

RALPH RUMNEY

La Vie d'artiste



EXPOSITION
DU 19 NOVEMBRE AU 31 DÉCEMBRE 2010
GALERIE LARA VINCY
47, RUE DE SEINE PARIS VI^e

ÉDITIONS ALLIA
16, RUE CHARLEMAGNE PARIS IV^e
2010



L'ÉCART, 1988.
Feuilles de métal sur panneau. 97 x 97 cm.

Quelque part dans son livre d'entretiens autobiographiques, *Le Consul*, Rumney parle du peintre Manzoni : "... il était encore plus jeune que moi (...) Un soir où j'étais chez lui, je lui ai dit : Si tu veux être artiste, ce n'est pas en faisant des tableaux que tu le deviendras. C'est en vivant une vie d'artiste." Comme toujours et comme tout le monde, quand il parle des autres, c'est de lui qu'il parle. On peut dire que les tableaux étaient importants dans la vie de Rumney, mais que la vie elle-même, avec ses splendeurs et ses aléas, fut plus importante encore.



Ça commence comme un conte de fées. Une enfance dans un grand presbytère pauvre, en plein pays des *Hauts de Hurlevent*, avec la lande autour. On ne fait pas plus romantique (Dolto, est-ce que ça marque ?). Il n'est pas né avec une cuiller d'argent dans la bouche, mais un livre de bibliothèque. Fils d'un pasteur socialiste, il cherche plus extrême, devient communiste, va vivre chez le grand pasteur marxiste du pays, qui l'adoube. (En fait, quarante ans après, dans sa grande maison pleine de tableaux superbes, E. P. Thompson avait encore sur le manteau de la cheminée une toile de ses dix-sept ans. Ça fait plaisir.) Reçu à Oxford, qu'il dédaigne ; passant par une "art-school" qu'il trouve tarte et laisse tomber, sa vie d'artiste ressemble assez au titre d'Orwell *Dans la dèche à Paris et à Londres*. À cette époque, je l'ai vu pour la première fois.

Continuons le conte de fées, Carabosse viendra plus tard. Une vingtaine d'années, déjà connu dans le Londres de la peinture d'avant-garde, où il a dû plaire aux uns et bien embêter les autres, que manque-t-il ? Une princesse. J.A.P. (Jewish American Princess) c'est Pegeen, blonde, autoritaire et fragile, fille de Peggy Guggenheim. Il l'aime, il l'enlève, il l'épouse. Et commence à mettre autant d'or sur ses tableaux qu'il y en eut sur toutes les icônes de Russie.

“J’ai découvert que l’on pouvait tirer de la feuille d’or une multitude de tons. Les nuances sont infimes mais passionnantes. En plus ce sont toutes des couleurs réfléchissantes... Au début, évidemment, c’était du toc, du cuivre, etc., mais j’ai progressivement découvert la vraie feuille d’or.” Argument irréfragable. On peut en chercher d’autres. Rumney était somptueux, hyperboliquement somptueux. Il semble “toujours avoir alterné entre la pénurie et une abondance presque absurde”, écrit de lui Guy Atkins. De l’or !

A-t-il vraiment appris à Yves Klein comment utiliser la fameuse feuille d’or ? C’est bien possible et technologique, puisque les idées circulent. A-t-il suggéré à Manzoni de se servir de sa “merde d’artiste” (les fameuses boîtes) pour épingler d’un seul coup l’art, l’artiste, le commerce de l’art et quelques autres petites choses qui ne vont pas bien dans notre monde ? Les souvenirs de cuite sont fumeux, on parle, on parle...

La même année, en 1957, c’est historique, Ralph participe à la création de l’Internationale situationniste. Il y joue un rôle non négligeable. Sûr, il en sera le premier exclu. Mais les notions qu’il avait déjà, purement situationnistes, de dérive, de détournement, de psychogéographie, lui restent bien entendu, l’accompagnent toute sa vie (d’artiste n’oublions pas). La rupture avec Guy Debord fut fracassante, l’amitié d’Asger Jorn, autre grand homme de l’affaire, ne lui faillira jamais.

Carabosse veillait. Dix ans après leur rencontre, la mort tragique de Pegeen bouleverse toutes les données. L’alcool, gai au début, prend de sales revanches. Pour les détails affreux et les règlements de compte sordides, se reporter, si l’on y tient, au livre et à ses souvenirs. Pour suivre son parcours sur le fil du funambule, les déséquilibres, les errances, les rétablissements spectaculaires (oui), il faut s’accrocher.

