say, to indict, denounce, proclaim, and no longer evade taboo subjects like politics and sexuality”.⁸

From the time of the following Salon, which opened in January 1965, the majority of artists embraced the new tendency. As Francis Parent and Raymond Perrot recount in their *Histoire* of the Salon de la Jeune Peinture, at the elective general meeting in March, “Zavaro, Thiollier, Canjura, Girod de l’Ain, Petit... were voted off the committee and replaced by Tisserand, Parré, Fleury, Aillaud, Recalcati, Biras and Buraglio, who, with Arroyo, Cueco, Artozoul..., and soon joined by Troche, would henceforth be able to impose a new line on the Jeune Peinture”.⁹

Gilles Aillaud was elected president of the new committee. He also directed the first *Bulletin d’information*, which appeared in June 1965 after the end of the exhibition. Its only page, which significantly opened with the work “action”, was a manifesto (ill. 3). The *Bulletin* wished to publicise both the committee’s intentions and the association’s accounts.¹⁰ The art critics in management posts would be replaced by painters. Appraisal of works would no longer be based simply on formal and stylistic criteria but also political. And the Salon as a whole would be required to follow a specific theme each year.¹¹

The publication of these directives was an answer to the misinterpretations to which the Salon had been subjected. To put an end to the hold exercised up until 1964 by a “sensibility verging on sentimentality”,¹² the members of the jury had chosen to use only the colour green in the paintings that they themselves would present at the Salon. To justify this decision, the catalogue combined seriousness with irony:

“This ‘tribute to green’ is not reverential. It covers the gamut of colours from yellow to blue. Its quantity remains imprecise and its weight unlimited. This tribute is an *amiable slaughter*; it is invested with critical insolence. It compares the different versions of the human nature of green. Green is tranquillity, the cool valley or peace of mind. Green is distraction and oblivion and escape. Positive seduction or traditional drug? In fact, this picture room is a boxing ring and battlefield. Some of the combatants have foliage in their blood and draw out like a beautiful summer’s day; others are concealed: they advance covered with bushes and furiously create the word: society. Nevertheless, at the

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BULLETIN D'INFORMATION DU SALON DE LA JEUNE PEINTURE

L'action entreprise l'année dernière par le Salon de la Jeune Peinture, qui consistait à montrer sans entraves ce qu'il y a de plus vivant et de plus jeune dans l'art aujourd'hui, ayant été mal comprise se poursuivra l'année prochaine avec une détermination accrue. Cette incompréhension quasi générale oblige de plus le comité à accomplir lui-même le travail d'information et d'explication qui devrait être — et à certaines époques a pu être — celui de la critique.

Le rôle du Salon de la Jeune Peinture est de dresser le constat objectif d'une situation que le comité n'a pas le droit d'ignorer. Le Salon de la Jeune Peinture est par définition le lieu où tous les jeunes peintres qui n'ont pas les possibilités de montrer leurs tableaux ou que ce soit peuvent exposer, le lieu où les entreprises les plus risquées et les moins abouties peuvent se manifester. En ce sens le rôle du Salon de la Jeune Peinture, plus fondamentalement encore que de présenter un bilan ou de tendre un miroir de l'actualité en peinture, est de donner des indications sur l'avenir. Et l'avenir n'est pas caché dans l'indétermination du futur, il est entre les mains de ceux qui risquent.

Ainsi apparaît le double décalage sous lequel doit être envisagée notre action. Le prochain Salon de la Jeune Peinture sera à la fois objectif et partisan au lieu d'être équilibré et libéral comme tous les autres Salons. Il sera même d'autant plus objectif qu'il sera partisan.

Si le comité par exemple souhaite obtenir la participation de peintres chinois, cubains, algériens, russes, c'est parce que l'art dans ces pays se trouve placé dans une toute autre situation qu'il est en Occident. Une confrontation sérieuse avec cet art n'a jamais été entreprise. Elle permettrait cependant de dépasser le débat du plan esthétique, c'est-à-dire du plan des rapports entre l'art et l'histoire de l'art, pour le placer sur le seul plan qui nous intéresse, celui des rapports entre l'art et l'histoire.

Tel était déjà l'année dernière le souci du comité lorsqu'il a décidé d'inviter un petit nombre de sculpteurs à montrer chacun un ensemble d'œuvres.

Si certains de ces sculpteurs s'attachaient au domaine traditionnel de la sculpture, c'est que le comité avait entrepris d'éviter l'habituelle confrontation de tendances et de styles au profit d'une intervention directe des œuvres dans la vie, d'est-à-dire au profit d'une confrontation de l'art avec autre chose que lui-même, et cela afin que puisse être mise en question sa nécessité.

Il faut poursuivre la tâche, et en finir avec ces lois solidement fondamentalistes qui commandent la structure de l'œuvre d'art, et qui ne font en réalité que maintenir depuis des années la peinture dans le domaine rhétorique du langage des formes et des couleurs, comme elles maintiennent la sculpture dans le domaine rhétorique de l'organisation des volumes, hors du temps, dans l'univers indéterminé des notions culturelles. Tant que ce travail de destruction ne sera pas complètement achevé il ne sera même pas possible d'élaborer l'unique et fondamentale question dont dépend l'avenir, c'est-à-dire la vie même, de l'art : dans quelle mesure, si petite qu'elle soit, la peinture participe-t-elle au développement historique de la vérité ? Quel est le pouvoir de l'art aujourd'hui dans le devenir du monde ?

Tel est le parti pris à la lumière duquel le Salon de la Jeune Peinture entend systématiquement accueillir les entreprises les plus variées, sans aucune condition esthétique préalable, et présenter ainsi pour la première fois un constat réellement objectif de la situation de l'art dans le monde en 1965.

LE COMITÉ.

RAPPORT FINANCIER

Lors de l'assemblée générale des sociétaires du 2 mars 1965, un rapport financier provisoire avait été approuvé à l'unanimité.

Maintenant, sous les comptes du XIV^e Salon sont réglés, nous pouvons donc dresser un bilan définitif de l'année, préciser le sens dans lequel nous avons organisé nos dépenses et nos économies, et en tirer les enseignements pour le prochain salon.

LES RESSOURCES

Droits d'acrocchage : 125 exposants x 20 F	2.500 F
Retenues aux refusés : 277 refusés x 5 F	1.385 F
Entrées : 214 entrées x 5 F (vernisage)	1.070 F
1.510 entrées x 3 F	4.530 F
1.310 entrées x 2 F (vern. + durée salon)	2.780 F
Catalogues : 744 catalogues vendus x 5 F	3.720 F
TOTAL DES RECETTES :	15.997 F

LES DEPENSES

Paye des gardiens du Musée d'Art Moderne (+ heures supplém., + permanence électricité, M.A.M.)	2.329,01 F
Impression effiches et invitations	800 F
Vendeuse durant le Salon	1.000 F
Insertions et publicité dans les journaux	2.325,47 F
Frais de cocktail de Presse	450,45 F
Frais de salles (réunions comité, assemblée générale)	500 F
Fournitures durant le Salon (papier, encre, agrafes, carnets de reçus, timbres et enveloppes pour invitations officielles, markers, etc.)	790,25 F
Impression circulaires, papier à en-tête, (+ typographie), frappe d'enveloppes	589,97 F
Frais généraux	1.507,13 F
Divers, petits frais	801,70 F
TOTAL DES DEPENSES :	11.222,98 F

Reliquat du XV ^e Salon, tous frais payés, + frais courants jusqu'à octobre 1964 (bordereau C.C.P. du 27-10-64)	2.685,20 F
RECETTES du XIV ^e Salon	15.997,00 F
DEPENSES du XIV ^e Salon	11.222,98 F
EN CAISSE, au 30 mai 1965 : Comptes Chèques Postaux (bordereau C.C.P. du 28-5-65)	5.740,62 F
Argent liquide	1.719,80 F
TOTAL :	7.459,22 F

Les économies ont porté sur :

- 1) La manutention : cette année, manutention bénévole du comité et du jury.
 - 2) La vendeuse durant le Salon.
 - 3) Les mûts et affiches de mûts (même économie que l'an passé).
 - 4) L'argus de la Presse : il a été jugé préférable, comme infimement moins onéreux, d'acheter les journaux où paraissent des critiques durant le Salon.
 - 5) Les insertions dans les journaux, qui sont passées de 3.639,98 F (XV^e Salon) à 2.325,47 F.
- On peut rappeler que, comme les autres années, l'impression du catalogue n'a rien coûté. Les recettes du catalogue sont donc nettes, les pages publicitaires couvrant les frais d'impression. Il y a eu une amélioration de sa présentation. Pour le prochain salon, on espère d'ailleurs encore cette présentation, sans pour autant changer le mode de financement.

