

Qu'est-ce que l'art ? (aujourd'hui) / What is art ? (today)

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Traduction and adaptation : Lisa Davidson, Elisabeth Ayre, Caroline Lecerf-Pajot

the artist as storyteller

by Jean-Max Colard

In the 1990S, artists stopped being afraid of anecdotes and narrative. There has been a myth of the art object as a perfect, autonomous object situated somewhere outside of history - above all, we did not need to seek understanding in words.

Because we are afraid of words. Many artists have tried to overthrow this relationship by claiming that "words are very good; indeed, it is important to be able to tell something. And what links us all are stories". A kick can be described, as can an exhibition: "What did he do?" The keys to understanding artwork today are rarely provided by the work itself. This is what the general public finds so annoying but this is also what is so fascinating: it is up to each individual to understand, like a detective, where a work comes from, how it was made. Sarah Morris' paintings, for example, represent the buildings of major multinational firms. From a distance, the work appears to be abstract. The viewer who remains at this distance, who does not read the title of the work (*Revlon*, for example), and does not try to know the story, completely misses the meaning of the work. Art today therefore questions our capacity to tell each other stories. This is exactly the same role held by the African griot, who recounts the history of the village's community every night. The artist plays a similar role today. It is neither ridiculous nor contemptible: it is essential."

globe-trotters

by Jean-Max Colard et Fabrice Bousteau

An exchange of viewpoints between two exhibition curators who travel around the world several times a year: from New York to Kassel for Okwui Enwezor, director of the upcoming Documenta; and from Paris to Mexico for the tireless Franco-Swiss-German curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist. Here's a rapid overview of an art world that is more open than ever before.

In the international contemporary art world, the number of biennials, exhibitions and artistic scenes has exploded in the last ten years or so. How do you situate the movement today?

Hans-Ulrich Obrist: People sometimes say that there are too many biennials, but I don't agree: for me, the fact that these events are increasing is basically a good thing. There is less isolation, division and segregation today. But the problem of large-scale exhibitions is often the downtime between two shows. To be creative, artistic activity must be continuous. We need to think more about duration, and reinstate the idea of research into what has become more and more event-oriented.

Okwui Enwezor: Yes, the art world is much more flexible; we are seeing a growing decentralization of artistic practices and artistic places. The city of Dakar, for example, is trying to become a pan-African space of its own, without worrying about what's happening in New York. An Asia-Pacific triennial for the entire region is being organized in Perth, Australia. Brazil is hosting the São Paulo international biennial, as well as the Mercosur, which has brought new energy from within, a Latin-American influx, and a critical response to the international models of Venice and the Documenta in Kassel.

Hans-Ulrich Obrist: I think several artistic venues are particularly vibrant today: one is Mexico City, where there is a self-generated energy and a young generation of artists, critics and curators. You can also see dialogues between disciplines, collaborations between art,

architecture, music and so on. Some artists have even told me what is happening in Mexico is so intense that they don't want to leave the city for a single day. Many cities in Asia have also become extraordinarily dynamic laboratories since the 1990s. This is especially true of Bangkok, where a very strong new generation of artists has emerged, and where exhibitions are organized everywhere throughout the city, in the most unexpected places. Finally, I think it's important to mention Paris, which has one of the best energies in the world today—something that was demonstrated at the Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris with the "Traversées" exhibition.

The heavy migration of artists currently underway could weaken local artistic movements, which are sometimes abandoned for New York, London and Paris.

Okwui Enwezor: The flow of artists is less traditional today than it was in the 1970s and 1980s. Nobody goes to New York today to pursue an artistic career. However, I do see artists going to Brussels or Paris, following a need rather than a fashion. African artists, for example, migrate toward cities to gain access to financing and greater freedom of movement. Paris has many artists, who go there to live and work. But we shouldn't deceive ourselves. People go wherever they have the most chance of obtaining a visa that will allow them to travel, and globalization gives them this opportunity.

Hans-Ulrich Obrist: Artists are less attached to a place; they are, instead, between places, participating in different scenes at the same time. It is the idea of "exchange" and contact zone that is fascinating: artists are crossing geographical, institutional and disciplinary boundaries.

Exhibitions today appear to be like events, just like music performances or fashion shows. What do you think about this phenomenon?

