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REVIEWS NEW YORK

Jacques Villeglé

Fleiss-Vallois

By Harmon Siegel



(From now on, everything will be as usual.) Printed in bold, all-caps lettering, this sibylline slogan appears in an artwork by Jacques Villeglé (1926–2022) for “The French



Sofía Córdova, *Green is A Solace, A Promise of Peace* (where small birds hide and dodge and lift their plaintive rallying cries) (detail), 2022, taxidermied doves, parakeets, and canaries, hair dye, brass, birch wood. Installation view, JOAN, Los Angeles, 2024. Photo: Evan Walsh.

DECEMBER 2024

VOL. 63, NO. 4

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Flâneur,” an exhibition of his work at Fleiss-Vallois. The wry joke points to an animating contradiction in the artist’s influential practice of *décollage*—one I had neither understood nor anticipated until seeing this show.

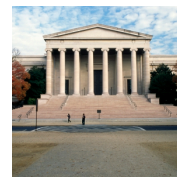
Décollage is the noun form of the French verb *décoller*, which means “take off” or “unglue.” It refers to Villeglé’s practice of excising fragments from the layers of posterage that cover public walls. The artist conceived this technique as a collaboration with the ordinary vandals whom he dubbed “anonymous lacerators” and whose ripping and defacing he celebrated as the most elemental of creative gestures. Rather than add to their handiwork, he simply excerpted passages that when mounted on canvas and displayed in the gallery countered dominant modes of midcentury artistic expression. Exploiting the swaths of monochrome color, lines of text, and graphic commercial imagery, Villeglé found collectively made substitutes for the high-art paradigms of abstraction, Lettrism, and Pop.

His references critically acknowledge the political crises that such movements elided. Take *Rue des Gravilliers, janvier 1973*. Its composition centers on a graffitied rendition of a Vietnamese flag, itself spray-painted onto a broadside printed with the names of places associated with war crimes: ORADOUR! GUERNICA! HANOI, ’72! Focalizing this motif, Villeglé seems to amplify popular opposition to American imperialism, inviting the vox populi into the space of art. Yet one feels an ambivalence dogging such savvy appropriations, a sense that militant propaganda ultimately shares the spectacular logic of commercial advertising. Under the torn agitprop, we find an ad for microcurrent facials. It includes photos of a

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woman undergoing the procedure, which, when juxtaposed with the list of sites, prompts us to compare cosmetic electrotherapy with unlawful electrotorture as a less evil but more effective means of enforcing compliance.

The beauty-shop poster promoted its treatments with a before/after comparison. I imagine Villeglé's delight at finding this accidental invocation of Andy Warhol's 1961 canvas *Before and After*, especially so close to the art-historically significant word *Guernica*. The "before," however, is missing, was torn off, as though the same mass public that condemned imperial war could not tolerate the sight of an untreated female face. The juxtaposition thus suggests an unsentimental, anti-utopian vision of public conscience, in which politics, art, and eroticism must all submit to culture-industrial flattening. The Vietcong star sprayed on the wall, the *Guernica*s painted by Picasso, and the maquillage applied to the Parisienne's visage—all end up as mere images.

The artist's deflationary avant-gardism gets further refined in 99, *Rue du Temple, 19 mai 1974*. Including only black, white, and primary colors, it invokes prewar artists such as Piet Mondrian and Alexander Rodchenko, who held the utopian idea that their art could change the world. To me, however, the best comparison is Jean-Luc Godard, for whom the reduced palette allegorized the diminishment of everyday life under capitalism, as in the filmmaker's *La Chinoise* (1967), with its young Maoists flaunting their Little Red Books as chic accessories. Likewise, the most prominent motif in Villeglé's décollage is a blue-and-white poster for François Mitterrand, France's first viable Socialist candidate. His face appears just below the cynical slogan mentioned at the top of this review. The two sheets seem to merge across the rip, as though tearing off the leftist politician's superficial rhetoric and revealing his true agenda: a radical turn to the status quo.

This anti-utopian humor reached its height in the most recent work in the show: *Opération quimpéroise—Mairie de Penhars—Le Quartier* (Operation Quimpéroise—Penhars Town Hall—the Neighborhood), 2006. This décollage comprises four advertisements for Villeglé's retrospective in his hometown of Quimper, branded with his garishly colored portrait, repeated four times in a Warholian variety of tones. Below each blares the name VILLEGLÉ, and, below that, in much smaller font, ESPLANADE FRANÇOIS MITTERRAND. Between Mitterrand's appearances in the two works, he had gone from radical reformer to the kind of national hero for whom streets are named. Similarly, Villeglé himself had entered the canon of artistic genius that he always sought to defy. Smiling out from his own promotional posters, the artist seems to delight in this last ironic twist: that his own transformation into an advertising image decisively exemplifies the very social pathology that he so damningly diagnosed.

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