Un équilibre financier semble avoir été retrouvé. Cet équilibre est le résultat de l'action commencée lors du XV^e Salon, puis continuée pendant le XIV^e Salon.

Il est possible, donc, d'équilibrer le budget d'un Salon comme celui de la Jeune Peinture, sans nécessairement y vendre de tableaux. La condition de cet équilibre est qu'il existe un intérêt du public, qui aille à l'élargissant. A ce propos, le tableau comparatif ci-dessous est démonstratif :

	XIV ^e Salon	XV ^e Salon	XV ^e Salon
Nombre d'entrées	2.273	3.398	3.495
Solde en caisse	227,27 F	2.685,20 F	7.459,22 F

(Note) : Etant donné la situation financière après le XIV^e Salon, le XV^e Salon n'a pu démarquer que grâce à des avances personnelles d'argent de membres du comité).

Pour le XV^e Salon, notre effort devra se poursuivre dans la même direction que pour le dernier Salon.

- Travail bénévole accru des membres du comité et du jury.
 - Réduction encore plus importante des frais généraux.
 - Efforts en vue de gagner un public plus étendu, afin de briser les barrières d'intention qui existent autour du Salon de la Jeune Peinture.
- C'est dans le sens de cette « bataille pour un public » que se résoudront (aussi) nos questions financières.

Le Comité du Salon de la Jeune Peinture, devant la nécessité de mieux connaître le travail, les recherches et l'évolution des jeunes peintres, a décidé d'établir un dossier de renseignements et, à cet effet, nous demandons aux peintres, aux directeurs de galeries de bien vouloir nous faire parvenir, quelles que soient leurs tendances, les catalogues et publications concernant leurs activités.

Pour le 17^e Salon de la Jeune Peinture, les droits d'acrocchage et de participation sont fixés à 25 F pour 3 toiles maximum. La retenue de 5 F pour frais de manutention et de gardiennage prélevée sur la somme remboursée aux candidats refusés, pratiquée dans les précédents salons, est supprimée par décision de la dernière assemblée générale.

Dans le cadre du prochain Salon, le comité souhaite l'envoi d'œuvres importantes. Il rappelle que chaque peintre peut présenter trois toiles sans limite de format. Le comité encourage toutes initiatives tant personnelles que collectives. Le secrétariat du comité se tient à la disposition des peintres pour toutes les précisions qu'ils jugeront utiles de lui demander.

Formation du Bureau et liste des membres du comité du 17^e Salon de la Jeune Peinture.

Membres hors statut. — Administrateur : Michel Treche - Secrétaire du comité : Edouard Arroyo.
Bureau. — Président : Gilles Aillaud - Vice-Présidents : Gérard Tisserand, Lucien Finery - Secrétaire général : Bernard Aillemeux - Trésorier : Michel Parra - Membres du Bureau : Francis Bira.
Comité. — Artzouf, Jean-Pierre Perron, Latil, Cusco, Buraglio, Philippe Leroy.

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height of the combat, nobody, absolutely nobody forgot that green is not the colour of blood.”¹³

After the combat, the identity of the winners was no longer in doubt. The exclusive use of green had the purpose of showing that pictorial quality depends less on the skilful use of colour than on political awareness, but a section of the public had interpreted it wrongly, considering the works exhibited as examples of “anti-art”¹⁴ inspired by Dadaism.

To dispel this confusion, immediately after the Salon the *Bulletin* stated its confidence in the future and the notion of art, and promised that the following session would demonstrate “the most vivacious and youthful elements in art today”. Rather than being “eclectic and liberal, like all the other Salons”, it would be “objective and partisan”, meaning that it would embrace the real world, and, with its Marxist motivation, that it would be eager to transform that world and stimulate social progress. Also, that it would invite “Chinese, Cuban, Algerian and Russian” painters so as to break out of the narrow framework of “the West”.¹⁵ The committee promised that the 1966 Salon would reflect the “situation of art in the world” and contribute to the “historic disclosure of the truth”. Gilles Aillaud had read Marx, Althusser, Giáp and Mao, but before that Spinoza, Nietzsche and Heidegger. The insufficiently recognised truth was the collection of power relations that decide the “future of the world”.¹⁶ Not only the class struggle, but also the relationships that man has more generally with things, animals and thought.

So that they would not be confused with the successors of Dadaism and Surrealism, the members of the Salon de la Jeune Peinture were not content with simply publishing this statement. By taking part in the exhibition *La Figuration narrative dans l'art contemporain* organised in October 1965 by Gérard Gassiot-Talabot at the galerie Creuze, they caused a real stir in the world of painting.

Vivre et laisser mourir

In this exhibition Gilles Aillaud signed his participation, with Eduardo Arroyo and Antonio Recalcati, in the polyptych *Vivre et laisser mourir ou la Fin tragique de Marcel Duchamp* and wrote the essay with the same title that offered clues to its interpretation.¹⁷ In the narrative given by the eight scenes in the polyptych, of which Antje Kramer-Mallordy has

analysed the sequence and their many links with the work of Duchamp,¹⁸ the father of the readymade is callously assassinated by the three painters. In the last of the scenes, the depiction of his coffin being carried by American Pop artists and French Nouveau Réalistes, and above all by the fact that it is covered by the American flag, was interpreted in 1965 as the antagonism felt by artists based in Paris that the centre of the art world had shifted to New York. The essay of October 1965, however, put forward completely different arguments.

Following the takeover of power from the earlier generations within the Salon de la Jeune Peinture in early 1965, the polyptych threw down a twin challenge against Duchamp and Nouveau Réalisme by the subject represented and the manner in which figuration was used. However, these forceful moves were primarily politically motivated. The American domination that they pilloried related to the image, values and principles that America had spread throughout the Western world since 1945. The concern was to know, not which artistic tendency would rule the world of art, but which conceptions of freedom, in general, and of the function of the artist, in particular, needed to be defended and implemented.

The thinking of the three artists was already encapsulated by the following sentences written by Paul Nizan, which would serve as an epigraph to the *Bulletin* issued in March 1969: “Men denied all real satisfaction have only to turn these inventions into imaginary worlds constructed by bourgeois thought. The soap bubbles inflated by the thinkers of the past pop at the first breath of wind that passes through the factories”¹⁹ (see ill. 6). The claiming for oneself of freedom of action, denied to most individuals on account of their living and working conditions, is a gesture that is both illusory and violent. Unconditional freedom is only a metaphysical postulate or perspective for action. To think of it as a reality, reserved to just a few individuals, or possessed by humans in contrast with other living things, is to contribute to the process of domination and destruction. Marcel Duchamp was not made responsible for these mechanisms but, in the field of art, he was positioned as the heir to the idealist tradition that fashioned their components – as opposed to the assumption that he was simply the agent of acts of artistic subversion around the time of World War I and the precursor of trends that followed World War II.

