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Positions, dispositions, expositions

André Ducret

Translator: Simon Pleasance



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Jauss, Hans Robert. *Petite apologie de l'expérience esthétique*, Paris : Allia, 2007

Péquignot, Bruno. *La Question des œuvres en sociologie des arts et de la culture*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 2007, (Logiques sociales)

Ruby, Christian. *L'Age du public et du spectateur : essai sur les dispositions esthétiques et politiques du public moderne*, Bruxelles : La Lettre volée, 2007, (Essais)

- 1 A collection of articles doth not an essay make: one goes to the quintessence, leaving room for intuition, seeking out the right word—*le mot juste*—to say what you mean. The other describes a scientific trajectory, complete with its meanders and its pentimentos; it abides by academic constraints, and uses, not to say abuses, quotation. The first calls as witness the community of scholars, the second, the erudite community. The essayist is a man of letters, and the scientist, at times a sociologist, like Bruno Péquignot whose book encompasses a whole host of writings whose aim is to give credence to the idea whereby the analysis of works, and their content as much as the manner of their production, distribution and reception, belongs, in its own right and fully, to the sociology of the arts.
- 2 Martin Heidegger, John Dewey, Louis Althusser, François Dagognet, Giorgio Colli—this sociologist has ready recourse to the works of philosophers, which he duly discusses using his own reasoning as back-up. Nor does he hesitate to draw from the history of his own discipline, as soon as “what is true in a research project remains so whatever might be the advances of knowledge, the renewal of problem sets, and methodological developments” (pp. 106-107). Rather than “forgetting” Pierre Francastel, Roger Bastide and Jean Duvignaud yesterday, and Pierre Bourdieu today, let's use them, for they still

have much to teach us. A chapter on the “contemporary art quarrel” which marked the end of the 20th century as well as another tiff about the difference between exegesis, hermeneutics and interpretation, are the choice morsels of a final section in which the author fortifies the position he intends to defend versus his colleagues and rivals, among them Nathalie Heinich, who, for her part, opts for the book of interviews to shed light on her own itinerary.

- 3 Some questions nevertheless recur: should sociology work the same field as art history, but with different tools? Or should it be content to claim such and such a portion thereof, which might overlook historians? And in particular, over and above these boundary issues between disciplines, isn't the nub of it all the problem set carved out by the researcher to broach his object? From this viewpoint, all that matters is the established facts of research and, here, they are rich and plentiful. But how does knowing more about the person help towards a better grasp of the work? The way in which sociologists broach the autobiographical narrative, when what is involved is their personal itinerary, merits, it seems to me, further questioning: at what moment should one talk about oneself, for what reasons, and in what form? Alternatively, what, in sociology, is the function of these “authorized narratives”, as Jean-Marc Poinot calls them?¹
- 4 The answer, it just so happens, might be: everything you've always wanted to know about the work of a sociologist of art but never dared to ask. Sense of concreteness, wariness with regard to philosophy, fondness for inquiry and, let's not forget it, the need to “earn our daily bread”, all thus very swiftly lead Nathalie Heinich to explore many different terrains. She describes how, contract after contract, a researcher's career is constructed, the haphazardness of encounters and readings, enthusiasms and disappointments, laboratory life, the choice of method, and the way in which a personal line of thinking is fashioned step by step—a particular set of issues. Whence the affinities which emerge after the fact between works where, in each instance, she goes back and forth from the detailed approach to specific situations to the construction of a “standard ideal” or all-encompassing model capable of describing as much.
- 5 When she explains her interest in contemporary art and the controversies surrounding it, she returns to the reactions stirred up, in— and outside the scientific arena, by analyses usually focused on “the conceptions that actors make for themselves about art” (vol.1, p. 54), otherwise put: on what works “do” rather than on what they “are” (vol.2, p. 43). Taking seriously the progress made by the discipline since the 1960s, and preferring empirical work, is, for her, the duty henceforth of any old pretender to the title of “sociologist of art”, for the solitary pleasures of the philosophical exercise in camera offers only meager consolations as compared with what we are taught by the proof of facts, and contact with the terrain.
- 6 Will Hans-Robert Jauss's plea that philosophy return to aesthetic experience, in particular—and in spite of and versus Theodor Adorno—to the issue of “aesthetic pleasure”, nevertheless be of interest to the advocates of a so-called “pragmatic” sociology? This is probably the editorial wager made in borrowing, in fragment form, from that 1972 lecture that has already been published in a French version². As far as Christian Ruby's book is concerned, treating as it does the way in which the figures of what we often—with nary a thought about their genesis—call *the* “public” and *the* “spectator” come into being, it puts a sequence of historical and etymological considerations—about the Age of Enlightenment in particular—at the beck and call of an in-depth line of thinking on the joint construction of the work and the listener, reader and viewer thereof.

- 7 Whether what is involved is classical, modern or contemporary art—the art of the culture industry and of “the emergence of the age of people” (p. 10), “the spectator must almost simultaneously, in front of each and every work, especially when new, reconstruct himself in relation to it by deconstructing himself in relation to the incorporated model” (p. 59). Exhibition arrangements, spectacles, forms of sociability, and even political mores determine the range of possible aesthetic stances. Alfred Stieglitz’s stance, as he photographed Marcel Duchamp’s urinal, is not the same as Goethe’s as he gazed upon Strasbourg cathedral. Taking things much further, with so-called “contemporary” art, the spectator/viewer is once and for all freed from aesthetic regulations” (p. 171), and ready to be exposed to other “exercises” (p. 179), which are no longer depleted by the mere chord of sensibility. Do I dare conclude thus, with the question: and will the sociology of reception—if not that of “works”—thus retrieve all its rights?
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NOTES

1. Poinot, Jean-Marc. *Quand l'œuvre a lieu : l'art exposé et ses récits autorisés*, Geneva/Villeurbanne : MAMCO/Institut d'art contemporain, 1999
2. Jauss, Hans-Robert. *Pour une esthétique de la réception*, Paris : Gallimard, 1978, pp. 123-157