Il n’y a pas si longtemps chaque nouveau romancier, chaque barbouilleur émergent se sentait obligé d’avertir le public qu’il avait été gangster au Brésil, gigolo à Hollywood, soutier dans un baleinier, orpailleur dans une sierra. On restait sceptique.

Quand on a lu un certain nombre de biographies de morts que l’on a bien connus, on sait qu’elles sont presque toutes fausses, biaisées, naïves ou menteuses. Quand on lit l’autobiographie de Rumney, quand on sait un peu de quoi il retourne, on la trouve par comparaison bien sincère. Pour le reste, il s’explique : “Un fait survenu dans ton existence, tu l’adaptes à quelque chose avec quoi tu puisses vivre. Je ne pense pas être une exception à la règle. La mémoire est donc sujette à caution. Les témoignages sont sujets à caution.”

Somme toute, l’aventure finit bien. Toujours *Consul* comme le consul de Malcolm Lowry, c’est-à-dire buvant comme un poisson, comme un trou, comme une éponge ; sans accepter aucune compromission avec ce qui ne l’amusait pas, créatif, autodestructeur, il a vécu plus longtemps qu’aucune justice divine (elle n’existe pas) n’aurait dû le lui permettre. Les vieux savent qu’on ne vieillit pas. Laissons lui le dernier mot : “Le dandy, en anglais ça a un sens, en français ça en a un autre. Je n’ai jamais très bien compris ce que ça voulait dire en français, mais je crois que ça pouvait s’assimiler au comportement de l’artiste.”

MICHÈLE BERNSTEIN
SEPTEMBRE 2010





L'ÉCART, 1988. Feuilles de métal sur panneau. 119,5 x 65,5 cm.



L'ÉCART, 1988. Feuilles de métal sur panneau. 122 x 122 cm.



A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

When I met Ralph Rumney in 1954 he was twenty. He had returned to London after spending some time on the Continent. In the postwar years he had been one of the first young English artists to try his luck abroad. Currency restrictions at that time limited the traveller to £ 25. His destination had been Linosa, an island off Sicily. The islanders there made sure he didn't starve, while occasional forays to the mainland provided him with painting materials.

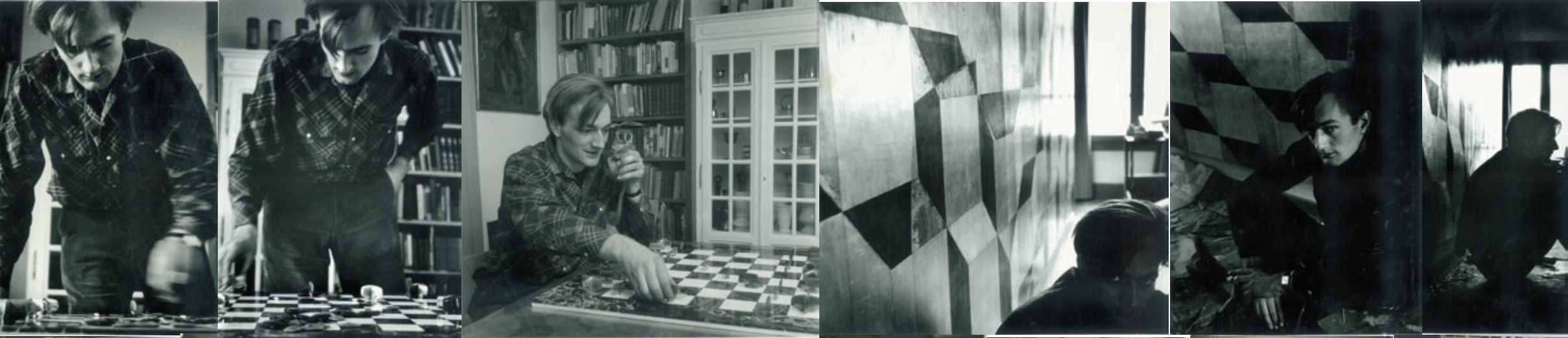
His painterly efforts resulted in an exhibition in Milan, which was at the time a leading centre of advanced modern art. Fontana, the Promodoro brothers, Baj and others met almost daily at the Giamaiaca Bar, which was clearing house for the latest information about the goings-on in the local art world. An artist could make a living by knowing some of the many shopkeepers and manufacturers who liked to acquire pictures as a speculation. It was easy to barter pictures against anything from free meals to smart furnishings. Everyone was waiting for the day when a car manufacturer would turn collector.

Rumney's exhibition in Milan was a sufficient success to enable him to return to England. His style was his own form of tachism, a style pretty well known abroad but not in England. In London he was given an exhibition at the New Vision Centre gallery which didn't go well. However, on the last day Rex Nankivell of the Redfern Gallery came along and bought the entire show and put it on in the West End. So Ralph was able to open a bank account in neighbouring Bond Street.

