

History in the Light of Contemporary Art

When do we start to write the history of contemporary art? How does this process unfold, and what are the factors that contribute to translate a series of events or tendencies into history? This panel will address the ways through which we acquire historical vantage points of our time, as well as the way in which new readings and revisions—or omissions—of immediate history can transform our perspectives. Due to the constant changing of its discourse and areas of interest, contemporary art making demands the equal renovation of the art historian in order to provide adequate interpretations and descriptions. This panel will discuss the kind of theoretical tools that contemporary art history should have, including new methods of interpretation, analysis and criticism outside of the conventional strategies of the art history discipline. What kind of parameters and methods are used as we build preliminary histories? When are they useful, and when do they become obstacles? The panel will also debate the contrasts between writing modern and contemporary art history today.

You are History: Already?

16:00 – 18:00

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My title, *You are History: Already?* means exactly this, that today we live in a culture that cannot stand the past, does not have time for yesterday. We have indeed entered into a kind of speedy and plastic environment where a ten-years-old book, as I heard from an art writer from Chicago, cannot possibly be of interest today. Forget Plato, Nietzsche, Camus or Greenberg for that matter. The accumulation of images and activities is unfurling on us with such a force and with such fantastic skill that Norman Klein in his latest book called "The Vatican to Vegas", can describe our condition as being controlled by special effects, by an electronic Baroque. Things seem to change so fast and so rapidly that you need to be connected like robots to your cell-phone with those microphones attached to your face in order to be right there when the phone rings to know if you have to buy or sell. The times they are changing all right. In this new type of world what can the art critic be? Is it possible to record, to analyze what we are witnessing? Is it worthwhile? Who cares? Who has time to consider? Is it worthwhile when we know that artistic productions are now produced and discarded almost as soon as they have been created? When careers of artists are shorter and shorter? But even more to the point where do art critics survive now? Where do they speak, to whom? Let me show you something that I have wanted to do for years. It is a kind of circus trick: the disappearance of writing in *ArtForum*. This magazine, for so long the bible of western culture has gotten a severe case of obesity just like the entire culture of laissez-faire capitalism. At the beginning, in the 1960s and 1970s the magazine was slim, cute, and very impressive and by the simple fact that it did not fit properly on the bookshelf due to its irritating format, intellectual! Today, it is still slick and irritating, but not for the same reasons. It is irritating because after spending a lot of money to buy it, you realize that you cannot find the texts you could be interested in. They are lost between images dripping with luxurious commodities of all sorts. What you confronted with is a series of beautiful color images of art, you, like the staff of *ArtForum* actually, do not want to see, and with advertisement "*ad nauseum*"—this is the way it is done—, although here of course much slicker and arty, in throw-away magazines and newspapers the world over. But those like *Metro* in France or Free Presses everywhere are at least free. So, caught in this deluge of ads, with the very short articles produced there—evidently for very busy people—what kind of art critic can survive? Of course, the most obvious lesson seems to be that all that is needed today is slick advertising. Do critics want to continue? Do they, still have room to maneuver in this kind of speed culture? Do they have time to think, to write, to be read? I would say no. But I would also say that their dismissal is to some degree their own fault, as I will explain latter on. What they have been replaced by are the reviewers (and advertisers), those modern mercenaries who are now running the show with curators and gallery owners. It was already like this in the past (in Paris in the 1950s this was a normal occurrence as it was in the 1960s when Greenberg was director of French and Co Gallery) but now it seems that there is no alternative to this process and no new definition adapted to the new cultural situation in order to formulate what an art critic could be today. Not only that, but their position is simultaneously attacked by wicked art historians, philosophers, cultural historians, etc.—now,

everybody loves the image. They want to participate in the debate. This has become cool in the contemporary cultural discussion as is the fact that artists have become art historians themselves.

