

Raymond Hains

Provocative French artist who celebrated the vibrancy of everyday objects

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The French artist Raymond Hains, who has died aged 78, was a founder of the Nouveau Réalisme movement in the early 1960s. Anything but a realist in the conventional sense, he was an affichiste, creating vibrant, provocative collages from layers of torn posters.

Although less celebrated than his flamboyant comrade Yves Klein, he anticipated the appropriation of mass media by Pop artists in Britain and America, and exhibited with such international figures as Christo, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.

Born in the Breton town of St-Brieuc, Hains joined the art school at nearby Rennes when he was 18. While studying sculpture, he was, in fact, far more interested in his Kodak camera, which he used to record the devastation of Dinard towards the end of the war. Soon afterwards he left for Paris, where, in October 1945, he began his apprenticeship with Emmanuel Sougez, a photographer for the magazine France Illustration.

Much of his early work used procedures adapted from prewar Dada and surrealism: hypnagogic abstract photographs (often made with distorting mirrors) and short movies recording the walks around Paris on which he collected strips of posters for his collages.

As early as 1949, Hains was associated with Jacques de la Villeglé, whom he had met as a student in Rennes. Sometimes the pair gave their works overtly political titles, as in Hains's Peace in Algeria (1956), shown at Colette Allendy's gallery in Paris, in the exhibition Law of 29 July 1881 - a reference to an infamous decree that restricted press freedom during the French third republic. Often the names were stupefyingly blank: their first collaboration, for example, was simply called M.

The two saw themselves as challenging the subjectivity and self-indulgence of the American action painters Jackson Pollock and Willem De Kooning, as well as their French equivalents in the Art Informel movement. Indeed, Hains once called himself an "inaction painter", resolutely opposed to the "emptiness" of abstract expressionism.

Some of his collages recall the textures and patterns of his supposed artistic foes. In 1957, the critic Edmond Humeau described them as having a "hit and run lyricism", and a few were even entitled Nymphéas (Water Lilies), in ironic homage to Monet's most sensual paintings. Generally, the fragments of posters are extremely impersonal, found on the streets rather than created in the studio - as Hains put it: "My works existed before me, but nobody had seen them, because they were blindingly obvious."

Some commentators have tried to relate Hains's ideas to the concept of the "death of the author" proposed by the post-structuralist thinker Roland Barthes. However, it would be more accurate to link affichisme with the surrealist aim of raising everyday life to a higher reality. According to Villeglé, Hains sought to transform the mundane into art: "The picture should not be considered as a world in itself, but the world itself should be seen as a picture."

In their opposition to abstract painting, Hains and Villeglé were united with contemporaries in France and Italy - especially with the collagist Mimmo Rotella, who also went around ripping billboards - and in October 1960 they participated in the first of several Nouveau Réaliste exhibitions, organised at the Apollinaire gallery, Milan, by the critic Pierre Restany. In 1962, another display of New Realism, at the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, featured local artists, including Jim Dine, Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg.

Just as the Americans' sculptures celebrated the beauty of household tools, cans of soup and the Danish pastry, Hains glorified the matchbox in monumental painted reliefs. These were displayed in 1965 at the Parisian gallery of Iris Clert, partly as a reference to the dealer's nickname, "la brune incendiaire". She added to the joke by employing firemen to guard the exhibition.

Visual and verbal gags remained key components of Hains's works during the 1970s and 80s. Indeed, he relished the fact that the French title for his poster-clad hoardings - la palissade - puns with the word for truism. Similar humour lay behind Well Read, Badly Read or the Code of the Little Butter Biscuit LU, a 1983 painting based on the pattern formed by a computerised bar code: here the brand name is also the past participle of the verb "to read".

In his later years Hains continued to develop the affichiste techniques that had become his trademark. At the 1997 Kassel Documenta exhibition, he even returned his lacerated posters to their original urban setting by festooning them along the Treppenstrasse underpass. Elsewhere he constructed quirky virtual collages out of images from the world wide web. His Macintoshages of 1999 combined prints and paintings of Archduchess Margaret of Austria, 16th-century regent of the Netherlands, with photographs of street signs and a parrot, presented as if displayed on a screen. Although lacking in historical rigour, they vividly capture the banal profusion of the internet.

For all his innovations, Hains was most happy roaming around Paris with a camera. Towards the end of his life, he produced spectacular photographs recording a city transfigured by its ephemera - Michelin men gesturing from scaffolds on the Avenue de l'Opéra, or the courtyard of the Louvre choked with hosepipes. A charismatic, sociable yet highly private man, he divided his last 30 years between Nice and Paris.

· Raymond Hains, artist, born November 9 1926; died October 28 2005