Ralph's finances seem always to have alternated between penury and almost absurd affluence. One visited him in a squalid room in Neal Street, in a house shared with near down-and-outs. Next one would find him in Harry's Bar in Venice or at Max Ernst opening in Paris in the company of the glamorous Pegen Vail

COUVERTURE
DU PREMIER NUMÉRO
DE LA REVUE *OTHER VOICES*.
Hebdomadaire, la revue
de littérature et de poésie
Other Voices a été créée en 1955.
Ralph Rumney en était
l'éditeur. Elle a accueilli
dans ses colonnes les textes
de plusieurs écrivains anglais,
dont Peter Fisk, Bernard Kops,
Hugo Manning, C. H. Sisson
et Stefan Themerson.

DOUBLE PAGE SUIVANTE :
PHOTOGRAPHIES D'HARRY
SHUNK



whom he later married. He seemed to me to take poverty with rather more equanimity than riches.

In the intervals between painting Ralph adopted a series of other activities. In 1953 he had founded and edited a short-lived weekly journal of poetry and the arts called *Other voices*. From 1969-73 he worked with the French National Radio in Paris. He had his own interview programme and private office. Later he became an art teacher at the Canterbury College of Art.

But to go back to the mid-fifties. In 1957 the situationist International movement, an offshoot of Lettrism, was founded. The founders were a tight little band of international intellectuals and artists. Guy Debord was the organiser, Asger Jorn the chief artist. Ralph Rummey, a founder member, was an ideas man who helped draft the rules. One of these rules was that offending members would be ruthlessly expelled. As luck would have it Ralph himself was one of the first to be expelled. The ostensible cause was his failure to report instantly to Paris headquarters on arrival from Venice. In Venice he had prepared an illustrated essay on psychogeography : the theory and practice of drifting through an urban environment.

When he left the Situationists he came to London and took an active part in the ICA in Dover Street which was then dominated by Lawrence Alloway with his pioneering ideas on American and European art. Ralph helped to enliven the London scene by causing one or two unfamiliar artists from the Continent to be known in London, in particular Yves Klein and Enrico Baj. More amusingly he helped to stage a very peculiar event at the ICA : the showing of Debord's film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*. This is a completely blank film with nothing at all shown on the screen. The sound track comes on occasionally with odds and ends of French prose spoken in deadpan voice, utterances such as "Veux-tu une orange ?" There was a final silence of 24 minutes when only the sound was the turning of reel. When the lights went up the protest from those who had bought tickets for this preposterous hoax was so loud that it reached the next audience queuing on the stairs. Those who came

CI-CONTRE :
GUIDE POUR L'EXPOSITION
PLACE QUI S'EST TENUE EN
1959 À L'ICA DE LONDRES.

GUIDE TO

PLACE

ICA PLACE

g a l l e r y

17-18 Dover St.

London W1

Roger Coleman

PLACE is not an exhibition of the work of three painters in the accepted sense, neither is it an experiment in arranging paintings nor an exercise in exhibition design.

PLACE is a collaborative expression of certain ideas common to the three painters on the relationship between painting and the spectator.

PLACE is an environment.

Background 1: The Mass Media

A significant development in post war art in this country (it appears to be exclusively English) is the acceptance on the part of some of the younger artists of the mass media as a legitimate body of reference. This can be seen, for instance, in the allusions to Science Fiction and monster lore in the sculpture of Paolozzi, in McHale's ikons of consumption and in Blake's collages of pop heroes.

In the work of the three painters of PLACE on the other hand, the influence of the mass media is present but not generally detectable without the aid of outside cues (sometimes the titles of the paintings are sufficient). The mass media for Denny, Rumney and Smith is not a source of imagery, as it is for Blake, but a source of ideas that act as stimuli and as orientation in a cultural continuum. They are concerned with the environment—mental and physical—that the mass media makes up and this sense of environment affects their outlook and activity as painters. Important is the idea of participation in this environment, for example, the movies—CinemaScope, Cinerama (note Rumney's CinemaScope heads).

The identification with the environment of the mass media is a significant aesthetic decision for these painters.

Background 2: American Painting and Space

One example, among others, American painting has had for the painters of PLACE is in the use of the big canvas. In the work of Pollock, Rothko, Newman, Still, space tends to be a direct function of the size of the painting surface and it has been called environmental. The surface is preserved as a surface and activity occurs over it vertically and horizontally expanding outwards to the four edges rather than from the edges to the centre. Thus the spectator, when he views the painting looks over it rather than at it; the painting expands into his space so that it becomes for the duration of looking his environment (unintentionally demonstrated for example in Pollock's *Blue Poles*).