In the old days, when I started my study in art history, things seemed quite simple. Art historians could or would only write about artists who were dead, about movements that had been integrated into the cultural mainstream; that had been accepted and sanctified by history. We were waiting; we had to wait, because the institution of art history did not allow us to roll into the gutter of the contemporary. It was too unsafe, insecure, and dirty. We had to wait, at least in France, like one does for great wine, for the process of decantation to finish, for history to tell us who and what had conquered the passage of time. Only then the art historian's job began. We were writing the history of the winners, the way the majority of historians were still doing. The everyday job of discussing art production was left to reviewers and art critics. In those days art history was about affirming and just explaining in greater depth why certain artists of the past were great. Never was the question asked: What is the mysterious mechanism that was selecting the winners and losers of history?

Along with a radical change in the focus of the history of past art incorporating new social and theoretical concerns, it seems that the post 1960s saw a questioning of these certitudes, when the division between art criticism and art history collapsed, when art history started to participate in contemporary debates by questioning power structures, by linking art production to political and social concerns not just questions of value. The frontier between art history and art criticism in today is in shambles allowing for the emergence of a large debate, one in which the contemporary artist is also actively involved. The hot issues of representation are not left for another generation to sort out but are constantly debated in awareness of the contemporary political culture. And that is a good thing.

But the new scene today is a difficult one to grasp. I would agree that after many battles to impose outsiders in the contemporary field, it has become widely diversified, regionalized so as to produce a rejection or suspicion of what was so entrenched before in quality, hierarchy and selection. Today as Yves Michaud argues in his latest book *L'art à l'état gazeux: essai sur le triomphe de l'esthétique*, we are now in a society surrounded by art insinuating itself slowly like a gas, participating without problems in the ongoing everyday. Here is Michaud:

I am suggesting that the art is no more the manifestation of the spirit but something like the decoration or trimmings of the period. From the organic and autonomous, with its proper (or own) life, we moved into style, from style into ornament and from ornament to trimmings. One more step and nothing is left but perfume, an atmosphere, a gas: the air of Paris, Duchamp would say. Art then takes refuge in an experience which is not that of objects surrounded by an aura, this halo, this perfume, this gas, as we can call it, gives through fashion the identity of the period.

What Michaud points is to the loss of the specificity of art, of its power to signify and define a moment, to impose its view on a society. Now, competing with other visual titillations like TV, digital images, video games, and films, art production has lost most of its appeal, which had been its specialty and importance. Michaud thinks that this is, in fact, good for our society because images now have to compete in a free market economy. And that is where I do have difficulties. Because I wonder if this gas that he describes quite convincingly, is not a deadly poisonous gas or at least a laughing gas. In both cases, it seems to me, there is nothing to laugh about. But how should we react? Do we need guides, whether they are art historians or critics, to appreciate this? Guides have lost their strength in a society always fascinated by newness. When the new was seen as important and meaningful cultural ruptures, fashion was denounced as Michaud explains as empty and superficial “fashion was the foam of the days, the inessential which obscures the real newness of things... Fashion is capable of producing differences in a world where there is none left.” But those differences slide along with the day.

So yes, after a few moments of hope after the fall of Berlin Wall, after the realization that the world was opening up to other cultures, that Biennales were popping up everywhere, a suspicion—which everybody shares now—grew that things were not going in any new way and that, in fact, traditional centers of power were still deciding what was in and what was out of the art circuit. Biennales, we realized, were becoming like artistic maquiladoras providing exotic but pre-cut objects for western centers which were still the major points of distribution, now even more powerful than when they were the only centers of production. Confronted with this, it is safe to say that—and last year’s SITAC conference is a case in point—the art world has begun to see that the art system has a voracious appetite for artistic contributions, in particular for those which would present themselves as “resistance.” Resistance was the *in thing* several years ago, but we know now that resistance often comes when we have already lost the war. I would prefer to face the incredible agility with which the art system can integrate, can co-opt as Debord was saying, any kind of opposition or critique produced inside the institution, (and not only inside the white cube.) What is interesting though, is that out of this understanding one is witnessing many forms of critical discourses appearing on the edge of art history and of institutions. Artistic in their essence, these visual discourses, not yet defined as such, work in situ, articulating critiques of the everyday in site-specific art.

