

# The Aesthetics of Coincidence According to Raymond Hains

by Christine Macel

In 1976, when Raymond Hains had his major retrospective at the CNAC, in the rue Berryer, in Paris, a show that he dubbed "La Chasse au CNAC," Alain Jouffroy made a comment in a short text he wrote for the Galerie Lanzenberg, Brussels. Although never taken up, it does more than any other to illuminate Hains's aesthetic. "For more than twenty years," he observed, Hains had been "spinning the strangest spider's web in the world: that of a sun which, wherever it shines, falls only on coincidences" (Alain Jouffroy).

Hains's own exploration of the world of computers in his recent *Macintoshages* has led him to note the implicit connection between the Web and the spider's web, and he has made the metaphor his own: "I am working on a kind of Web," he says. Or: "Life is like a novel, like Brittany lace or a spider's web." And Hains's art can indeed be envisaged as spinning a giant web or piece of lace, linking words and objects, proper names and places, in accordance with a logic that obeys only a deeply subjective form of causality.

In this sense, the connection with the surrealist aesthetic is much more apposite than is now supposed, especially the link with the principles laid down by André Breton's description in *Nadja*, of "sudden parallels, petrifying coincidences . . . events whose intrinsic value is difficult to gauge . . . and the kind of associations of ideas that they elicit—a way of making you go from the Virgin's thread to the spider's web. . . ." These head-spinning coincidences that punctuate Hains's life allow him to invent a world whose logic may be perverted and, sometimes, inverted, in terms of its principles, notably with regard to time. Two recent events show how Hains's logic reinvents causality by linking proper names and places, at the same time denying the synchronicity of coincidence, thus leading to conclusions that are personal in the extreme. While staying at the Hôtel Athéna, in Lyon, in February 2001, Hains went to the Musée de Grenoble for an exhibition in homage to Emmanuel Sougez. Afterward, he remembered that Freud had stayed at the Athena Hotel when visiting the Acropolis. Hains also recalled the story about Freud's feeling faint when he saw the monument, because of the scene's seeming unreality. This coincidence led him to develop ideas about the "uncanny" [*unheimlich*] and to a metaphysical meditation on the nature of the real.

In 2000, as a result of Jean-Jacques Lebel's research for an exhibition of Victor Hugo's drawings, "Du chaos dans le pinceau, Victor Hugo, dessins," Hains was able to trace connections from his own work, *Brise-James* (transported from the beach at Saint-Malo to the Fondation Cartier in 1995), to two earlier events. The first was in 1853, when Victor Hugo, struck by the analogy between trees weathered by the sea and human bones, had his son Charles photograph him standing in front of the breakwater [*brise-James*] in Jersey, then used the negative to make a wash drawing. The second was in 1926, when the surrealist Georges Hugnet, who may or may not have known about Hugo's work, was photographed in front of the breakwater at Saint-Malo, the very construction beside which Hains had himself photographed and filmed by Hopi Lebel, and that he later transported to Paris for exhibition at the Fondation Cartier and, subsequently, on the Champs-Élysées. This series of coincidences might have ended there had not the exhibition itself revealed two other links in the Hainsian chain of causality: on the way in, visitors were greeted by "a wooden panel painted by Victor Hugo"—a *palisade* [billboard] *avant la lettre*—and the show ended with "the imprints of [Brittany] lace." Hains used these facts to enact a backward rereading of art history and present himself as "champion of criticism."

The whole of Hains's artistic career is full of such unlikely happenstance. For instance, the first poster that he peeled off in the rue de Rennes, Paris, in 1949, offered a formal analogy with the ideogram of the World Citizens organization (the outline of a man in a circle), which the American pilot Garry Davis had initiated two years earlier by tearing up his American passport outside the Palais de Chaillot in Paris, a gesture that won him the support of Breton, Gide, and Einstein. For Hains, who had attended one of Davis's talks, because of his meeting with the sister-in-law of Romain Rolland, Louise Guieysse, the coincidence was too fine to pass up.

In fact, the torn poster, the idea for which had come to Hains and Jacques de la Villeglé as a result of a prophecy by the surrealist Léo Malet, is, in itself, a form of chance encounter. As Hains has commented, "The torn posters are like falling in love in the street." He has also mentioned this notion of love at first sight in relation to photography. "I kissed a couple in Barcelona," were his words about a recent image.

