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Kneading Ambiguity

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Baqué, Dominique. *Pour un nouvel art politique : de l'art contemporain au documentaire*, Paris : Flammarion, 2004

Mongin, Olivier. *L'Artiste et le politique : éloge de la scène dans la société des écrans*, Paris : Textuel, 2004, (Conversations pour demain)

Vander Gucht, Daniel. *Art et politique : pour une redéfinition de l'art engagé*, Bruxelles : Ed. Labor, 2004, (Quartier libre)

- 1 In a “critical and polemical” essay, Dominique Baqué puts forward the hypothesis that for the past 20 years art has flopped. In the face of the complexity of reality, it is naïve and ineffectual. In railing against activist practices associated with the anti-globalization doxy, the author observes the depoliticized withdrawal of “the art of the intimate”, condemns the offhandedness of “entertainment artists”, refutes the effectiveness of the “neo-avant-garde”, and laments the illusions of “relational aesthetics”. After this postulate, she asserts that, nowadays, the documentary will take over from art, as a “plastic, discursive and informative” form. Its “lucidity” will usher in a new awareness. The proposition is fitting because the documentary style has dominated many exhibitions. D.Baqué ends by describing the significant photographic approaches of Allan Sekula, Marc Pataut and Gilles Saussier, who question their conditions of production and reception, the challenges of their images and the way they articulate with words. She then tackles the issues of withdrawal, silence and invisibility raised by the films of Claude Lanzmann and Rithy Panh.
- 2 The interest of this analysis has to do with the fact that she recognizes the importance of the political dimension of the sign, and that she highlights its weaknesses, not to say the ingenuousness of certain artistic propositions (Rébecca Bournigault, Lucy Orta). However, she does not clarify the disputable notion of “political art” here used to describe different

practices, thereby actually eluding the political character of all artistic signs. Stances (like Felix Gonzalez-Torres's denial of work) lead to a general discourse (how to interpret Jochen Gerz's anti-memorials?¹ What about the Georges Didi-Huberman/G rard Wajcman controversy?²) The thesis is weakened by the simplification of the views held by the artists, and by the hasty verdicts pronounced on the way the works are received (Jenny Holzer), and even through the poor understanding of them (Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Porte-Parole*). Absences are problematic: no reference to concepts (philosophical, cultural) whose works might derive some benefit, nor to the theoretical debate dealing with the place of the subject and of politics in democracies (Ernesto Laclau), nor to the reappropriation of history practised by theoreticians (Gayatri Spivak, Edward W. Said) and non-western artists³. One or two arguments flirt with the illusion that the quality of the political dimension of art is its unambiguousness. Now, the contradictions of certain propositions in no way deny their meaning and their effects. They are probably inherent to the most relevant works, those capable of questioning them all over again. To explore works, is it not important not to reduce their ambiguities and to envisage them as forms of reflection?

- 3 In defending the documentary as if, at the present time, there existed just the one form of action, this book tends to be incorporated in diagnoses about the end of modernity, which merely recognize the presuppositions of modernism, its partial interpretation of the upheavals of art, and their connections with political liberation movements in the name of a unilinear vision of history. The documentary art, as Olivier Lugon has shown⁴, actually stems, back in the 1930s, from the paradox between document and aesthetics. To grasp its resurgence, it is important to pursue the study of its influence on the artistic practices of the 20th century. The complexity of the definition of the social and political role of art has to do with its symbolic and cognitive function. In order to examine the dynamics of the present, it seems necessary to focus on precise observations, and the way the artistic sign is conceived—its genesis, context, and the processes of reception and aesthetic appreciation.
- 4 However, this book is based on a positive ambiguity: if it contests, it is also a call for aesthetic and political watchfulness. In reality, this text as it were kneads itself through contrasting and conflicting perspectives of meaning, which break up its own identity (its backing of the libertarian "hacktivism" of the Internet). It is political in the sense that it does not solve questions. It suggests an attempt at clarity, but without advocating any one-off view. In this, it permits thought to invent itself. This approach calls to mind that of the contemporary intellectual, as defined by Olivier Mongin. Unlike the expert and the partisan intellectual, his stance consists in constructing a set with heterogeneous elements and articulating their contradictions. It stipulates a democratic commitment respecting the rules of play of democracy, i.e. conflictual consensus ("unity" in discord)⁵. In a conversation extending the line of thinking entertained since 1989 about television, globalization, and cities, O. Mongin opposes the "society of the spectacle which multiplies observations, exposes social conflicts but omits to present them". Reinventing distance obliges you to link aesthetics and politics to give shape to a reality and offer a place to the author of this form, demanding to know who he is and whom he is addressing. Quintessential questions.
- 5 In other respects, Daniel Vander Gucht's book takes up a certain number of well-worn themes ("divorce between contemporary art and the public", "subversion and subsidy") by incorporating the revision of the modernist history of art history. This text, which is

neither a theoretical critique of art based on a grasp of the historical process, nor a critique of the experience offered by the works, is based on “one or two simple conceptual tools taken from sociology and philosophy”. In the form of a synthetic commentary, it conveys an instant erudition. Its final chapter underscores the role of women on the art scene of the 1970s and the problem sets issuing from aesthetic feminist movements. It has the merit of broaching an issue often overlooked in France (and in Belgium?).

NOTES

1. See Young, James E., *The Texture of Memory*, Yale: University Press, 1993
2. See Didi-Huberman, G. “Images malgré tout”, in the catalogue of the exhibition *Mémoire des camps* (Paris : Marval, 2001) ; the articles “De la croyance photographique” and “Reporter photographe à Auschwitz” by G. Wajcman and Elisabeth Pagnoux in *Les Temps modernes*, n°613, March-April-May 2001 ; and, Didi-Huberman, G. *Images malgré tout*, Paris : Minuit, 2003 (see the notice 017 in this issue of *Critique d'art*). Does the term “right distance” used by D. Baqué call to mind Paul Ricœur’s “right memory”?
3. For example, Raqs Media Collective, The Atlas Group, Kader Attia.
4. *Le Style documentaire : d'Auguste Sander à Walker Evans, 1920-1945*, Paris, Macula, 2001, (Le Champ de l'image). For further details on the book see: *Critique d'art*, n°19, notice 056.
5. The theme is a topical one. See the republication of Rancière, Jacques. *Aux bords du politique*, Paris : Folio, 2004.