The aspirations of the painters of PLACE are towards a space of this kind. For them it demands the participation of the spectator, and the concept of participation figures largely in their working programme. (It should be pointed out however, that this is a flexible concept and the individual attitudes of the three towards it are not the same either in kind or degree). Further they make a connection between this level of participation and the participation demanded by the environment of the mass media (again this appears to be an exclusively English development).

Background 3: The Game Environment

The idea of spectator participation stemming from the mass media on the one hand, and fine art sources, like American painting, on the other, has lead the painters of PLACE to an interest in ludic or game participation. (This applies more to Denny and Rumney than to Smith). Game participation exists on two levels, 1, the interpretation of the painting/spectator relationship as a game situation in which the painter's gestures, marks, etc., are moves within a strategy which in turn elicits a 'strategy' from the spectator, and 2, on a more literal level where the spectator is invited to manipulate the work (example, Denny's experiments with paintings with moveable parts like a Chinese puzzle) or an environment constructed as a maze in which the spectator in finding his way through the maze is 'playing' against the artist (example, Rumney's experiments with maze environments).

PLACE, then, represents interests in A, environment in a general sense, B, the environment of the mass media, C, an environmental space in painting, and D, the concept of participation explicit in A and B and implicit in C.

Rules of Place

PLACE is an environment made from the paintings of three artists and organized by certain rules decided upon by the painters before the painting began. The rules, chosen for the sake of unity, as cues for the spectator or participant, and for organizational simplicity, are as follows:

SIZE

7 ft. x 6 ft. and 7 ft. x 4 ft.

7 ft. x 6 ft. was chosen as the standard size as it is just larger than man-size at full stretch and therefore large enough for the painters to exploit an environmental space and yet small enough for handling in mounting and dismounting the exhibition. The smaller size was chosen later to give a greater overall diversity.

COLOUR

Red, Green, Black, White (used singly or in any permutation).

The colours were chosen more or less arbitrarily by the painters but complementaries were thought to be most useful in the context. A colour control was accepted to provide a thread the spectator can follow through the exhibition and to allow each painters' approach to a similar problem register clearly.

ORGANIZATION

The paintings are arranged diagonally across the gallery to give four main vistas—one for each painter and one common with black and white paintings (see plan).

The painters agreed to paint as near to their normal work as possible and to make no radical departures from their usual procedure, but because the works were done in series and with certain controls new developments appeared.

People and Place

The spectator is invited to participate in PLACE as an environment while recognizing that the objects that comprise it are paintings in their own right and no different from paintings arranged in a conventional way. Participation is capable on different levels, A, the individual painting, B, the work of one of the artists, C, the work of all three artists together (black and white view) and D, random samplings from the exhibition as a whole. PLACE can be looked at, through, over, between, in or out.

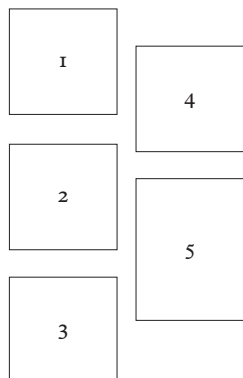
PAINTINGS

Robyn Denny

Ralph Rumney

Richard Smith

Exhibition arranged by Roger Coleman

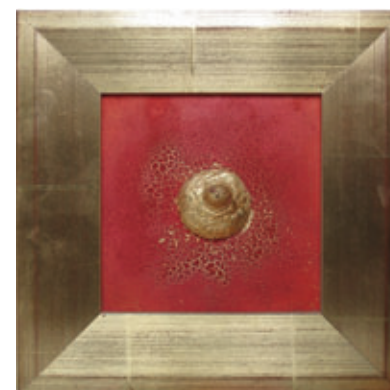
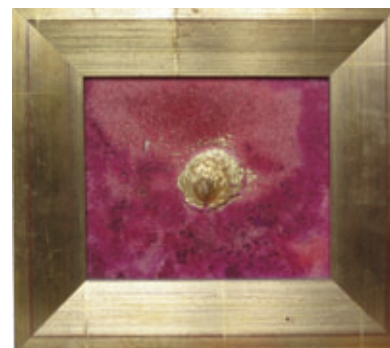


