

Bruno Latour / Jacques Rancière : Regards de philosophes
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What do philosophers think about art today? We asked two leading French thinkers, Bruno Latour and Jacques Rancière this question, both of whom share an intense curiosity for contemporary creation. The result: a "state of art" evaluation of the cultural context today –one that seeks to restore contemporary art's status as an avant-garde movement once again.

How do you view contemporary creation?

Jacques Rancière: In the last few years, I have wondered about certain installations – whether it's the end or a crisis in art, or the shift from a modern paradigm to a post modern paradigm. But I'm not really satisfied with any of this, in fact, I tried to reexamine the development of art, taking some distance from the idea of modernity. I then became interested in contemporary creation, to try to see why it is not an end, a radical break but is linked to much larger possibilities, to extremely different forms of art.

Bruno Latour: As an anthropologist, I wanted to understand the way people produced works of art. And the only way I found to do this was to make it, or at least accompany the production —notably by participating in exhibitions, like the "Laboratorium" in Antwerp or "Noise" in Cambridge. These places are where you get the most information from artists as well as curators, sponsors and the public. I am now working on an exhibition at the ZKM in Karlsruhe on the theme of iconoclasm. I wanted to try to understand what, in contemporary art, is based on an obsession for images and their destruction, by trying to identify an iconoclastic tradition among current creators, an iconoclastic tradition that remains extremely strong. In this tradition, an image is judged by the number of other images that it somehow leaves broken in its wake.

Jacques Rancière: I would also like to see how things are made. I usually contribute to catalogues as a historian, philosopher and theoretician, which is somewhat frustrating. It is something else to be an exhibition curator, to truly participate. On the other hand, I don't feel I have the expertise of an exhibition curator. My interest is to force myself to get into things that I don't know well; I have always tried to respond to provocations and only discuss that which I know poorly or not at all.

Bruno Latour: With the "Laboratorium" exhibition, I didn't think about using artists— indeed I don't know many—but instead invited twelve scientists who would

re-perform some experiments in public. The concept was to demonstrate that there is a relationship between the studio and the laboratory that is not based on the result but on the process. My obsession was to create an art-science exhibition with fractals on the one side and painting on the other. It was somewhat chaotic, but there were nonetheless some great moments, as when, for example, Isabelle Stengers redid Galileo's pendulum experiment, in a space devoted to the arts. Was it a happening, an installation, scientific history or educational? It didn't make any difference.

We rarely see philosophers who show such a strong interest in contemporary creation. Why?

Jacques Rancière: Most often, aestheticians, art philosophers discuss Cezanne, Cézanne and Cézanne, repeating a Merleau-Ponty-like approach in which they see a few contemporary Cézannes. What is unique about contemporary art -is that all the different genres are represented. There is also the issue of age: I belong to a generation where politics occupied center stage. Basically, we liked the modernity of abstract art and music because it was easy to conceptualize it. The situation is very different today; I'm surprised to see a fairly strong knowledge about contemporary creation among young philosophy researchers.

Bruno Latour: Yes, but at the time, contemporary creation was viewed as a sort of avant-garde of philosophy, with the idea that if you wanted to know what would happen in philosophy in ten or fifteen years, you had to look to the arts. I have the impression that the situation has shifted; in other words, some contemporary creation continues in the same vein by breaking down doors that are already open while intellectual, conceptual, and particularly political thought no longer relates to this approach. There are obviously examples to disprove this: the architect Rem Koolhaas, for example, who offers a magnificent way of surveying the city, which is two or three decades ahead of urban sociology yet also produces objects. This is a perfect way to reexamine the link between intellectuals and products. But most often you cannot much count on contemporary art, which continues to follow the same anti-institutional, anti-mediation, anti-science approach. In my opinion, it's a question of political mediation: today there is an entire series of ready-made formulas concerning contemporary art. One such formula is the accusation of being a "philistine," which means that the public is no longer necessary. Yet artists do have to account to the public. We have indeed reached a dangerous pass when an artist starts to isolate himself in a creative bubble, claiming an inalienable right to be miserable and to be misunderstood; and proclaiming himself over and above everyone, simply by stating that you are either an artist or you're not. And I have the feeling that it is more interesting now to try to make artists be accountable than to allow them the right to be creators.

Jacques Rancière: I would look at the question of the relationship between political inventions and artistic invention somewhat differently. What strikes me is the seeming abandonment of political invention: how, in politics, to invent subjects that truly create new forms of perception or intervention. Today, there is something of a caricature of what were once the symbolic actions of the 1960s and 1970s, as if a certain form of militancy concerning demonstrations, symbols and exemplary action – which have virtually disappeared from the political field – survived as some sort of artistic copy. I've just come from the Palais de Tokyo, where we were told that each work by each artist questioned the contemporary world, challenged representations and publicity and defied power. What does that mean? For those who exhibit and for those who create the exhibition, it seems obvious that by using materials from everyday life or using advertising images, the objects by artists immediately have a polemic value with regard to the political and commercial world. Artists are something like the standard bearers, or the hammer and sickle; in a way they hold the emblems of the Left. But they hold them in forms that often look like empty parodies.

Bruno Latour: Just as computers have moved toward miniaturization, there has been a miniaturization of the critical spirit. In *Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme*, Luc Boltanski discussed the idea that the new-look capitalism of the 1980s had completely integrated artistic criticism. Yet, the heavy-handed trend continues to try to "shock the bourgeois," and it is fairly paradoxical to see that the critical spirit still considers itself the most advanced, while it is one of the driving forces behind the negative aspects of contemporary capitalism.

Jacques Rancière: It's not about criticizing the naiveté of artists who believe that they are always acting as critics, when they are the ground troops of capitalism. This is not the way to look at the problem. The same artistic processes can or cannot be compared under different conditions depending on whether there is a struggle or not.

Isn't contemporary art also suffering from its strong links to fashion, publicity, the cultural industry and, general speaking, the commercial world?

Jacques Rancière: We can always say that the widespread law of interconnected commerce the law of capital, the law of merchandise. But these arguments are entirely reversible: the link between a state of art and a state of domination is not necessarily written in stone. It's possible, but I don't believe that we should make some kind of general law of relationship by saying that painting, music and so on are losing their boundaries and have necessarily fallen into the hands of capital. There are no specific criteria that can define an integrated art as opposed to an art of resistance. There are circumstances in which different forms of action, forms of object repopulate different, enigmatic worlds that do resist. The problem today is to create resistance.

This does not necessarily mean criticism. But to create tools and processes that are

somewhat different either in terms of the method of confrontation or the type of enigma.

Bruno Latour: The problem now is not the lack of critical spirit, but the opposite, in other words, trust. We are not in a situation that demonstrates an abundance of trust; we are, instead, in a vacuum in which it is important to regain trust. We have heard much about the end of painting, theater, music and sculpture, but it is those who proclaimed their death who are finished. In reality, painting is beginning, sculpture is beginning, theater is beginning and soon, because we have only scratched the surface of the medium and there are a million things to do.