Again, the art object, as in the 1970s is suspect and instead activities—political or poetical—are produced. Some say it is not art, maybe it is, and that is the point. Meaning can still be produced but outside the institutions of art. And it is there, in those dissident spaces that the art critic, the art historian and other intellectuals can work together, along with those image makers, to think and mount a critique of market oriented societies which have produced monsters of entertainment from the obese *ArtForum* to the Bilbao Guggenheim to touristy biennales. It is maybe our good luck that our world does not really believe in the artistic anymore, in history or in taste the way we used to. It is then a good thing to live in a world without universals, because the world is now open for questioning, for deconstructing a system

of representation for long time kept taboo. But who will do the critique? What is fascinating is that at the time when almost everybody realizes the radical transformation of culture under global market economies, everybody realizes as well that all forms of knowledge or analysis are outmoded or unable to address the new situation. So here comes, the art historian. The art historian interested in contemporary life and culture. There is finally in this unsettled situation a possibility to produce discourses detached from all the traditional discursive categories. It is possible now to envisage—recognizing that the old categories of art criticism, art history and art production are ineffective in producing critical and destabilizing discourses—to articulate a new type of critical inquiry, one which would be a mixture of all the above (art criticism, art production and art history). Art historians were unable to deal with contemporary art for the reason given above. Art critics were often targets of sarcasm as they were often involved in the production of texts that were incomprehensible in purpose or so programmatic that they were flying against the pictures they were presenting. These excesses gave the profession a bad name like Clement Greenberg forcing the art produced by Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still into a framework; which had nothing to do with what they were interested in. Or more dramatically, the production of totally mystifying critical texts like those of the French art critic Michel Tapié who in 1951 presented his text for an exhibition by The Painter Mathieu in Paris. His words were courageously translated by somebody into English for presentation in New York:

only the recourse to the hylemorphic principle of the individuation of a haecceity quantically defined (*qua substantia fit haec*)—a universal formality may be applied univocally to all things—may still be possible as the last means of a volitive and actual achievement of the individual in deferring the ineluctable rarefaction of the critico-organic entities and the corollary engulfing of all possibility of transumption of the epistemological reality into maximum intellection.

No comment!

When one realizes that historians have also lost their center of discursive power as well as their ability to keep a linear descriptive apparatus, and that artists and art in general have also lost their originality and neutrality why would it not be possible then to propose a new type of intellectual (mixing artists, art historians, historians, anthropologists, etc...) who would be interested in being engaged in not only describing but also analyzing and deconstructing the mechanism of artistic recognition and production on multiple levels and in multiple forms. With this de-skilling of traditional intellectual positions, with the abandonment of specific and well-established traditions, it could now be possible not only to decode contemporary culture but also to critically approach what is at stake in contemporary art. That is, to write its history, if we understand the writing of history as a study of the mechanisms (symbolic or practical) put in place in order to reinforce the order of things. Once it is understood that the dissenting space is needed and has to be created outside the many structures of art, a cutting analysis of the ideology, phantasms, constructions

and projections of a dreamed world in contemporary art can be made in order to counteract the gas Yves Michaud was talking about. And that is the task at hand today. This intellectual front of another kind should be able to counteract, through a thorough investigation of the many and diverse connections with power, the art of today in order to be, not in a position of resistance but in one of revolt against our ways of seeing, our ways of understanding and doing. Julia Kristeva, already in her graduate seminar in 1994 was opting for a culture of revolt, the only way to protect the individual in a new and normalizing global economic order. She said in particular: "our modern world has reached a point of its development where a certain type of culture and art are threatened or even impossible. Not the culture-show, nor the consensual and informational culture promoted by the media, but the art and culture of revolt... It is important when those productions are obscure or difficult to grasp to interpret them." This culture of revolt being one of the few possibilities of avoiding the complete robotization of the individual in our global mediatized society. What this new alliance of revolt-culture producers will provide is an exit out of the spectacle through a deconstruction of art production into their economic and ideological components, into their relations to power. On the other hand, the quality of this new alliance, of this new type of art-writer will be his ability to discuss critical visual activities without being tied automatically to the art market and sucked into the art world through the art critic. In the end, the fragmentation and division of the world can be the occasion to discard old unworkable traditions often geared towards the protection of the status quo in the face of huge social transformations. It is time to break the ice as De Kooning said about Pollock and we have to make sure that, this time, the ice is not only the one clinking in cocktail glasses.