In 1959, shortly after presenting his first billboard piece, the *Palissade des Emplacements réservés*, at the first Parisian biennial for young artists, Hains looked into the window display of Editions Clartés and saw the publisher's new encyclopedia open to the "Entremets de la Palissade," a dessert consisting of "an avalanche of confectioner's custard held in by a *palisade* of ladyfinger biscuits." Following which, at a dinner party, he met Geneviève de Chabannes la Palice, the descendent of the Seigneur de la Palice, who gave his name to the pastries known as Les vérités de la Palisse (which Hains would photograph in 1988). In 1963, he came upon a poster advertising a show about the Seigneur de la Palice being put on in Lapalisse, in the department of Allier. He tried to make it there, but was late, and, in the end, happened upon a text about the Marquis de Bièvre, a famous punster, who would be the central figure in his 1986 show at the Fondation Cartier at Jouy-en-Josas—this being in the Bièvre valley.

The coincidences mentioned here all involve rhetorical speculation around proper names, which are central to Hains's elaborations. They are made possible by a practice of the *dérive* [drift], a kind of "psychogeographic exploration," as the situationist Ralph Rumney once described it. Although—unlike Fran çois Dufr êne, who, in the end, was brusquely expelled from the Situationist International—Hains's links with Guy Debord were far from close, his approach was certainly germane to the latter's theory of "moments and situations." Travel, be it static or actual, lasting a day or weeks, became a way of coming across places, people, and names in order to reinvent the reasons for their existence. The process is eloquently summed up in this anecdote related to Aude Bodet in 1988: "One day, when Dufr êne was still alive, I met Wolman and his wife on the square at Vence, where there is a great big ash tree [fr êne]. When we saw the plaque giving its name, we said, 'Funny, we are on place du Frêne. . . . This place du Frêne should be place François Dufr êne, with—why not? —a Musée Dufr êne.'"

Hains's art of combinations involves what Pierre Restany described as an appropriation of the real, but one that goes further than the ambit of the readymade. In addition to presenting fragments of the real, whether posters, billboards, sheet metal, photographic records, or sidewalk sculptures, Hains enacts a total appropriation of the world—of knowledge, of language, of people and things. Regarding which, the artist speaks readily of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind*, in which the author dwells on the question of classification and proper names.

Hains's art of combinations also brings to mind a tradition that has its roots in Antiquity, a mnemonic art founded on places and images that flourished during the Renaissance in the hermetic philosophy expounded by Raymond Lully and Giordano Bruno. Its ambition was to create a true "art of memory" that would be a part of rhetoric and make it possible to master the world in its totality. In the classifying methodology that he developed in the mid-seventies, when he went from "posters to cards," with his reading cards written in blue felt pen and kept in Kiri cheese boxes, then his cardboard boxes and "Airbus" cases containing notes, books (with reading dates and times), his images and photographs, Hains offers a striking analogy with this hermetic tradition. Here is the description of the Theater of Memory conceived by Giulio Camillo

in the sixteenth century, as related by a certain Viglius Zuichemus: “Under the images there were drawers, or boxes and chests, containing masses of papers on which there were discourses. . . .” Hains’s mode of thought is, as he says himself, rather like a form of algebra, an obscure language in which memory becomes a major art form. His method of classification is simply the tool of a rhetorical art that invents a new, almost sacred language that, at first glance, is hermetic, but that eventually reveals a kind of coherence, one that objectifies the world in accordance with its own subjectivity.

In this sense, Hains is related not only to the art of memory but also to glossolalia, that invented language that sometimes consists of no more than a few phonemes, and whose most famous exponent (Artaud aside) was none other than Jean-Pierre Brisset, in whom the surrealists took a close interest, and who claimed that linguistic associations could lead to a total understanding of the world. Indeed, one of the unrealized projects that Hains worked on with Camille Bryen and Jacques de la Villeglé concerned an anthology entitled “From Glossolalia to Shattered Letters” (“De la glossolalie aux lettres éclatées”). Hains was also influenced by his reading of Philippe de Félice, whose book *Foules en délire. Extases collectives. Essai sur quelques formes inférieures de la mystique* was all about the kinds of glossolalia that occurred in states of trance.

Hains’s aesthetics of coincidence is, therefore, about much more than wordplay. It is grounded in a philosophical tradition whose ambitions are, above all, metaphysical. It makes it possible to ward off reality, the years, and death, and to travel in time. Hains once bought—but never read—a book entitled “The Secret Masters of Time,” whose cover showed an hourglass and a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci’s self-portrait. He must surely have had his reasons for hanging on to this obscure work, published in the J’ai Lu imprint’s “Mysterious Adventures” collection. No doubt he himself is one of those masters of time, one of those artists of memory who, like Diogenes, is never fooled. Hains is, in his own terms, a “cynic struggling with a neocabalist,” and, more than ever, the “minister of his own culture.”