By making a reference to James Bond in the first part of the title, the polyptych questions the content of popular culture and the use that Pop Art and Nouveau Réalisme made of it. The allusion was not simply ironic because, in the collation with Duchamp, or rather with what was

aimed at by the inclusion of his name, the interest was indeed life and death. What was at stake were all the philosophical and artistic positions that denied art's vocation to remain turned towards the world, such as Hegel's argument that art is a thing of the past, Guy Debord's thesis that condemned art outright as spectacle, but primarily, and conversely, all postures that exalt art, as though the creative act were what is important rather than the reality towards which the act strives. These different ways to repudiate the sense of art tacitly share a premise: they are all haunted by the "fear of death".²⁰ The real world is replaced by the fiction of a world that is entirely humanised, intellectualised, artificialised and aestheticised. This is essentially the reproach addressed to Marcel Duchamp:

"Underlying this thought is an unformulated resentment: the world in which we are dying is a state of chaos, in the face of which man is alone and obliged, in order to live, to take everything on himself. Confronted by this world, he endeavours to build up another, sheltered from time, a human world, his 'Work'." ²¹

In retrospect, the reduction of Duchamp to his American consecration may seem extreme and overly conditioned by the context of the Cold War. Although they ignored what his work had also contributed to consider the relations of art with the world,²² the three painters were not contradicted by Duchamp himself in the interview that he gave to Pierre Cabanne a year later:

"I understand nothing about politics and see that it is a really stupid and unproductive activity. Whether it leads to communism, monarchism or a democratic republic, it's all the same to me".²³

Gérald Gassiot-Talabot's exhibition and the polyptych in particular sparked acute protests in the press and art world. The successors of those who had embraced scandal as a central element in their practice during the 1920s were caught on the hop in 1965 when the avant-garde movements themselves were the target of sacrilegious treatment. So as not to draw more attention to the painters, Marcel Duchamp chose to play down their intent: "Those people just want to advertise themselves, that's all. [...] It's the infancy of the art of publicity".²⁴ Also depicted as one of the coffin bearers, Pierre Restany warned against the ideological orientation of the "rowdiest [...] scoundrels", who to his eyes were Aillaud, Arroyo

and Recalcati. To him narrative figuration was a demonstration of “social realism”,²⁵ close to socialist realism. “When the painting was shown”, wrote G  rald Gassiot-Talabot, “it caused an explosion of anger; people had a fit when they saw it; they slashed the canvases; they insulted us, they wrote unimaginable things in the visitors’ book. At that time in Paris there were some ten spiritual, political or artistic groups that cooperated on making protests, giving out leaflets and getting petitions signed.”²⁶ The Surrealists initially decided to publish an article in *Combat* but in the end published only a handout called “Le ‘troisi  me degr  ’ de la peinture”, which denounced the violence and artistic weakness of the polyptych, claiming that, whereas third-degree humour might authorise the depiction of a murder, it shouldn’t justify third-rate paintings of this kind.

Unlike Duchamp, the signatories of the leaflet – several of whom would soon be considered representatives of Figuration narrative – recognised that the polyptych was more than just a “stupid advertising trick”.²⁷ Its illegitimacy was political in nature: the three painters had struck a blow at the “freedom of spirit” and the “emancipating” conception of poetics to which Dadaism and Surrealism had opened a door. Given that everyone has to maintain full freedom of conscience with respect to “distinguishing good from evil”, the dictatorial behaviour of the young painters and their “resolutely ‘socialist-realist’ style”²⁸ were enough to incriminate them. Even so, Aillaud reoffended in two essays written on the subject of the polyptych, *Comment s’en d  barrasser ou un an plus tard* (1966) and *Post-scriptum* (1973). Inspired by Althusser’s analysis of culture as a system of oppression, his position would invariably remain that art must never take freedom for granted but strive to bring it about.

Aillaud’s direction of the Salons of 1966 and 1967, his participation in the Sal  n de Mayo that celebrated the anniversary of the Cuban revolution, and his production of paintings like *La Fosse* were all motivated by the same emancipatory ambition. But his own canvases did not defend any explicit cause. They do not have the ironic and polemical nature of *Vivre et laisser mourir*. Continuing a secular tradition, they took a long, hard look at reality. They presented elements in discord that were also in conflict outside the paintings. Using a mode of representation that was considered obsolete by being faithful to the forms and colours of the world, they shunned the prevailing culture.

Although the members of the Salon de la Jeune Peinture had themselves strongly challenged mores and the institutions, they were initially surprised at the extent of the rebellion of May 68, then immediately

comforted. Their participation in the events was to make an essential contribution to the impressing of the movement in the public space and collective memory.

Atelier populaire

At the école nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, the students condemned the “class-based character” of their school, its rift with the “rest of the workers” and the “invisible prison” represented by the “privileged status of the artist”.²⁹ The hierarchical structure of the various ateliers, especially in the architecture section, was criticised for being archaic and conformant. The leading members of the Jeune Peinture committee united with the students when they occupied the building. The



4 The Atelier populaire at the école nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, May 1968, anonymous photograph taken from the book by Francis Parent and Raymond Perrot, *Le Salon de la Jeune Peinture – Une histoire, 1950-1983*, Montreuil, Jeune Peinture, 1983.

“atelier bourgeois” was replaced by an “atelier populaire” that printed thousands of fly-posters each day (ill. 4). The work was organised as follows:

“The fly-poster designs, created by a group following a political analysis of the day’s events, or after discussions at factory gates, are proposed democratically at the end of the day in a general assembly.

This is how a judgement is reached:

- is the political idea correct?
- does the poster communicate this idea well?

The designs that are accepted are then either silkscreened or lithographed.”³⁰

Gilles Aillaud did not draw any of the posters himself but took part in the debates, writing of the leaflets, printing of the screen prints, and sweeping the atelier. Daniel Anselme’s newspaper, the *Cahiers de mai*, to which Aillaud contributed, stated in its July 1968 issue that between 14 May and 27 June 350 fly-posters were designed and 600,000 printed at the école des Beaux-Arts. The 106 students and painters were removed from the school by force at 4am on 27 June.

Following the re-establishment of Gaullist power, the militants, workers, artists and intellectuals who had taken part in the protest wondered about the limits their action had come up against and how to instigate a new phase. It was within this context that publication of the *Bulletin du Salon de la Jeune Peinture* restarted, of which a single issue had appeared in June 1965. One of the many articles in the December 1968 issue regretted that the Atelier populaire had restricted itself to “accompanying the struggle” and using “very simple means, like the posters”.³¹ The painters should have placed the range of their artistic abilities at the service of the revolution rather than produce just caricatures and slogans. Originally planned for the 1968 Salon, the “Salle rouge” was to become this means of action.

Salle rouge

The Salon committee drew lessons from the comparative setback of the Salle verte and the experience of the Atelier populaire. Presented in January 1969 at the Cité universitaire, then in the “Animation Recherche



5 The Salle rouge, in front of the Berliet factory in Bourg-en-Bresse, 1969, anonymous photograph taken from the book by Francis Parent and Raymond Perrot, *Le Salon de la Jeune Peinture – Une histoire, 1950-1983*, Montreuil, Jeune Peinture, 1983.

