

## IT'S ONLY ROCK'N'ROLL - BUT I LIKE IT -

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I took leave – in writing – of Marc Rebollo's work in 2000 with Glycérol and Éthanol. Back then he was painting molecules, the image of the molecule used to execute the painting together with, above or below, the name of the molecule displayed in gleaming and affectless paint where the mise-en-abyme would produce a distanced literalness – at the time I'd compared him to Russian avant-gardes and to Ed Ruscha. Then came other series, pixelated shapes, patchworks or fabrics with captions – nearly always with captions –, leaking letters, witty logotypes, postcard collages under multicolor checkerboards and the switch from lacquer to gouache and acrylic with the return of surface effects – I write return because surface effects had already featured in the oil paintings from the early 90s and the distaste towards an overly matter-oriented and expressionist kind of rhetoric had led him, subsequently, to more restraint. And I'm to deal with all of this, fourteen years of painting in a few pages... I give up, of course. Or rather, not totally. I shall stick to a few questions and remarks.

**QUESTION N° 1:** What is the reason for the artist's obsession with letters and captions?

**QUESTION N° 2:** Why are the captions always in English and what do the painting titles tell us?

**QUESTION N° 3:** What's the point of rock and pop in this pictorial history?

I'm sticking to this not for the joy of reducing the complexity of the practice to just a few and ultimately quite obvious elements, but because one has to dig in somewhere, even, and especially, with a crowbar and since I do not have space enough to do an in-depth tour. Please note, before continuing, that one can invert the order of questions and go from the general to the specific or from the specific to the general. It hardly matters since there is a totality facing us – the artworks – and so all of these questions are naturally intertwined.

**ANSWER N° 1** For Marc Rebollo, the caption is undoubtedly pop in origin, yet, even more so, stems from the slogan – since influences are always multiple. The caption on the paintings is of the same nature as a slogan – and not a logo. Marc Rebollo's paintings include the reality that encompasses the artist and, notably, in the vein of the avant-gardes, the world of the pictorial letter all around us – just like a Delaunay. The slogan is omnipresent – one need merely recall some vulgar highlights of the advertising world. The slogan is a major mode – and even Naomi Klein's "No Logo" can become an identity slogan. As has been grasped by Ben, Claude Lévêque, Claire Fontaine and Adel Abdessemed.

To cite what Wikipedia has to say on the matter – one must keep abreast of the times –, a slogan “appeals more to affect and mental configuration than to the intellect” and a slogan should be “poetical (which does make it free of brutality); funny; recognizable and resistant to deformations in a noisy context: short enough so that it can be constantly repeated with ease and comfort, even while shouting, and potentially writable; remarkable for its graphic design.” This definition strikes me as being fully applicable to Marc Rebollo’s artwork.

Marc Rebollo’s slogans are apparently as void of meaning as those applied by the above-mentioned artists, except that he is not asserting politics, but rather plastics – being make-believe as we all know. Marc Rebollo’s slogans are, like Morandi’s bottles or Cézanne’s apples, a means to test out a subject through painting in order to talk about painting. Or: “Choose your title”, “Beautiful, soft and gorgeous”, “Hard silver and extra heavy”, and “Never die” have a solely pictorial meaning and are by no means moral or political injunctions – conspicuously so, I hope. I dare: Marc Rebollo is a formal painter. His mode is that of forms – even if these forms are capable of pointing to the world we’re in and to its vacuity and, therefore, of speaking, incidentally, about politics.

**ANSWER N° 2** One cannot help noticing, nevertheless, that English has become the lingua franca. Yes, no question about it. Movie titles – blockbusters – are no longer even translated and, moreover, many of the superb exhibitions of contemporary art organized by topnotch curators bear English titles, quite simply because economics and the trading system compel it, but also because it’s hipper and there’s a rising fear of provinciality in Paris. And then “Total recall”, even pronounced with a French accent (total ricol) has more punch than “remémoration totale” – what a paltry language is ours, so meagerly accentuated.

The case at hand does not have to do with a trend – although trendiness is everywhere – for the captions in Marc Rebollo’s paintings often stem from words – from lyrics – from rock ‘n’ roll – I shall use this term generically for all types of Anglo-Saxon popular music deriving from the historic genre that this term designates – or from the music world in general – “standard”, “break”, “beat”, “bridge”, “choose your title”... and because English is the natural language of rock ‘n’ roll – there’s no way around it, French just doesn’t rock. And one can glimpse, in this artwork, an entire network of references: “Shiny, shiny boots of leather” harking back to Velvet Underground, “Interstellar Overdrive” to Pink Floyd, “Stay on the scene” to James Brown, etc. One can recognize or not, one will recognize some more than others and it doesn’t really matter, at the end of the day, that “Never die” refers to rock ‘n’ roll and not to James Bond. “Never die” has an impact, a resonance for all those who have gorged themselves on American or British references – from James Dean to punk to Neil Young. It is therefore a question of affects – which is the realm of the slogan – in any case, this is so at first glance, for the artist as well as the viewer. And at second glance...?