1. *AUTRES CHOSES*, 1992. Mixed media sur panneau. 12 x 14,8 cm. / 2. *AUTRES CHOSES*, 1992. Mixed media sur panneau. 11,3 x 11,3 cm. / 3. *AUTRES CHOSES*, 1992. Mixed media sur panneau. 11,5 x 11,5 cm. / 4. *AUTRES CHOSES*, 1992. Mixed media sur panneau. 11,5 x 11,5 cm. / 5. *AUTRES CHOSES*, 1995. Mixed media sur panneau. 17 x 13 cm.

out of the auditorium tried to persuade their friends on the stairs to go home instead of wasting their time and money, but the atmosphere was so charged with excitement that the advice had the opposite effect. The newcomers became all the more eager to see the film ! On later reflection one realised that Guy Debord had used the emptiness and silence to play on the nerves of the specators, causing them to let out “howls in favour of Sade”.

To assemble an overview of Rumney’s art would be difficult if not impossible. He himself has the habit of assembling pictures and notes which are then lost or abandoned somewhere beyond recall. He was reported, at one time, to be making metal sculpture in Paris. I suspect the works have gone astray. One is reminded of Christian Dotremont, the secretary of the COBRA movement. He used to fill suitcases with his poems and jottings. When a suitcase became too heavy he would abandon it wherever he happened to be. Ralph’s dispersals were less systematic, based, I think, on an inability to strike firm roots. His family roots in Wakefield, where his father had been vicar, were pulled up very early on. Since then he has been a nomad. In the circumstances of today that’s perhaps not such a bad thing. Ralph himself is able to put up an interesting case as to the logical sequence and development of his art from informal abstracts to large hard-edge pictures and even larger panels in gold and silver leaf “based on perceptual and optical ambiguities” to the present experiments with a still camera and plaster moulds. Above all this he insists that the production of artefacts is valueless unless it is born out of a firm and consistent philosophy of life.

GUY ATKINS 1985





THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY

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1. *AUTRES CHOSES*, 1984-1985. Mixed media sur panneau. 14 x 14 cm.
2. *L'ÉCART*, 1991. Feuilles de métal et peinture sur panneau. 30 x 30 cm.
3. *AUTRES CHOSES*, 1984-1985. Mixed media sur panneau. 15,3 x 15,3 cm.
4. *AUTRES CHOSES*, 1984-1985. Mixed media sur panneau. 39 x 15,3 cm.
5. *CARTE DU TENDRE*, 1995. Feuilles de métal et rouge à lèvres sur papier imprimé. 20 x 49 cm.

RALPH

In a red walled room with a red fire alight in it and Arvo Part playing on a winter night in Paris I met Ralph on the telephone, introduced to me by Gérard Berréby. A magnificent voice, rich and strong and deep, augmented the redness of the room. In the spring of the next year I would speak to him, again on the telephone, from the tiny kitchen of my Norfolk cottage. We spoke about people – situationists – we knew and had known in common, in other European cities, in other years. We spoke in English, a first for me when talking on this subject ; it was a bit strange and deeply moving. All my communication with situationists had been in French before. And Ralph was a situationist (I ignore the expulsion) and an artist. My involvement in this story refused to end.

By next spring, the first of the new millennium, we spoke by phone often. He was sad that he didn't see his grandchildren. He wanted me to find out where the Tate had put his painting *The Change*. We laughed when he told me how he jumped out of the taxi where Peggy Guggenheim was sitting to borrow the fare from Bernard Kops, who didn't have much, at his Charing Cross Road bookstall. The year 2000 was the year of Tate's split into *Modern* and *Britain* so their appropriation of Ralph, the European, would have been an interesting challenge. I discovered that *The Change* remained in the Reserve Collection of Tate Britain ; Ralph's birth country had superseded his adventures in the rest of Europe in the Tate's choice.