Confrontation” section at the musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, the exhibition would later visit Sartrouville, Versailles, Belfort (in the Alsthom factory), Pérouges (in the streets), Bourg-en-Bresse (on the road in front of the Berliet factories), Lons-le-Saulnier (at the Maison des Jeunes et de la Culture), Besançon, Saint-Brieuc, Bologne, and perhaps others (ill. 5).³²

This time the theme imposed was no longer an ironic formal prescription but a political injunction: the works all had to show support for the people of Vietnam, who were then at war. The artists were not content to militate simply for peace or just espouse a cause with which they identified: they wanted to have some bearing on the international conflict between the great powers, as it was being played out in both Vietnam and France:

“The oppression brought to bear by American imperialism, which the Vietnamese people have confounded by holding it in check, is the same power that is being exercised in a comparatively masked manner here and now in our bourgeois society.”³³

Gilles Aillaud chose to exhibit *La Bataille du riz* (ill. 2), which he had painted in 1967. Although the painting was given its justification by the

world situation and the history then taking place, it was not enough for it to be politically legitimate for it also to be successful artistically. To be “convincing”, a “painting must exist as a painting”.³⁴ It must not subscribe to an “adhesion” but to an “adherence”,³⁵ in other words it must stick to its cause and, in so doing, unite with it, rather than simply declaring that it is supportive of it. It was with the capacity to actually stimulate this adherence that the group discussions held in front of the paintings were concerned. So as to rise above the status of slogans, Pierre Buraglio insisted that an extract from a leaflet or an official line be associated with each painting.

Gilles Aillaud’s work is based on a Vietnamese propaganda photograph featuring a weave of contrasts: a small woman, a Vietcong foot-soldier, whose rifle is trained on a huge man, a member of the US Air Force. The jungle visible in the background of the photograph has been replaced on the canvas by a rice paddy and farmers at work. The sentence attached as a caption matches the image closely: “*Il faut se battre pour préserver la production et il faut produire pour assurer la victoire au combat*” (‘We must fight to safeguard our production and we must produce to ensure victory in battle’; Pham Van Dong, Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam). By altering the background, Gilles Aillaud gave more substance to the subject matter, and created relationships on which the eye can linger, between the pleats in the clothes, the edges of the fields, hair, rice plants, necklines, poles, and the curvature of the backs, with the latter being both different and similar depending on whether you are a rice-farmer or a prisoner. These oppositions, links and interest make us mindful of the actual experiences endured by the Vietnamese. The thought comes to mind in which the terraces of the rice paddies rise indefinitely, the peasants stand shoulder to shoulder and seem destined to prevail over all American soldiers, however powerful they may be.

In spite of having had long preparation and its journey around France, the exhibition was a relative failure. The fact that its Marxist-Leninist discourse contradicted the views of the PCF, which it considered too reformist, meant that all doors to the communist press and exhibition spaces were closed to it.³⁶ To break the critical silence, the *Bulletin* took it upon itself to offer clarification and interpretation. It responded notably to the accusation frequently levelled since 1965 of having reinstated, if not the forms, at least the concept of social realism, whereas the PCF itself had ended up criticising it. The issue published in March 1969 gathered “*Éléments d’étude sur le réalisme socialiste*” for a series planned to con-



6 *Bulletin de la Jeune Peinture*, no. 3, March 1969
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tinue over several issues. In the same way that the canvases were collectively created, the articles were also written by the group as a whole. This anonymous series drafted by Michel Troche also sheds light on the particular case of Gilles Aillaud (ill. 6).

Socialism and realism

Whereas the formal nature of his practice harmonised with the return to figuration that was occurring then even outside of the Marxist milieu, the realism of Gilles Aillaud amounted to more than a generational or partisan phenomenon. It was neither because he was a Marxist that he was

a realist, nor conversely that he was a Marxist because he was a realist. His figurative technique was the extension of a daily praxis of drawing that he had practised since childhood, while his political convictions had their roots in his reading at the age of 23. His realism fulfilled a more immediate fondness for imitation, which he rendered anew on each occasion, while his Marxism entailed collective reflection and analysis.

Gilles Aillaud nevertheless became aware of the political implications of realism during his early years when he observed the way in which some artists, such as Jean Hélion, evolved from abstraction to figuration between the late 1930s and the start of the 1950s:

“For him [Hélion], as for the artists of his generation, art was the socialist utopia of the future that he believed he was constructing with his works of abstraction. It took catastrophes, Nazism and defeat to make him understand that all that was just an idealist utopia and that there was a need for a woman, a cigarette, a potato. His development was logical and sound. This utopia, this construction in abstraction and vagueness, was foiled by the harshness of reality.”³⁷

But Aillaud’s personal and political desire to capture the world objectively should not in any way be confused with a dogmatic realism that excluded any practice not strictly figurative. From a formal perspective, his position was, on the contrary, fundamentally open to plurality.³⁸ Its intangible principles were liberty, equality and conflictuality. The fact that equality had been betrayed in liberal states, by the abstract invocation of the equality of rights, is what chiefly fuelled his revolt. The fact that freedom was flouted in countries dominated by the USSR explains his adherence to Maoism during the years 1965–75. For the growing section of the young – such as Marxist-Leninist workers, artists and intellectuals – who were no longer able to identify with the position of the PCF, Mao had become a leading political figure by calling for an uprising against the Chinese Communist Party. Largely ignorant of the living conditions in China, or prone to rationalise them ideologically, Western militants believed they were being told the truth when they read propaganda, which they helped to disseminate. In 1973 Gilles Aillaud still thought that, in contrast with Stalin, Mao respected the “development of the individuality of each person”³⁹ and freedom of creation. Taken literally, the Chinese president’s aphorisms in the *Little Red Book* could in fact support these ideas:

“Politics: ‘Let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend’ aims to stimulate development in art and scientific progress, as well as the blooming of socialist culture in our country. In the arts, different forms and styles are able to develop freely, and, in the sciences, different schools of thought can freely compete with one another. It would, in our opinion, be detrimental to the development of art and science to resort to administrative measures to impose this or that style or such-and-such a school and to forbid any other style or school of thought. What is true and false in art and science is a question that must be resolved by means of free discussion in artistic and scientific circles, and through the practice of art and science and not by using simplistic methods.”⁴⁰

For a communist artist, and *a fortiori* a figurative painter, turning to Mao provided a degree of freedom compared with the dogmas of socialist realism formalised by Zhdanov as from 1934 and imposed in the countries of the Soviet empire. Although Gilles Aillaud did not take up any position, notably with regard to Zhdanovism, the two articles published in the issues of March and May 1969 are congruent with his work. In these the anonymous author (who is actually Michel Troche) essentially analyses the history of the notion of socialist realism and stigmatises the usage made of it by French critics during the 1960s:

“Each time a painter chooses to do his work in accordance with a political criterion, he is accused of succumbing to ‘socialist realism’; unless, without accusing him openly but, using a more paternal method, he is allowed to understand that he is actually in danger – that this lack of refinement does not suit his temperament – that his viewpoint is comprehensible but that, if he would kindly refrain from this infamous aesthetic deed, he will continue to be considered a member of the family.

It is not by chance that socialist realism has become this comforting cream pie that is thrown at the head of all those who upset the formal and ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie; that convenient formula which, instead of quickening the mind, exempts one from thinking; that sin that paralyzes painters; that vague notion that allows those on the right to snigger, the thoughtless to smile knowingly, and former combatants of ‘politically committed’ art to exorcise a long-standing feeling of guilt.