This all, at second glance, becomes quite abstract and gets drained of meaning – this is also the slogan’s realm – and one can imagine repeating “Blowin’ in the wind” like a mantra. “Never die” will no longer hark back to the King – i.e. Elvis Presley – or to Johnny Rotten, but will just be a motto, yet another motto. And here, I believe, lies

one of the subtleties of Marc Rebollo’s artwork – as opposed to artists who keep reminding us that they’re politically concerned with what they articulate. The subtlety is in the constant wavering between affect and abstraction. The slogan simultaneously resounds and gets drained of meaning. The paint speaks out – quite literally – through language (the slogan “Hey, hey, hey” that Marc Rebollo uses), while also becoming an abstraction, that which it is formally, that which language is formally, that which the slogan is formally.

One could venture another interpretation: English is the language of distance. It is another language that, in its own right, creates distance from its affects. Or, if I am not to be believed, suffice it to look at the painting titles. The painting titles are often the repetition of that which is inscribed on the painting as if distance, by the same token, necessitated tautology – what you read is what you read.

**ANSWER N° 3** Even so. It’s not quite sure there is really all that distance from Marc Rebollo’s viewpoint in his use of rock ‘n’ roll as a reference field. This happens to be already mentioned in this book, but is worth repeating: Marc Rebollo was a record dealer – and he still lights up prodigiously whenever the subject is music, where he displays a rare erudition. Furthermore, we note that he was born in 1955. The artist belongs to the first generation born with rock, after rock, to have grown up listening almost exclusively to rock, and to have shaped their visual culture by way of record jackets, some of the most famous of which were designed by Andy Warhol (Velvet Underground, Rolling Stones, John Cale...), Richard Hamilton (The Beatles), Peter Blake (The Beatles and Paul Weller), Richard Mapplethorpe (Television)... and one doesn’t have to be a big art critic to grasp that this special relationship between text and image, between the impact of a title and the explosive beauty of an illustration, is intrinsic to the vinyl record jacket – the CD format hardly makes such an impact. Suffice it to look at the jacket of the first major LP in rock history: Elvis Presley (1956).

It would obviously be a mistake to limit Marc Rebollo’s visual universe to this single reference for, as he mentions in the interview with Brigitte Ollier reprinted in this book, there is also Kurt Schwitters, René Magritte, Cy Twombly, Alighiero Boetti, Ed Ruscha, John Giorno, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Walter Swennen, Glenn Ligon... but rock often winds its way here too.

And so, rock... I’d written, above, that Marc Rebollo’s artwork does not entail any sort of moral and political injunction, but if it invokes rock, how can this be avoided? Rock is a moral and political code, as comes to light when thinking back to the Summer of Love in 1967, to Woodstock in 1969 or to late 70s punk – to bring up a few quick references. For a long time, rock went hand in hand with contestation, revolt, youth and counterculture... And yet what if rock, in Rebollo’s artwork, happened to be a little more than just a motif...

Or, as I’d written above, the slogan invokes affect and rock invokes affect. A slogan or a song title or a snippet of a rock ‘n’ roll lyric is a distillation of affects, an affect of affects, an affect squared. I can look at the paintings entitled Interstellar Overdrive without knowing anything about the Pink Floyd piece from which the title derives, but

if I'm familiar with the music of Syd Barrett's band, I can instill the painting with the psychedelic mood of the long instrumental improvisation – among the first instances of this genre of music and readers may wish to refer to Peter Whitehead's documentary *Tonite Let's All Make Love in London* where one can see excerpts of the band's light shows performed in London in 1967, to get a gist of it.

**CODA** Thus, in *Discothèque 1, 2 and 3*, Marc Rebollo pays homage much like a high school student listing his favorite bands during math class. The first painting is dedicated to British punk and post punk bands (*Television Personalities, Wire, Monochrome Set...*) and can be read like an autobiographical painting – of music from his twenties. The second is dedicated to Black American musicians (spanning Al Green, James Brown and Otis Redding). The third to White American musicians (from Johnny Cash to Karen Dalton). With these three works displaying a slightly harsh surface, coarser brushstroke and deliberately less chilly atmosphere, Marc Rebollo reduces the distance, devises less formal works, charges the paint... although it is not sure whether the superimposition of the names Phil Ochs, Tim Hardin and Dan Hicks and the Hot Licks elicits anything in the viewer's mind. Consequently, the viewer experiences the works as highly formal, and this is undoubtedly the intension. The family tree, or painting-list, is a form like any other that Marc Rebollo explores. With these three paintings, he locates himself between Jean-Michel Basquiat – for the list –, Julian Schnabel – for the surface – and Peter Halley – for the utilization of models drawn from the communication world. In a nutshell, he takes distance in multiple models that define contradictory readings – but is it not the aim of artworks to prompt contradictory readings? With his paintings, Marc Rebollo shows us that he is a formal painter of affects.

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