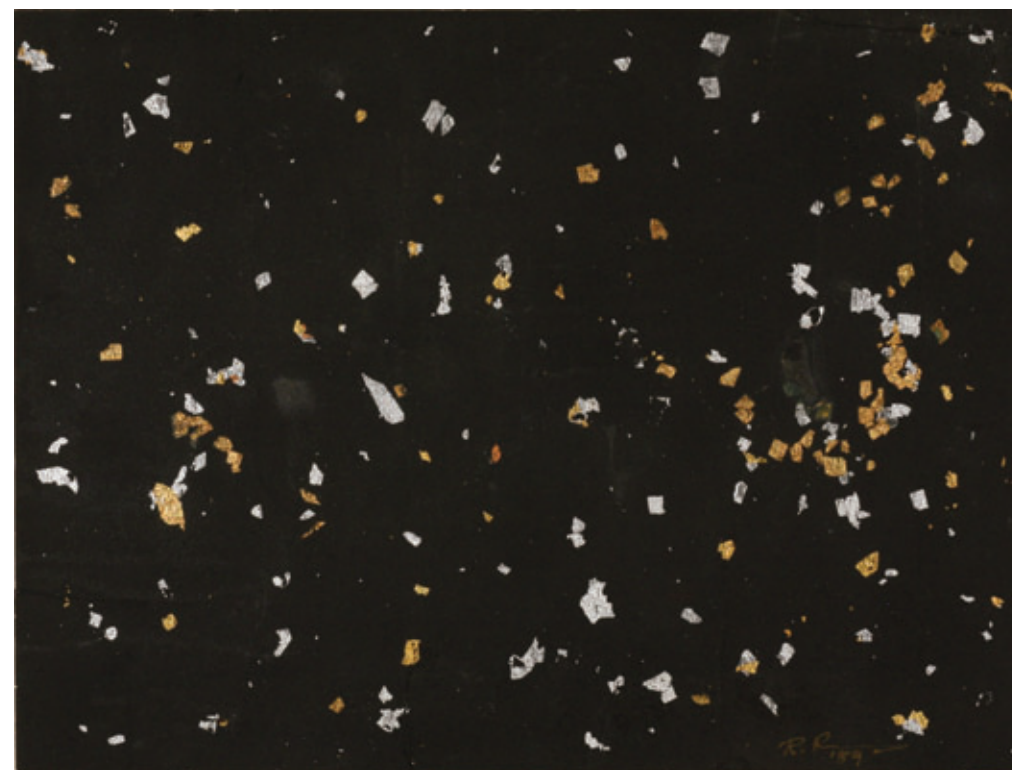
We talked about flânerie ; I introduced him to Georg Simmel ; sent him a copy of *The Metropolis and the City*. He was delighted with it. I had just finished writing an MA essay on the modernist city and was starting to unravel links between flânerie and the *dérive* and thinking about how Gianfranco Sanguinetti and I spent those days *exploring the social space* in Florence in the seventies. Now I was talking to the psychogeographer par excellence.

Frayed after days packed with seminars and demanding night drives, I would be sustained at the day's end by Ralph's beautiful voice. When the pressure started for me to write my dissertation, he presented me with an excruciating choice by inviting me to give a paper at a psychogeography colloquium he was organising in Manosque (where he then lived) that summer.

A year or so later, after a drive from Nice to Manosque, which seemed to get further and further away as I travelled, I found him posed on a bed after I'd negotiated a labyrinth of dark room spaces : thin and elegant, nursing a broken leg. He looked to me a lot like Marcel Duchamp. I knew he had been making work addressing Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Perhaps this was my conflation.

ALISON DUNHILL
LONDON, SEPTEMBER 2010

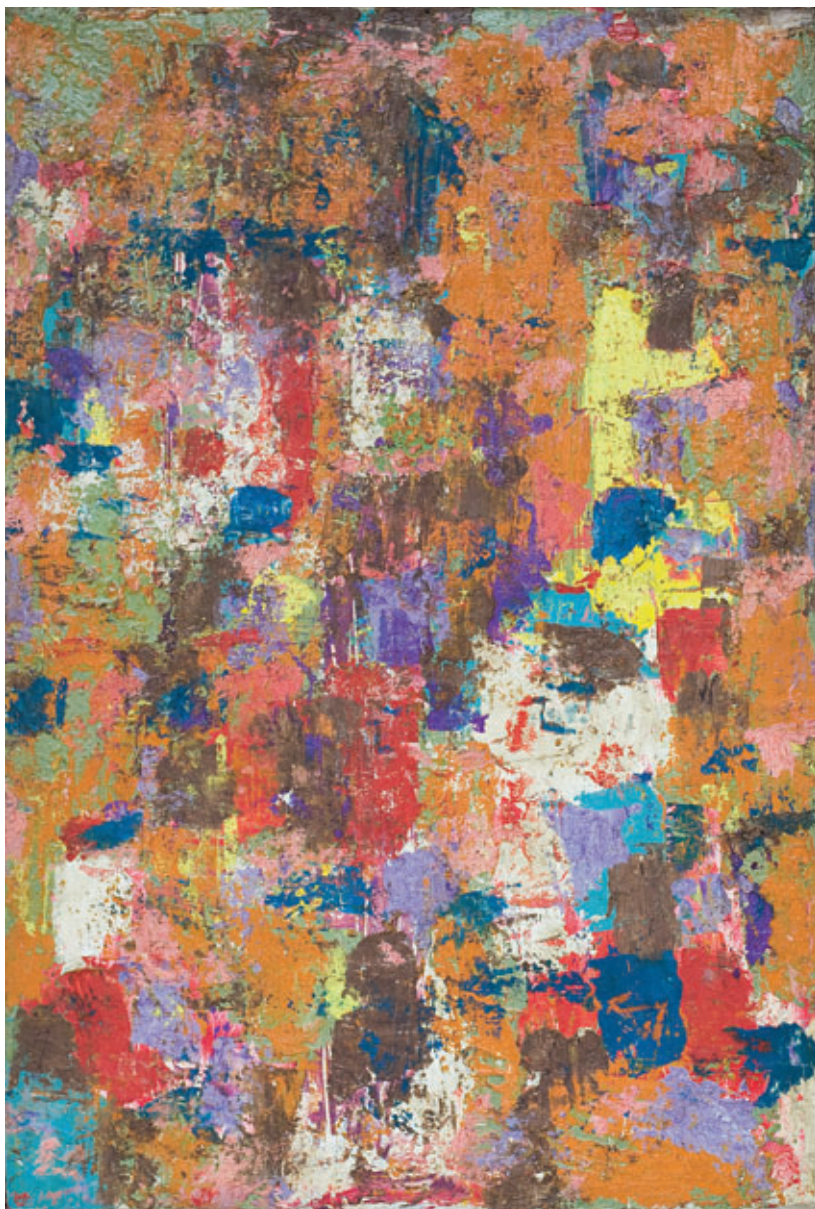
SANS TITRE, 1989.
Feuilles de métal sur papier.
30,7 x 40,6 cm.