As for art critics, highly specialised – there’s no need to dwell on that –, *socialist realism* comes from a catalogue of words, along with ‘perceptible eloquence, established personality, inner need, structure, technology, etc.’, from which they pick. It is an expression selected to give advantage, instead of ‘academicism’ or ‘directed art’. And which, furthermore, is seasoned by that ultimate spice: anti-communism.”⁴¹

Rather than plumping either for or against “socialist realism”, Michel Troche classified the biased usage that newspapers of both the right and left made of the concept. The definition he offered goes back to the Marxist-Leninist sources that unaided offer a positive appreciation of its essence:

“It was Maxime Gorki who first used the expression *socialist realism*. The notion was later codified and institutionalised, in particular by Zhdanov. His definition was very simple: socialist realism is realist insofar as it stands in opposition to bourgeois idealism. It is the true relations between man and his natural and historic milieu that must generate a just vision of the world, and not the imaginary and mystical relations on which bourgeois writers and artists base their arbitrary reconstruction of reality; socialist realism is socialist to the degree that it resists an unprincipled description of reality: it consists in taking the perspective of reality of those who transform it in a revolutionary sense, to ‘truthfully represent reality in its revolutionary becoming’ [note: Jean Fréville, Préface aux textes choisis de Lénine sur la littérature et l’art].”⁴²

Leaving aside the historical developments that socialist realism experienced in the USSR and Democratic Republics, such a conception appears consistent, in terms of intentions, with the attack on Marcel Duchamp made in 1965. But these articles, which reveal in detail the situation in Russia in the 1920s and ’30s, confirm that the members of the Salon de la Jeune Peinture did not ignore the manner in which the notion had actually been employed.

Generally speaking, they distrusted all aesthetic genres inasmuch as the public and critics employ them, whether consciously or unconsciously, so as not to see the reality that art demands we acknowledge. That is why the members of the Salon de la Jeune Peinture stated in the *Bulletin* of December 1968: “We are not a new group, a new school of, let’s call it ‘art engagé’ (politically committed art)”.⁴³ Whereas “engagement”

could be said to be consistent with the intentions of the Salon's members, use of the term finally materialised around the Communist Party, so much so that it was better to discard it than redefine it.

From Gilles Aillaud's standpoint, the important question was not to know whether a work could be classified or not as "politically committed art" but if it displayed real responsibility. Inasmuch as it was neither necessary nor sufficient to be figurative to be politically consistent, figuration as such was not a criterion of evaluation. As from 1966, Pierre Buraglio made a decisive contribution to the return of abstraction to the Salon de la Jeune Peinture after the exclusions of 1965.⁴⁴ This change in spirit made it possible to embrace Claude Viallat and Vincent Bioulès, who would later become members of Supports surfaces, and the group BMPT, which presented its break with painting at the Salon of 1967.

Conversely, the figurative painters were then politically far removed from the Jeune Peinture group, like the Nouveaux Réalistes and those artists that art criticism would soon refer to as hyperrealists. At the start of the 1970s, the fact that his work was often assimilated to this latter tendency spurred Gilles Aillaud to differentiate himself explicitly. Even if they had in common the attempt to translate the appearance of the visible world faithfully and the use of photography in the preparation of a painting, their stances were quite distinct and even antagonistic. Aillaud used photographs as "sketches" or "aide-memoires", while the hyperrealists worked on the "means of communication that is the photograph".⁴⁵ He stressed this so that his work would not be confused with the type of painting that "pulls off the remarkable feat of working on a level of the tenuous, minuscule and imperceptible while being brutal, simplistic and naïve".⁴⁶

After May 68, the authors of the *Bulletin de la Jeune Peinture* worked systematically to spark a cultural revolution. Although they made use of Maoist terms and arguments, they positioned themselves in relation to the views held by the artists, critics and politicians on the French intellectual scene, careful also to distinguish themselves from positions that, for one reason or another, might have seemed close to theirs (such as those of Alain Jouffroy, Jean Dubuffet, the review *Tel Quel*, etc.). To defy the prevailing culture, the major difficulty was, however, that the press, public policy and educational institutions themselves claimed emancipation as a value. The matter at hand was thus to agree on the words.

The conceptual analysis of ideology

Among the contributors to the *Bulletin*, Gilles Aillaud concentrated especially on analysis of the pseudo-emancipatory ideas and theses that had flourished since the post-war period. His primary target was the “autonomy of art”, as it was defined by historians and writers like Élie Faure and André Malraux. According to these authors, modern artists no longer aimed at representing the objects in the perceptible world or invisible realities, rather they tended to liberate themselves from all subjects of representation and to place value on the artistic act as such. This conception of the work of art as an end in itself did not immediately entail a defence of “art for art’s sake”. Considering culture as the only response man could advance against fate, the only force able to confront death, Malraux did not appoint it for aesthetes alone, on the contrary, he emphasized its relation with the human condition in general. An autodidact himself, he was persuaded that the historic moment had arrived when the masses would have access to the world’s masterpieces through museums and books. From the time that Western art began to disengage itself from all external models, the works of all mankind could be considered independent of their political or ritual functions, and as part of a vast “imaginary museum”. The paradigm of modern art became a historic and anthropological model. As Minister of Cultural Affairs under General de Gaulle, André Malraux based his political policy on his desire to make the “value of art” known to the greatest number possible. Thus, for example, in a speech he made in New York on 15 May 1962, he declared that “culture” was the “free world’s most powerful ally” to “lead humanity to a dream worthy of man – because it is the heritage of the nobility of the world”.⁴⁷

For Gilles Aillaud, allusions of this kind to the “free world” were immediately suspect. Regardless of the problem posed by knowing or not whether they were sincere, such emancipatory promises were in any case too ingenuous and too indifferent to actual living conditions not to remain in the thrall of the ruling classes and state powers. Seeing culture as an instrument for achieving individual freedom, overstepping social barriers, and stimulating dialogue between different peoples, by giving it an institutional context like those of museums or “maisons de la culture”, the current of thought to which André Malraux belonged disclaimed the very reality of art. When cut off from the world, reduced to a heritage to be managed, made known and renewed, contrary to all intent culture becomes an instrument of segregation and propaganda:

“The essence of the work that culture performs is to enclose each activity in a separate reality by making itself its own subject. It separates, isolates, divides. It is very simply a matter of dividing in order to reign. But to be truly effective, it must do so invisibly and painlessly. That is why the concept of autonomy is essential.

The advantage is immediately apparent: when the links between one activity and the rest are cut, when they are *detached*, it looks as if that activity has been freed. It is lulled to sleep with euphoria. At the same time, those who wish to prod it awake find themselves cornered in a contradiction: to liberate it they want to reattach it, they come to restrain it once more even though they had found it so hard to detach it and free it of its shackles. So much so that, in the end, anyone who fights for freedom is inevitably seen as a *delinquent*. And that is when culture becomes completely oppressive and implacable: there is no excuse for a crime against freedom.”⁴⁸

Just as the perpetrators of the 1965 polyptych had represented themselves as murderers to thwart the illusion of Duchamp as a sort of liberator, and to show that in fact it was itself a bearer of death, four years later Aillaud published the mechanism that links the individualist conception of autonomy with the legitimization of oppression. It is precisely because freedom, culture and creation are often the goals of progressiveness that the idealised vision of them must be denounced:

“The universality of culture is a delusion, [...] there are no grounds for a ‘supratemporal’ reconciliation – that of ideas and art – to exist disconnected from the inequalities and conditionings in the material world of work.”⁴⁹

Unlike Guy Debord, whose critical views were then somewhat similar, Gilles Aillaud never claimed that artists’ works and thought had become ineffective. Art is capable of being revolutionary provided it is linked with a political analysis, that it does not delude itself about its own power, that it maintains a link with the people, living things and objects as they really are. The underlying precept of this link demands that we halt here for a moment. Gilles Aillaud never supposed that the things art focuses on might already be given, visible or known independently of art itself. On the contrary, art is necessary because it contributes to their actualisation:

“Showing or displaying something does not mean that something is represented. It means convoking the objective reality in which each thing has a particular place and no other, a place that is not interchangeable but not necessarily determined, a place that needs to be determined.”⁵⁰

Painting never refers purely to a situation that has already been seen. Instead of relating to a presumed accessible reality, it projects a reality established by the analysis and attention applied to the very act of seeing and thinking. The distinction is all the more difficult to discern in the case of Gilles Aillaud, in which the figuration suggests it is used to give an image of things. But once one looks beyond the image plane, the distinction becomes clearer. By dint of its own reality, the painting creates links with the things that are not restricted simply to the most immediate links. It intensifies, multiplies and densifies these relationships. Figuration and non-figuration are in no way differentiated on this plane, in which the only interest is to know whether or not reality is produced. However, the actualisation itself cannot be evaluated in objective terms: it depends as much on the painting as on the historic moment and the singularity with which it is viewed.

