RAYMOND HAINS
Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin

Laeticia Bado once described meeting Raymond Hains in Paris and his famously associative way of talking: "Haines cannot be interrupted in the direction his unconscious journey is taking," she wrote. "He is a true follower of objective chance: The scale and velocity of this 'unconscious journey' is felt in the comprehensive exhibition of Hains' work at Max Hetzler's two galleries in Berlin and his Paris outpost. The three exhibitions are organized loosely thematically: 'Raymond la science' (Raymond the Scientist), examines the artist's experimental approach; 'Raymond labrast' (Raymond the Abstract), in the larger Berlin space, looks at his associative logic; while 'Raymond la disint!' (Raymond the Talkative), in Paris, takes language as its ou. Beginning with tiny black and white photographs shot in 1944, which documented the war-ravaged streets of his hometown, St Malo et Orain, Britain, and concluding with a series of geometric nudes based on Borromean knots by Jacques Lacan, Hains seems barely to have paused for breath during his six-decade career, until his death in 2005. A trio of pieces in the more intimate of the Berlin galleries manifest the fluid metaphorism of his work throughout his long career. Mésilage (1950-55), a small gouache composed of wobbly lozenges of red, blue and white, was derived from an abstract film he made with fellow artist Jacques Villages, shot with a self-made distortion machine he called a hypnagogoscope: a camera with a lens of fluid glass, which recreates in Hains' work) also appears on a paroxysm shading a white plastic table and chairs (Panoys, 2004), finally, Paille Carré (2001), a wall panel of blue Plexiglas strips, incorporates a number of small videos into its surface, documenting the artist at work, talking with friends at seaside cafes, or walking along the beach, always with his camera strung around his neck. A self-portrait of sorts, it introduces Hains as an inextinguishable documenter of the vagaries of everyday life—a tendency illustrated in the exhibitions's last room, which exhausts two of the many hundreds of archival boxes in which Hains collected and stored assorted ephemera, and displayed their contents: notebooks derailed with handwriting, boxes of slides, postcards and guidebooks. The contents of these archival boxes—like situationist versions of Andy Warhol's time capsules guided by the principles of dérive—are like an art historians dream. Hains is most often associated with Pierre Restany's nouveau realisme movement, which sought to shift from the world of painting to "truth in the world." His affichiste works—torn advertising posters taken from hoardings, which he began making in 1949— as well as "the (polished) - rearrangements of fence boards — remain his most striking pieces. Combining accident with haptic appeal, they demonstrate Hains' claim to be an "action painter": "I'm not so much a creator, encounters are more my thing" at the same time, they update the readymade for a proto-pop era of consumerism. Works such as Untitled (1971), in which the word "evocation" is poured visibly, bring up associations with the political climate of Paris '68, while the impression large-scale nonchalance of his affichiste works appears effortlessly contemporary, bringing to mind all manner of younger artists from Klaar Lidén to Michel Majerus to Sterling Ruby. But, as the exhibition demonstrated, nouveau realisme was just one facet of his practice. A suite of five untitled photographs from 1946-47 of tiny abstract grids, forms and objects, suggests the start of an inquiry into the nature of perception. Around this time, Hains began experimenting with lenticular glass that led to the creation of the hypnagogescopes. Two black and white distorted photographs dated 1948-49 are printed large and mounted on aluminium, suggesting his constant reuse and updating of his personal archive, adapting the means of presentation to fit the time. Though associated with surrealism and pop, Hains' work was too restless to sit comfortably in any one category. The pieces in the second Berlin show convey this, beginning with a graphically skewed clock face from the hypnagogagic phase, and a signature sleutel's 'matchbook,' while including more incidental works such as Stella deformed (Deformed Stella, 1961), a photograph juxtaposing a catalogue on Frank Stella with a glass of Stella Artois. In the back of the gallery, this associative wordplay transitions to the digital world, in a large-scale screenshot showing three cross-linked open windows, one of the "Meechtheshedst" he began making in 1988. Though it may appear clumsy and quaint (by today's post-internet standards), it is nonetheless evidence of Hains' readiness to adapt to the tools of the time, despite his pushing 80 when this work was made. These exhibitions are a tantalizing hint of the breadth of Hains' approach and the constantly shifting states of his free-associative mind. They left me wanting to see more.

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