Okwui Enwezor: It is not limited to the contemporary art world, as this applies today to any cultural event. What I find most surprising is that contemporary art, which should resist the industry of culture and its commercial outlook, has been completely tamed and assimilated by the public, thanks to the media. It's unfortunate, as the critical energy that the artists try to express in their work is completely obliterated. But I am extremely surprised to see how much artists remain fashionable and how many people go to exhibitions, even when some of the exhibited works are very hard to understand. The question is whether the public has a critical view or look at art because it's the trendy thing to do. I have to admit that I don't know the answer. The fact is that museums have never had so many visitors; so what kind of public do they attract? What exhibitions could we organize in order to drive away visitors. These are the questions to ask.

Hans-Ulrich Obrist: How can we ensure the survival of experimental exhibitions and laboratories? This is a crucial question. As Rem Koolhaas said: "You can't have a laboratory with two million visitors per year." Yet possibilities do exist: either laboratory conditions can be integrated into larger structures and cohabit with others, or they can exist as small structures.

Exhibitions today require larger and larger budgets. What is going on?

Okwui Enwezor: The issue of money is an essential one. Art has become exorbitantly expensive in terms of production, transportation and insurance, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for cultural institutions to organize events, especially as they receive far less money than other government departments. With the growing number of large events requiring immense budgets, exhibition curators are now more like administrators or managers.

Hans-Ulrich Obrist: The shifting views in terms of exhibition profitability is disturbing. At a time when global and exportable ready-to-show events are in the forefront, it has become urgent to think about a wider interconnectedness. As the economist Amartya Sen wrote, it is essential

today to invent other forms of circuits through which we can bring together marginal elements and make them stronger to encourage reciprocal and mutually beneficial dialogues.

Okwui Enwezor: At the same time, we cannot focus only on biennials and large events. An art critic can work on exhibitions of many different scales. I even think that merely exchanging ideas about major different exhibition spaces, and between curators, intellectuals and artists is important: new possibilities are generated from these encounters, which then provide further impetus for contemporary art.

Hans-Ulrich Obrist: Ten years ago, an organizer could spend two or three years preparing an exhibition. Today, the time frame is much shorter. Research time is often very short, but we have to resist this trend by inventing other venues: the “Cities on the Move” exhibition, for example, tried to resist the package of touring exhibitions. It was organized in just six months, but was held in different forms in New York, Vienna, Bordeaux and Bangkok. We have to construct new time frames to resist the danger of homogeneity and standardization caused by the mechanisms of globalization. On the other hand, the poet and visionary Edouard Glissant refers to the notion of “globality”: he suggests that we not seek over-all solutions but develop negotiations and ways of interacting that can demonstrate the multiplicity of the diverse.

Okwui Ertwezor: We have to ask ourselves certain questions: What is the work of a curator? What role do we want money to play in our exhibitions? For me, having more money means that I can, remain independent and that artists can therefore be allowed to work to their maximum potential instead of limiting themselves to creating poor-quality videos. A curator’s job is not to take advantage of his dominant position to impose his own choices on an artist. It means negotiating with the artist, respecting his or her choices and work, discussing ideas, holding different-opinions. This is how individual projects can move forward.

regards de philosophes

by Jean-Max Colard et Nicolas Demorand

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.

mobile generation

by Jean-Max Colard et Fabrice Bousteau

Which up and coming artists are sparking the interest of curators throughout the world? They’re frequently only slightly younger than the selection of “stars” we are presenting, but the work of these artists appears to be gaining in visibility and impact. It was, of course, very difficult to draw up this list of twenty “young” artists from so many different backgrounds. This overview also looks at the geography of art; we have moved away from London and New York and paid more attention to Berlin, Paris and the teeming French art scene, not to mention India, Mexico and the Scandinavian countries. “Travel educates the youth,” as the saying goes, but in

return, these young people also make us travel, force us to change habits, shake up traditions and most of all, break down the boundaries between various art forms and disciplines. Here's a portrait of twenty figures from a mobile, intangible and wired generation, as well as an interview with Stephanie Moisdon-Trembley, curator of the "Manifesta 4" exhibition in Frankfurt in May of 2002.

For the "Manifesta 4" exhibition, Stephanie Moisdon-Trembley scouted out young artists working today—words in motion on the next generation to come.

