

FEBRUARY 2006

## Salons de Refuse

HANNAH FELDMAN ON RAYMOND HAINS AND ARMAN

LAST FALL, WITHIN A WEEK and across an ocean, the careers of two of the last living artists associated with what Pierre Restany in 1960 christened "*le Nouveau Réalisme*" came to an abrupt halt. Cancer claimed the seventy-six-year-old French-American sculptor Arman in New York on October 22, and self-proclaimed "citizen of the world" Raymond Hains died in Paris on October 28 at age seventy-eight. That the former's death was mourned as the loss of a "tireless creator" by French President Jacques Chirac and the latter's passing was lamented by the venerable office of the minister of culture not only suggests the artists' centrality to French art after World War II, but perhaps also delineates the limits of their work's critical impact on the institutions of postwar society.

Both artists' practices took shape in the turmoil of the late '40s. Arman, an only child born Armand Pierre Fernández to a family of Spanish-Maghrebi descent, came from Nice, where he and his parents, who ran an antiques shop, experienced hardship and hunger during the Italian and German occupations. A rebellious student, he quit the Ecole Nationale d'Art Décoratif in 1949. Hains was also born to a shopkeeping family, in the Breton town of Saint-Brieuc, where the difficulties of Nazi occupation were matched only by the destruction endured during the Allied campaigns of 1944. He too went to art school and he too quit. But beyond these chronological and circumstantial ties, Arman and Hains owed the intertwining of their reputations to their affiliation with Yves Klein, Restany, and the group of young, contentious artists the latter duo anchored. It was Klein who brought them together, and Restany who, in his activities as a curator and critic, proclaimed their aesthetic union.



Left: Arman with *Home Sweet Home*, Paris, 1960. Photo: Shunk-Kender. Right: Raymond Hains, Paris, ca. 1960. Photo: Harry Shunk.

Arman met Klein first, while studying judo in Nice in 1947. Both men were interested in astrology, Buddhism, and Rosicrucianism; they formed a fast alliance and, with painter Claude Pascal, became the Triangle Group in 1949. (Their most salient contribution was arguably their pledge to follow Vincent van Gogh in signing their paintings with only their first names, thus setting the stage for Armand to become Arman in 1958, when printers for Iris Clert's gallery omitted the *d* and the artist chose to celebrate the mistake as a sign of his transgressive nature.) In 1956, at his first solo show at Galerie du Haut-Pavé in Paris, the Surrealist- and de Staël-inspired abstractions Arman had been working on since 1953 failed to inspire critics. But his more experimental "*Cachets*," 1955–57, pieces of paper inked by a rubber stamp, are said to have caught the eye of the young Restany, who encouraged Arman to pursue this more object-oriented approach. Two years later, the artist made his first "*Allure d'objets*," 1958–60, paintings in which found items, like pearls, were used instead of brushes, and paved the way for the object appropriation that would come to define Nouveau Réalisme.

Material culture, and the society that produces it, motivated Hains's early work as well. In 1945, after abandoning art school in Rennes, the artist went to Paris, where he apprenticed with Emmanuel Sougez, a staff photographer for *France Illustration*. As a photographic ingenue, Hains manipulated the lens to create abstract, nonmimetic compositions that he called "new realities." These experiments with the nature of perception would become Hains's principal concern for the next sixty-odd years. During this time he invented not only a resolutely site-specific genre of production, but also an entire world conjured from the simultaneously expanding and collapsing realms of association invoked by the slippage he generated among the signifiers, traditions, and histories of different people, places, and products. Within this world Hains declared himself minister of his own culture.

The first Nouveau Réaliste exhibition took place in 1960 at Milan's Galleria Apollinaire, but it was 1961's "*A 40° au-dessus de dada*" (40° Above Dada) at Galerie J that officially introduced what Restany would call the "collective singularity of the group" to the Parisian art world. By adorning the exhibition invitation with his own pistol-brandishing likeness, Restany intended to announce an offensive against both the Dada past and the domination of European galleries by American artists. His bombastic gesture laid the groundwork for both the aggressively interventionist role of the critic/curator as it has come to be celebrated today and the critical expectation that would forever link these young artists to their Dada predecessors. However, according to Arman, "40° Above Dada" was more retrospective than launch, since, in his estimation, the Nouveaux Réalistes were already a thing of the past by 1961. As he would later contend, the union that brought him, Klein, Hains, Restany, François Dufrène, Jacques de la Villeglé, Martial Raysse, Daniel Spoerri, and Jean Tinguely together by signed declaration on October

# Galerie Max Hetzler

Artforum

Feldmann, Hannah: *Salons de Refuse*

February 2002

27, 1960, was undone in twenty minutes, when Hains and Klein called it null and void, having come to blows over Hains's reservations about the "realism" of Raysse's work and his disparagement of Klein's anthropometries.

While it is difficult to imagine the mild-mannered Hains engaging in a fistfight, it is certain that as early as 1963 he was busy distancing himself from these artists as well as the curatorial efforts of their leader. All the same, whether the group lasted twenty minutes or two years, its implications for the reception of Hains's and Arman's varied production cannot be overestimated. Hains's oeuvre is still—and perhaps mistakenly—understood through the "new perceptive approaches to the real" that Restany articulated as the organizing principle of the Nouveau Réalistes' appropriation of "sociological" objects from urban space. And Arman's legendary 1960 exhibition "*Le Plein*" (Full Up), in which the artist responded to Klein's "*Le Vide*" (The Void) of the year before by filling Clerf's entire gallery with garbage, often serves as a textbook illustration of Restany's Nouveau Réaliste dictum. Indeed, few works have ever brought modernity's escalating waste into such close cohabitation with the institutional space of art.