In spring 1969, following the poor attendance and detraction of the *Salle rouge*, the Salon committee decided that they had to take a yet harder political line. Rather than consider the international situation, it was necessary to focus on living conditions in France. The quest for greater consistency between theory and practice inspired the committee members to make far-reaching transformations. As a legacy of the bourgeois culture of the 18th and 19th centuries, the term “Salon” to signify an exhibition was jettisoned in favour of a title that alluded to its revolutionary nature: *Police et culture*. The age limit, prize, panel and catalogue were all done away with. No longer was the term “*œuvre*” used but “*travail*”. The paintings were all to have the same dimensions (2 × 2 m). Anybody could exhibit provided they could defend their premise. The show itself was downplayed and greater importance placed on the preparatory meetings and the *Bulletin*, which became the nub of the activities. Three of the seven issues were published between March and June 1969.

In issue no. 4, published in May 1969, the committee stated it was promoting “Marxist ideas”. Among its various battlegrounds, the front it had been defending since December 1968 was marked by growing hostility to the Communist Party, resulting in several artists having to make

a choice. The canvas that Gilles Aillaud presented in the exhibition *Police et culture* in July 1969 is representative of this development.

La Datcha

Executed with Eduardo Arroyo, Francis Biras, Lucio Fanti, Fabio Rieti and Nicky Rieti, *La Datcha* attempts to “show how the bourgeoisie keeps intellectuals dependent on them by indulging them, and how these intellectuals accept these favours”.⁵¹ Like the polyptych of 1965, the painting attacks tutelary figures: not the avant-garde artists accused of being pseudo-revolutionaries but philosophers who actually inspired the youthful protesters of May 68, beginning with Gilles Aillaud himself. The painting was accompanied by a new lampoonist handout and a small plaque fixed on the frame: “*Louis Althusser hésitant à entrer dans la datcha Tristes Miels de Claude Lévi-Strauss où sont réunis Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault et Roland Barthes au moment où la radio annonce que les ouvriers et les étudiants ont décidé d’abandonner joyeusement leur passé.*”⁵²

Behind the plate glass window, the twilight combines the romantic cliché of sunset with the symbol of decline. The “*pensée sauvage*” (wild pansy) that illustrated Lévi-Strauss’s 1962 book of the same name⁵³ sits beneath a bell-jar. The representations of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel Foucault in armchairs reflect their institutional position. Jacques Lacan’s obscurity appears foiled by the fact that he is seen clearly before the curtain, beside the mask. Roland Barthes is seen as he enters the scene to join the others, serving them coffee or vodka. However, the primary target is Louis Althusser. For the moment he remains in the shadows, books – undoubtedly by Marx – in hand. He stands a chance to be heard but only provided he remains outside this “secondary and permanent residence where, in a particularly refined setting, the bountifulness of munificent nature encourages the creation of structures”.⁵⁴

By making a return to the philosophy of Marx in the first half of the 1960s, Louis Althusser had helped to preserve the legitimacy of the PCF during the post-Stalin era. From 1966, some of his pupils at the École normale supérieure began nonetheless to move away from this standpoint and take up a Maoist stance. In July 1969, Jacques Rancière publicly described Althusser’s position as “revisionist” (by which he meant disloyal to Marx and a traitor to the revolutionary cause) by demonstrating the excessive effectiveness he attributed to the theory, his abandonment of the concept

of class struggle, his shift towards a neo-Durkheimian sociology, his denial of the dominance implied in the teacher-pupil relationship, and his exploitation of science to restore the authority challenged by the student movement.⁵⁵

By presenting the disillusion aroused by the reaction of Structuralist philosophers to May 68, like inviting Althusser to join the young and the proletariat in their struggle, Gilles Aillaud militated to restore the political function to Marx's thought:

"In practice, Marx's works remain first and foremost, and in spite of efforts made, what Marx himself wanted them to be, a weapon in the hands of the working class."⁵⁶

He continued his analysis of the prevailing ideology by criticising in particular the way in which art is taught in schools. The position of the artist is rendered harmless by the views that too easily bestow freedom and power upon him. The groundwork for this neutralisation is laid by a conception that reduces reality to visible appearances, to previously cut-out elements that the artist can play with as he likes:

"What must a school teach an artist to prepare him for the role of a free man?

His relationship with reality has to be 'unrealized' so as to enable him to believe that everything must and can come from his mind. To do that he must be inculcated with a certain idea of what reality is, and that idea depends on a certain *prior treatment of reality*.

Because they are revealed in their appearance, all things will be reduced through abstraction to what is purely visible in them, that is to say their form. Reality will thus become material, a vocabulary, if you will, or a repertoire of formal elements that only a creative mind will be able to arrange. In short, the artist reconstructs the world like a god.

It is immediately understood that if he only has available to him what he is able to draw out of himself, he stands little chance of threatening the established order."⁵⁷

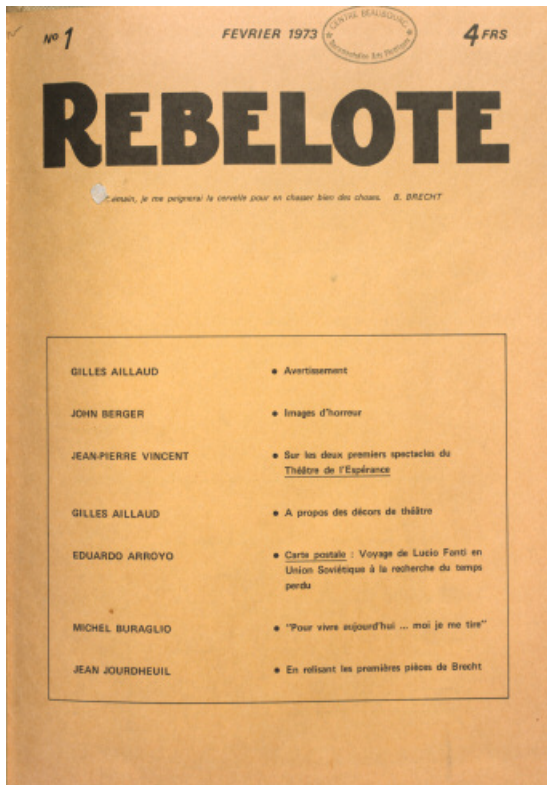
Aillaud's criticisms were not directed only at the capitalist system but, more generally, at any intellectual bearing that remains purely external, that turns in on itself, and which denies the very terms of reality, its pres-

ence, production and implications. It was for this reason that the accusation levelled at the heirs of Surrealism and the Structuralist philosophers had also to be applied to the group directing the reviews *Tel Quel* and *Peinture Cahiers théoriques*. Inasmuch as it places the self-enclosurement of the text and any signifier at the start of a poem or painting, the standpoint of Philippe Sollers, Marcelin Pleynet, Louis Cane and Marc Devade was diametrically opposed to that of Gilles Aillaud. The fact that they made reference to Mao did nothing to bring them closer. As Daniel Lindenberg wrote in an anonymous article in the *Bulletin*, the verbiage of *Tel Quel* was no more than “the revival of stale, reactionary and mystical ideas dressed up in ultra-modern ‘scientific’ garb, tending to prove that artistic practice occurs in a different world from ‘vulgar’ social practice”.⁵⁸