"Most young artists are constantly on the move. Given the confusion of all this movement, we lose track of their identities. We can no longer find any trace of them, nor can we situate them; they have co-opted the artistic territory. We can therefore no longer speak of national scenes, given the danger of this type of ideology. Nor can we define movements or groups. But there are geographical places, with as much distance between Marseille, Lille and Paris as between Barcelona, Reykjavik and Istanbul. I was struck by Iceland. The entire world is there, in miniature, with its technology, fashion and soon. At the same time, this landscape of lava and tradition is very isolated. Sarajevo, Moscow and Portugal are all fascinating, hyperactive places, which are still in the midst of multiple transitions. We have to go back in two or three years to see the emerging artists. This mobility is not, however, solely geographical. Just as it's impossible to conceive of a love affair lasting a lifetime, artists today have several lives. I see them continuing to think, come up with projects, but in other fields, other artistic endeavors. Many of them come from such diverse fields as science, architecture or advertising. They decide to move into the art field, but can just as easily leave it again. Just as an artist can become an urban planner, after working with the concept of cities. The notion of pursuing an artistic career is in serious jeopardy. The long-term, linear approach to art has been largely overturned by different forms of mobility and by the collapse of borders. This new generation has suddenly been thrown off track and is confronted with new feelings of anxiety and concern. The question is this: how can we still make something when everything has already been made? How to manage all these images, these references and the multiple sources of knowledge? This is especially true in countries—no man's lands such as the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo—that have been devastated on the political front, that have no infrastructure and where everything remains to be reconstructed. On the other hand, we have the relatively aggressive marketing approach of the international artistic community, with its biennials and major international patrons. This has created a wide split. Yet I don't believe the end result is entirely negative. What interests me is to see how globalization generates differences within a kind of standardization. Young artists from Eastern and Central Europe, for example, are not part of the international network, but they use the same tools, the same I-Mac, the same sources; they are well informed and entirely connected to the world. But the way they use this information is totally different; this is where it becomes fascinating. Rather than focusing on the division between dominant and marginal situations, between the culture of the strong and the culture of the weak, we should try to look at what is happening between the two, and how the global culture is used differently in different places."

Preface

by Jean-Max Colard et Fabrice Bousteau

Paradoxically, it has never been so difficult to be an artist as it is today, with Internet, MTV and advertisements everywhere and in a society in which our screens and magazines are teeming with images. What do artists do in this jungle of aesthetic packaging and billboard images? How do they respond to this apparent plasticity conveyed by the media? And how to recognize them,

despite their oblique strategies; how to follow them in their frequent and multiple explorations beyond the field of art itself?

To answer this barrage of questions, we have decided to present a limited yet exacting selection of more than forty international artists from the new generation who are already among the great names in contemporary art. This subjective selection, made by *Beaux Arts magazine*, but after consulting various well-known figures in the art world, has been expanded and updated from the first edition; the last two years have been marked by the sad loss of Chen Zhen; by young artists such as Olafur Eliasson, Olaf Breuning and Thomas Demand, who have burst on the scene; while others, such as Claude Lévêque, Kendell Geers and Wim Delvoye, author of the famous shit machine *Cloaca*, have become strong players on the international scene. This selection, which takes a closer look at the thriving French scene, is also intended to be a proposal, open to discussion. It includes key figures, but also several unexpected artists; a certain number are absent, of course, and the decisions were sometimes difficult to make. This somewhat subjective list is not meant to be binding in any way; it is not a Best of the 1990s, nor an artistic compilation for the new century—and even less a top 40 of sales. It is not meant to set any standards, but aims merely to reveal more than forty artistic worlds that are still evolving, more than forty paths worth watching. This is more a prospective, rather than a retrospective, in an evolving landscape. Artists today are multidisciplinary; they work with every possible type of support, from postcards to canvases, as well as video and paint. They may grow plants or create automobile prototypes or habitats. Rather than rejecting these forms which often appear to be incongruous and sometimes even irreconcilable with the ideas we all hold about a work of art, we should perhaps let them evolve, and let ourselves be convinced by their very strangeness. If there is one thing that art requires of us, it is a clear and open mind, a momentary breakdown in our mental classifications—to finish with preconceived ideas about contemporary art once and for all.

Conscious state by Jean-Max Colard

She calls her own films “human dramas.” They are stories of young girls at the age of their first sexual experiences (*If 6 WOS 9*, 1995), family dramas (*Today*, 96-97) and couples separating (*The Tender Trap*, 1991, *Consolation Service*, 1999). These are people caught in the narrow weave of human relationships, each one telling his or her story in a monotone, while a image of the person appears and disappears intermittently on screens. After constructing and deconstructing another feminine identity through her work with Maria Ruotsala in the early 1990s, or in the “Dog Bites” series, in which a nude young woman takes on the characteristics and movements of a dog, this filmmaker has become known internationally as the Scandinavian woman of the *Nouveau Roman*, creating works between fiction and documentary, cinema and television, using monologues as a flow of consciousness, multiplying the number of voices and story paths, and pursuing new narrative experiments, with the sound and image ever so slightly out of sync.