For his part Hains remains best known for the accumulations of street posters that he, along with Villeglé, claimed to have invented as the art form "*décollage*" in the late '40s, and which had already served to fuel Restany's aesthetic formulation long before he articulated it as "new." But discussion of this aspect of his practice is evolving even now. In recent years, as the American(ized) discipline of post-1945 art history has finally begun to engage with the implications of France's colonial exploits, a 1961 exhibition of these posters at Galerie J titled "*La France déchirée*" (Ripped-Up France) has occasioned a level of interest and debate not yet directed at Hains's other production. This show displayed *décollage* created from political signage torn from the walls and billboards of Paris's streets throughout the turbulent decade of the '50s, when France was battling to maintain its North African colonies. Years before Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, in his writing on Arman and Klein, painstakingly defined the discursive terrain within which this neo-avant-garde operated, critics in the early '60s (like some today) could not see the institutional frame that delimited and animated Hains's *décollage* as anything other than either a celebration of random happenstance or a refusal to comment on the political situation that he highlighted without inflection.

This misunderstanding may have been partially attributable to Hains's steadfast refusal to tell viewers how the exhibition should be read. Repeatedly declining the opportunity to pronounce his own political indictments, Hains preferred the more nuanced strategy of allowing the chains of associations embedded in his work to engage the viewer in the process of establishing meaning. As Jean-Max Colard astutely observed in these pages in December 2001, Hains's work is nothing if not "nonlinear, made up of digressions, missed appointments, lateral moves, and temporary disappearances." His shying away from the limelight, however, did not extend to an unwillingness to critique it. At Documenta X in 1997, his carnivalesque parading of a giant Iris Clerf puppet through the streets of Kassel as a "messenger of the arts" evoked the much less visible but equally viable aesthetic traditions of the small French village of Cassel, where similar figures are paraded through the streets during festivals. Thus one of the "giants" of the Parisian art world in the '60s became a link to the kinds of local cultures obscured in the media and to the tourist frenzy created by such high-profile events. Likewise, Hains maintained his distance from some of the more glaring temptations of the art world, including that of resorting to a single, legible, and repeatable practice. For Hains, the artist who succumbed to such a disastrous fate became an emblem of his work, a "personified abstraction." It was in an attempt to outrun his own ossification that he created what was perhaps his most prophetic critique of the increasingly corporate, celebrity-oriented culture of the art world. For a 1965 exhibition at Clerf's gallery, he invented and copyrighted the artists Seita and Saffa, whose names were taken from the initials of the French and Italian state-owned tobacco companies, respectively. To this fictional pair Hains attributed a body of work that included giant matchbooks, each filled with matches in bright colors reminiscent of, for example, the blue that Klein had copyrighted as his own. The immediate object of Hains's critique, Nouveau Réalisme's codification as style, obscured the degree to which this exhibition also questioned the larger players: entrepreneurial artists, deep-pocketed corporations, and opportunistic galleries.

It is likely that a similar constellation of critical interests led Arman to preserve copious quantities of commodity-refuse in such early accumulations as the "*Poubelles*" (Trash Cans), 1959–70, or in his less arbitrary but equally degraded hoardings of objects like the shoes that make up *Madison Avenue*, 1962. Unfortunately, especially after Arman's naturalization as a US citizen in 1973, such gestures were increasingly aestheticized in the glossier form that most Americans associate with his work. The critical possibilities that his early accumulations presented for thinking about "late" capitalism's obsessive concern with filling space and manipulating time were stifled in favor of an uncritical celebration of production that corresponds to the agenda of commodity culture. The French carmaker Renault was only too happy to supply Arman with the wrecked cars he needed to construct massive automobile sculptures from the late '60s through the mid-'80s. Such collaboration with industry, now the calling card of many a contemporary artist, neutralized Arman's focus on its waste, situating him as a primary beneficiary of a phenomenon he claimed to critique.

The dialectical implications of production and destruction were by no means unknown to Arman, who had been indulging audiences since 1961 with violent displays of *cholère* as he smashed or burned an array of objects. Indeed, his later forays into official state art, as represented by the massive stack of tanks he mobilized for *Hope for Peace*, 1995, a sculpture commemorating the creation of the Lebanese Army, further demonstrate his preference for prolonged meditation on destruction at the expense of other, perhaps more fecund lines of inquiry. The memorialist impulse of *Hope for Peace* seems, if not quite complicit with the destructiveness implied by its very materials, then perhaps blind to the collusion of interests that has married capitalist production and military violence, and which Arman witnessed firsthand as a marine during the First Indochina War. Of this experience, he lamented, "I was involved in a lot of bombing, a lot of terrorism," yet he also noted, "It's very strange—because at the same time in this very violent life—sometimes it was our duty to bomb Communists, people, to machine gun. I was very good at that, I was gifted for things like that." From our present juncture at the crossroads of yet more imperial war, the legacy of Hains and Arman speaks equivocally to us. Perhaps preserving remnants of the past and drawing them into new temporal associations is all that is necessary for instructive dialogue; perhaps not. What is clear is that the divergent practices represented by these two artists have proven prescient in ways that Restany, their would-be interlocutor, could never have anticipated.

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