The intransigence of the outlooks ended up dividing the members of the Jeune Peinture. The tensions were not new but they were forcefully heightened by the repression exerted by the police on the leftist movements, the waning of revolutionary expectations, and the decision taken by the Ville de Paris to no longer host the Salon at the musée d’Art moderne but in the basement of the pavillon des Halles before it was demolished. The artists found themselves splintered by a fracture similar to the one in 1964, between those for whom “we should only have written presentations of the paintings”, and those for whom “we should only have written leaflets”.⁵⁹ The *Bulletin* ceased to appear after the publication of issue 7 in November 1971. Gilles Aillaud had left Jeune Peinture at the start of 1970. With friends who were still attempting to reconcile the two orientations, he created a new journal in 1973. Pierre Buraglio suggested it should be called *Rebelote*.

Rebelote

In the four issues of *Rebelote* that appeared until February 1974, Gilles Aillaud endeavoured to get away from the dogmatism with which the Salon de la Jeune Peinture had ended up while continuing to defend the same line he had taken in earlier articles. In the editorial of the first issue (ill. 7), he once again criticised the “intense antisocial activity we see in process pretty much everywhere in the so-called ‘sciences humaines’, which fascinate artists, who are always keen on new ideas”.⁶⁰ The offence caused by the intellectuals remained the proliferation of their own dis-



7 *Rebelote*, cover of issue no. 1, February 1973 © Bibliothèque Kandinsky, MNAM/CCI, Centre Pompidou, cote P 555.

courses. Thanks to his education, Gilles Aillaud was better protected against being fascinated. He undertook not to put forward general views and essentially to discuss “professional” issues. The article that he wrote for the first issue was thus devoted to the painting of theatre sets, which would become one of his main activities for some thirty years. Even if it was much less characterised by revolutionary pipe dreams, this shift towards a truly collective art can be compared with the decision to work in a factory taken by certain Maoists, of which Pierre Buraglio was one. Like all works of art, theatre décor must not be reduced to an “image” but become “like a thing”. In other words, the spectator should not be kept in a “waking dream” but, on the contrary, should be “awoken”.⁶¹

Gilles Aillaud’s published writings after the decade 1965–74 do not harbour either the tone or concepts typical of activism, but his evolution in the direction of theatrical decors, poetry, playwriting and landscape painting did not signify a lessening of interest in politics. Rather than reflecting a presumed depoliticisation, his progression demonstrates the

adaptation that the political conscience was, and still is, obliged to make following the waning of Marxist culture. Indeed, he engaged in another form of communism on his reading of the pre-Socratic philosophers, to whom he dedicated a play:

“The real ‘common’ is to be found in man’s relationship with the divine. It is in their singular relationship with god that two men can share something in common, not through what they have in common in their weaknesses.”⁶²

The common could still have a historic chance, but only if it is envisaged in its strength. It has its roots in our relation with the Other. “Only the Other is strong.”⁶³ As a principle, the transcendence entailed in any form of otherness takes the form of a god. Aillaud did not in any way withdraw into religion or archaism. His views on the divine were conditioned by Heraclitus’s unity of opposites and Spinoza’s discourse on Nature. His observations drew only on relationships, conflictual attachments, the living. The focus of his painting remained the revelation of the non-artistic configuration of reality, concealed as it is in brutal, inhuman light.

In his last play, *Le Masque de Robespierre* (1996), Gilles Aillaud put a great deal of himself into the character of the revolutionary leader, as he battles with the “atheists” who only believe “in the imbecility of the measuring device”.⁶⁴ However, he expected no help from a spontaneity of divine source:

“It’s all over for this God worshipped by imbecilic, sanctimonious devotees. This saviour, who has never saved anyone, is the worst of deceptions. Man has to change, but this is very possible; he only has to understand that he is of the same stuff as his neighbour. The problem is not that of denying that life, as you were just saying, develops full of contradictions, but of re-establishing equality between equals, of freeing men born to be free.”⁶⁵

Equality and fraternity between individuals have their roots in the awareness of individual solitude:

“That is the ceremony of the supreme Being: man is alone with himself, that is to say he is alone even in the presence of everybody else,

because they're all alike even if no individual resembles his neighbour. They gather together, like those colonies of birds in the Arctic that find their young among the stones without difficulty."⁶⁶

All attachment with otherness has its roots in human solitude. At the other end of the selfhood dimension lies the equal of the self – whether human, divine, animal or object – which, though on one level is always 'unequal' on account of its otherness, is also radically similar in view of its relational status. On this axis of egalitarianism where the finite exists, every being is animal, "including the minerals". Everything is a young lion blending in among the rocks. If he makes this axis his horizon, the individual becomes transformed and able to develop his own power. It is as an instrument of a similar extension or transformation that art effects its political action. Before "returning to oblivion", its action, small as it may be, is to "have revealed, in its splendour, a glimpse of what man might be".⁶⁷