NO HEAD, 1993.
Crayon et encre sur toile. 12 x 18 cm.
HEAD IN THE GREEN, 1989. Huile sur toile.
18 x 14 cm. *HEAD IN THE SKY*, 1989.
Huile sur toile. 19 x 24 cm. *HEAD IN THE DARK*,
1989. Huile sur toile. 19 x 24 cm.



STRIPPED HEAD, 1961. Feuilles d'or et mixtion sur bois. 122 x 122 cm.



RALPH RUMNEY
REBELLIOUS ARTIST AND CO-FOUNDER
OF THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL *

THE ARTIST, writer and co-founder of the Situationist International, Ralph Rumney, has died of cancer at his home in Manosque, Provence, aged 67.

Interviewed in *The Map Is Not The Territory*, a study of his life and works by Alan Woods, he said : “I think the trick, as far as possible, is to be sort of anonymous within this society. You know, to sort of vanish.” Indeed, until the publication last year of that marvellous book, Ralph seemed almost to have been forgotten in his home country, except by those of us fortunate enough to have known him.

In 1989, the Tate bought one of his paintings, *The Change*, dating from 1957. And there have been a few retrospective shows of his work in the last few years, most recently in his home town of Halifax.

Ralph produced a vast body of work over the years – from informal abstracts to large canvases using gold and silver leaf, from plaster moulds to polaroids, montages and videos. But only now are these being reassembled and reassessed. As he put it : “They’ve been scattered all over the place. That corresponds to a particular way of life, to luck and different circumstances. Things are sold, things are lost. You could almost say that today I’m an artist without work, that they’ve become accessories.”

Ralph’s vanishing tricks were notorious, an essential part of a life of permanent adventure and endless experiment. He moved, as his friend Guy Atkins said : “between penury and almost absurd affluence. One visited him in a squalid room in London’s Neal Street, in a house shared with near down-and-outs. Next, one would find him in Harry’s Bar in Venice, or at a Max Ernst opening in Paris. He seemed to take poverty with more equanimity than riches.”

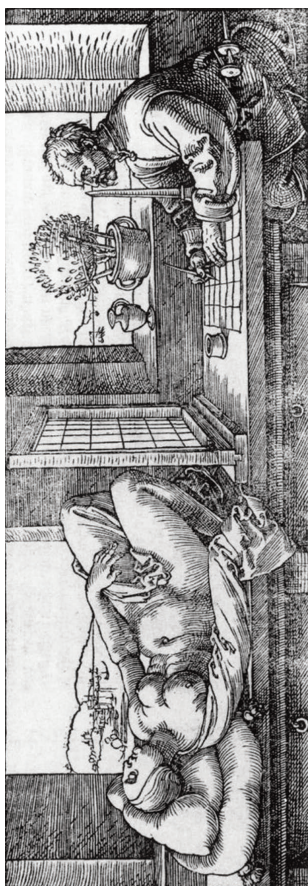
Only latterly, and partly because of ill-health, did Ralph settle down in Manosque, where he shared a flat full of his paintings with his cat, Borgia. For *The Consul*, another book of interviews

* Cet article de Malcolm Imrie a paru dans la rubrique “Obituaries” du *Guardian*, le 8 mars 2002.