Translated from the French
by Timothy Stroud

- 1 Aristotle, *On Plants*, I, 1, 815a10. In Aristotle, *Minor Works*, Vol. XIV, Loeb Classical Library, trans. W.S. Hett, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1936, p. 143.
- 2 It was subsequently shown at the musée Estrine de Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, then at the FRAC Auvergne in Clermont-Ferrand. See Gilles Aillaud (1928-2005), exh. cat., Rennes, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Clermont-Ferrand, Somogy Éditions d'art, 2015.
- 3 Gilles Aillaud, *Bulletin d'information du Salon de la Jeune Peinture*, n° 1, June 1965, p. 1. Between 1965 and 1969, the seven issues of the bulletin bore three rather similar titles whose differences nonetheless reflected important developments: the *Bulletin d'information du Salon de la Jeune Peinture* (no. 1) still had an auxiliary status; *Le Bulletin du Salon de la Jeune Peinture* (no. 2) was a fully independent publication; *Le Bulletin de la Jeune Peinture* (nos. 3-7) indicated the growing importance of the painters' collective and the obsolescence of the notion of the Salon. Even so, the title will henceforth be shortened to the *Bulletin*.
- 4 Gilles Aillaud, "Les raisons de continuer notre action", in *Bulletin* n° 3, March 1969, p. 3.
- 5 Gilles Aillaud, "Police et culture", *Bulletin* n° 4, May 1969, p. 4.
- 6 Laurent Brunet, interview with Gilles Aillaud, *Lisières*, n° 1, 1998, p. 11.
- 7 Jean-Jacques Lévêque, *Arts*, 15 January 1964, quoted by Francis Parent and Raymond Perrot, *Le Salon de la Jeune Peinture – Une histoire, 1950-1983*, Montreuil, Jeune Peinture, 1983, p. 35.
- 8 Ibid. (own translation), p. 37.
- 9 Ibid., p. 40.
- 10 Publishing the financial results was itself a political act. The people involved in the organisation of the Salon were made identifiable by their professions ("attendants", "saleswoman"), likewise the materials and investments necessary ("supplies", "printing", "advertising", etc.).
- 11 See Parent and Perrot, 1983 (note 7), p. 55.
- 12 *Bulletin* n° 2, December 1968, p. 2.
- 13 Editorial of the Salon de la Jeune Peinture of 1965, quoted in Parent and Perrot, 1983 (note 7), p. 48.
- 14 *Bulletin* n° 2, December 1968, p. 2.
- 15 In point of fact, they could not be included in the 1966 Salon.
- 16 *Bulletin* n° 1, June 1965.
- 17 The three painters were the only ones to sign the polyptych, but Biras, Riéti and Fromanger also contributed to it. The act of painting collectively signified a refutation of individualism and the value placed on style. The paintings were not signed on the front of the canvas but the back.
- 18 See Antje Kramer-Mallordy, "Vivre ou laisser mourir l'histoire. Les stratégies historiques de la Figuration narrative", *OwnReality* (24), 2016, online: <http://www.perspectivia.net/publikationen/ownreality/24/kramer-mallordy-fr> (November 2016).
- 19 Paul Nizan, *Les Chiens de garde*, epigraph of the *Bulletin* n° 3, March 1969, p. 1.
- 20 "Vivre et laisser mourir ou la Fin tragique de Marcel Duchamp" (1965). Like most of the critical essays written by Gilles Aillaud, this one is included in the compilation organised by Pierre Buraglio: Gilles Aillaud, *Écrits, 1965-1983*, Valence, Éd. 127, 1987, p. 8.
- 21 Ibid., p. 9.
- 22 Even if in a radically individualist manner, Duchamp also claimed that the real world had precedence over art: "I like living, breathing, better than working. I don't think that the work I've done can have any social importance in the future. Therefore, if you wish, my art would be that of living; each second, each breath is a work which is inscribed nowhere, which is neither visual nor cerebral" (see Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett, [London, Thames and Hudson, 1971], p. 72). Without claiming an immediate transformation of society, this relation with existence exercised a force that retrospectively no longer seems so directly opposed to the design of Gilles Aillaud – provided that the emphasis is placed on life rather than art.
- 23 Pierre Cabanne, 2014 (note 22), p. 134.
- 24 Ibid., p. 132-133. See Cécile Debray, "Donner davantage à penser. *Vivre et laisser mourir ou la Fin tragique de Marcel Duchamp*", in Didier Ottinger (ed.), *Gilles Aillaud. La jungle des villes*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2001.
- 25 Pierre Restany, "Les yéyés ont jeté le masque", *Planète*, n° 26, January-February 1966, see Antje Kramer-Mallordy, 2016 (note 18), p. 8.
- 26 Gérard Gassiot-Talabot, "Table ronde sur les Malassis", catalogue Galleria Ciak, Rome,

- March 1973, quoted in Parent and Perrot, 1983 (note 7), p. 46.
- 27 "Le 'troisième degré' de la peinture", BNF, cote RES G-Z-328 (10).
 - 28 Ibid.
 - 29 Leaflet of 21 May, quoted in the *Cahiers de mai*, n° 2, 1-15 July 1968, p. 15.
 - 30 *Cahiers de mai*, n° 2, p. 16.
 - 31 *Bulletin* n° 2, December 1968, p. 3-4.
 - 32 *Bulletin* n° 5, June 1969, p. 10.
 - 33 *Bulletin* n° 2, December 1968, p. 3.
 - 34 Gilles Aillaud, "Les raisons de continuer notre action", *Bulletin* n° 3, March 1969, p. 2.
 - 35 Ibid., p. 3.
 - 36 In an interview with Patrick d'Elme, the painter Gérard Tisserand analysed it in retrospect: "The adoption of Marxist-Leninist arguments cut us off from everybody, in particular the PC. We were never able to show the 'Salle rouge' in communist municipalities except at Bagnolet because the PC could not do otherwise, seeing that we three lived in the area (it was moreover organised so that there was nobody at the preview). So we were left with a pile of paintings on Vietnam that we couldn't show anywhere. Finally, the ARC accepted them, which meant that Gaudibert, its director, had his funds reduced by two million because the Ville de Paris was not at all happy" (quoted in Parent & Perrot, 1983 (note 7), p. 93).
 - 37 Richard Crevier, "Entretien avec Gilles Aillaud", *Révolution*, 11 May 1980, p. 60.
 - 38 This is demonstrated in particular by his preface to the catalogue of the exhibition *ÉCRANS* by the abstract painter Pierre Buraglio, held at ARC 2 in 1976.
 - 39 Gilles Aillaud, "Présentation", *Rebelote*, n° 2, April 1973, n.p.
 - 40 Mao Zedong, "The Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People" (27 February 1957), *Quotations from President Mao Tse-Tung*, Beijing, PLA General Political Department, 1967, p. 336.
 - 41 "Éléments d'étude sur le réalisme socialiste", *Bulletin* n° 3, March 1969, p. 4.
 - 42 Ibid., p. 7.
 - 43 *Bulletin* n° 2, December 1968, p. 4.
 - 44 See Parent and Perrot, 1983 (note 7), p. 58 and p. 62.
 - 45 Gilles Aillaud, "Entretien avec Jean Clair", *Chroniques de l'art vivant*, n° 37, 1973, p. 8.
 - 46 Gilles Aillaud, "Présentation", *Rebelote*, April 1973, n.p.
 - 47 André Malraux, "Allocution prononcée à New York le 15 mai 1962", taken from *La Politique, la Culture*, Paris, Gallimard, Folio Essais, 1996, p. 294.
 - 48 Gilles Aillaud, "Les raisons de continuer notre action", *Bulletin* n° 3, March 1969, p. 3.
 - 49 Gilles Aillaud, "Police et culture", *Bulletin* n° 4, May 1969, p. 3.
 - 50 Gilles Aillaud, "Préface du catalogue de l'exposition de Pierre Buraglio *ÉCRANS*, ARC 2" (musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1976), reprinted in Gilles Aillaud, 1987 (note 18), p. 41-42.
 - 51 "Indications de travail", *Bulletin* n° 4, May 1969, p. 6.
 - 52 "Louis Althusser hesitating to enter Claude Lévi-Strauss's dacha, Tristes Miels, where Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes are gathered at the moment the radio announces that the workers and students have joyfully decided to abandon their past".
 - 53 Published in English as *The Savage Mind*, trans. anon., Chicago, Univ. of Illinois, 1966.
 - 54 "La datcha", *Bulletin* n° 5, June 1969, p. 15.
 - 55 See Jacques Rancière, "Sur la théorie de l'idéologie politique d'Althusser", reprinted in *La Leçon d'Althusser* [1974], Paris, La Fabrique, 2011, p. 213 f.
 - 56 Gilles Aillaud, "Quelques éclaircissements", *Bulletin* n° 5, June 1969, p. 2.
 - 57 Gilles Aillaud, "Police et culture", *Bulletin* n° 4, May 1969, p. 3-4.
 - 58 "Mise au point : pourquoi nous combattons *Tel Quel*", *Bulletin* n° 3, March 1969, p. 8.
 - 59 Gilles Aillaud, "Avertissement", *Rebelote*, n° 1, February 1973, n.p.
 - 60 Ibid.
 - 61 Ibid.
 - 62 Gilles Aillaud, *La Medesima Strada*, Strasbourg, Éditions de la Phocide, 2009, p. 45.
 - 63 Gilles Aillaud, *Dans le bleu foncé du matin*, Paris, Christian Bourgois, 1987, p. 116.
 - 64 Gilles Aillaud, *Le Masque de Robespierre*, Paris, Christian Bourgois, 1996, p. 16.
 - 65 Ibid., p. 27.
 - 66 Ibid., p. 15.
 - 67 Ibid., p. 76.