The Map Is Not The Territory d’Alan Woods a paru aux Manchester University Press en 2000. Abondamment illustré, cet ouvrage contient des extraits de textes et un entretien de l’artiste.

SANS TITRE, 1958. Huile sur toile. 60 x 39,5 cm.

Le Consul est un livre d'entretiens avec Ralph Rumney réalisés par Gérard Berréby en collaboration avec Giulio Minghini et Chantal Osterreicher. Il a paru aux éditions Allia à Paris en 1999. En 2002, les éditions Verso à Londres ont publié cet ouvrage en langue anglaise, traduit par Malcolm Imrie.



with him soon to be published in Britain, he chose, as an epigraph, a phrase from the French writer Marcel Schwob : “Flee the ruins, and don’t cry in them.”

For most of his life, Ralph was a nomad, wandering from country to country, into and out of trouble – in London, Paris, Milan, Venice, or on the tiny island of Linosa, south of Sicily, one of his favourite places. “I’ve always felt entirely at ease among the 400 inhabitants, regularly cut off from the world for long periods. Some people have accused me of solitude, but I would claim that what I found there was in fact, a small society on a human scale.” Claiming not to be believe in avant-gardes, Ralph none the less crossed paths – and sometimes swords – with just about every radical movement in art and politics of the last 50 years, made his contribution, and moved on.

He was born in Newcastle, and, at the age of two, moved to Halifax, where his father, the son of a coalminer, was a vicar. He endured boarding school, discovered Sade and the surrealists in his early teens, turned down places at Oxford and at art school, ran away to Soho bohemia, and to Paris.

What followed was a long erratic journey. En route, his travelling companions included E. P. Thompson, who gave him a room when he was 17 so he could escape his parents, and deepened his understanding of Marxism ; Stefan Themerson, a collaborator on *Other Voices*, the magazine Ralph produced in London in the mid-1950s ; Georges Bataille, with whom Ralph argued about eroticism ; Yves Klein, whose work, like that of Michaux, Fontana and others, Ralph introduced to the London art world ; William Burroughs ; and the philosopher and psychiatrist, Félix Guattari, who gave Ralph sanctuary in his clinic outside Paris when he was, unforgivably, accused of murder. In 1967, Ralph’s wife Pegeen – whom he had saved from earlier suicide attempts – killed herself with an overdose of barbiturates in their Paris flat. Her mother, Peggy Guggenheim, who had always hated Ralph (for reasons he describes, with wit and surprising lack of bitterness, in *The Consul*), took out a civil action against him for murder and “non-assistance to a person in danger”. Already devastated by the loss of his wife, Ralph endured months of persecution before the action was dropped.

It was Ralph’s involvement with the Situationists that was most important to him, and which has, in part, led to the rediscovery of his work. There is a set of photographs from the first meeting of the Situationist International, in the Italian village of Cosio d’Arroscia in July 1957. All the founding members are there : Walter Olmo, Michèle Bernstein, Asger Jorn and, of course, Guy Debord, smiling at the camera. Only Ralph is missing – because he took the photos.

His own description of the foundation of what some now see as the most lucid revolutionary grouping of the second half of the 20th century is modest, but accurate enough : “At the level of ideas, I don’t think we came up with anything which did not already exist. Collectively, we created a synthesis, using Rimbaud, Lautréamont and others, like Feuerbach, Hegel, Marx, the Futurists, Dada, the Surrealists. We knew how to put all that together.”

Ralph’s membership of the SI did not last long. Debord expelled him – “politely, even amiably” – less than a year later, accusing him, wrongly, as it happens, of failing to complete a projected psychogeography of Venice. But his association with the Situationists did not end there. It endured throughout his life ; he remained friends with many of them.

In the early 1970s, Ralph married Debord’s former wife Michèle Bernstein, and, though they later divorced, the two remained close friends. To Ralph, she was “the most situationist” of them all, the one who fought to stop the group turning into an ideology or a sect. In that case, they were perfectly matched.

A couple of years ago, with public interest in the Situationists growing, a whole slew of books on the movement were published in France. But it was *The Consul* that was, as the paper *Libération* put it, “the most lively, the most passionate”. Ralph embodied the best of the SI, in his political intransigence and intellectual curiosity, in his playfulness and wit, and in his anger at those who are running, and ruining, this world.

He is survived by his son, Sandro, a well-known art dealer.

MALCOLM IMRIE
MARS 2002

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