Criticism in the Face of the Anthropocene

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EDITOR'S NOTE

“Man is in search of a new language about which no grammarian, in any language, will have anything to say.” Whether this is a new visual or theoretical language, this search—referred to here by one of the founding fathers of art criticism, Guillaume Apollinaire, in his *Calligrammes*—needs bright minds, cheeky enough to cross accepted boundaries, summon up doubt in the face of certainties, and question the plural phenomena of these jolting contemporary worlds.

Faithful to this idea, the magazine *Critique d'art* now includes the heading “Theory & Criticism”, conceived as a deliberately free space, rich in variations of tones. Because far from posing as “grammarians”, it behooves us to open a door to the draughts (of time), the better to give free rein to other voices of criticism in the making. These voices belong to winners of the art theory and criticism prize, awarded once a year by the Centre national des arts plastiques (CNAP). Among the class of 2013 we must salute the “contemporary archaeology” proposed by Damien Airault in his research dedicated to the reconstruction of the exhibition *Science Fiction* which Harald Szeemann organized in 1967 at the Museum of Decorative Arts. For her part, concerned with going beyond Western peripheries, Mildred Duran has, thanks to this grant, embarked on an investigation into the semiological adventures of action-art which she has located in today's Asia, Africa and South America. To launch this heading, we have invited Vincent Normand to have his say, in order to introduce the theoretical perimeter of his current research. Because he gives pride of place to one of the component factors of criticism: the history of exhibitions. Because he is bold enough to enter through the door of epistemology, from the angle of the anthropological hypothesis of the Anthropocene. Somewhere between erosion and

stratification, the politics of the museological eye becomes geology: might this not be one of these much sought-after languages? Open to discussion.

Antje Kramer-Mallordy

The "Brewster stereoscope", 1849. Source : *Popular Science Monthly*, vol.21, New York, 1882

- 1 The repercussions of the Anthropocene concept in the scientific community over the past decade or so have recently spread to the field of the Human and Political Sciences. This concept has in fact crystallized many vehicles of contemporary thought, ushering in a kind of "geological turn" in various disciplines, from philosophy to the epistemology of the sciences, from political economy to ecology, and from ontology to aesthetics.
- 2 This essay is a brief introduction to a few aspects of an area of research that is trying to inscribe the history of exhibitions and representation in the broader field of a history of observation, in the light of the consequences of the Anthropocene concept in the economy of knowledge. The source of this research lies in two typical aspects of the current theoretical and artistic landscape: on the one hand, it takes note of the movement of hypercritical introspection which seems to embrace the revived interest in the history of exhibitions and its key figures (in particular that of the curator, about whom many curators are writing books),¹ and, on the other hand, it is fuelled by prospects launched by a set of authors whose various research projects are contributing more or less directly to what can be called an "anthropology of modernity".² So this research is driven by the desire to find a vantage point from which to grasp the borders and boundaries which modernity has imprinted in the world, both in their present structural forms and in their historical "cast shadows", in order to precisely situate the role of art in the transformation of their formal, epistemological and political operations. What is involved here is the introduction of fundamental elements of a historiographical discourse encompassing both the history of exhibition systems throughout modernity

and the anthropological issues which the Anthropocene concept ushers in, by focusing, to this effect, on the central constitutive instrument representing the modern spectator, the birth place of art criticism: the museum.

3 The Anthropocenic Theatre: a Reverse Stage

- 4 The Anthropocene is hallmarked by the evidence of the impact of human activity on the geological formation of planet earth, whose most significant effect since the end of the 20th century is climate change. The immediate consequence of such a definition is the transfer to a geological level of the description of nature as an anthropogenic entity, meaning manipulated, altered and partly produced by Man. The circle which the Anthropocene draws indifferently around human beings and Nature radically modifies the definition of this latter: previously conceived like everything that was situated outside the production of humans, or as the mere backdrop of human activity and thought, on the Anthropocenic stage Nature enters the sphere of technical objects fashioned by man.
- 5 The Anthropocene, whose chronology is a matter of debate, but whose beginning overlaps with the industrial revolutions that marked the mid-18th century, and incipient capitalism, is above all an instrument lending a new visibility to the *compearance* between the human figure and the world. With regard to this *compearance*, we can say that it has been historically sorted out by the project of Reason which has informed scientific modernity and continental philosophy, and that it has consisted in the construction of an absolute discontinuity (an ontological separation) between Man and Nature, and between subjects and objects. By making explicit the productive continuity between human gestures and the environment in which they are carried out, the Anthropocene reveals that the age of extraction of the historical subject from Nature (in which modernity has consisted) has simultaneously been the age of the constitution of humanity as a geological stratum. The Anthropocene turns the modern gesture of separation between Nature and the transcendent humanist subject into a process inseparable from “erosion” of the ground from which it operated. The Anthropocene thus exposes the movement whereby human history encounters geological time, where the historical becoming of Man, which has informed Western modernity, overlaps with that against which it had posited its movement, exposing the human figure and the backdrop of Nature to their mutual ontological instability: the history of Nature and that of civilization’s crossed paths. By revealing that “background” and “figure” enter an unstable relation, and that the modern discontinuity between these two levels of representation of existence is dissolved in post-humanist socio-technological structures, the Anthropocene consists in a techno-ecological discourse to do with the re-conceptualization of *anthropos* as a planetary relation.
- 6 The Anthropocene thus introduces a new precariousness into the epistemological divisions and the great divides that modernity has imprinted in the world. By taking note of the fact that modern tools of knowledge and appropriation of Nature have not simply contributed to reforming an *analytical* image of this latter, but also to producing it in a *synthetic* way, the Anthropocene in a way ratifies certain aspects of the “symmetrical anthropology” initiated in the 1990s by Bruno Latour.³ In a now famous formula, Bruno Latour actually asserts that the Moderns “see double”: at the basis of modernity there is, according to him, a fundamental dissociation between what the Moderns, in their endeavour to explain the world, have achieved in *practice* (the ever subtler recomposition of objects of knowledge in an infinite number of hybrids) and the *theory* that the Moderns

have produced by themselves (sorting these hybrids into pure forms). The Anthropocene is what sheds light on this “binocular” vision which defines modern epistemology: highlighting both the operations of purification which constitute modern knowledge and the process of hybridization which underpins its activity, it invites us to undertake a critical plunge into the historical formation of discontinuities, borders and boundaries which, through modernity, have delimited the space of Reason and its political, scientific and aesthetic project. This history has to do with the logic on all fronts of modernity and it is a matter of undertaking it without losing sight of the fact that the history of Modernism in art, as well as that of its institutions (at the forefront of which comes the museum), have conveyed and are still conveying the systemic conditions of modernity.

7 **The Museum: Geometry of the Eye**

- 8 If Walter Benjamin saw no difference between the optical experience offered by a museum, a botanical garden and a casino, this was because the identity of the modern museum lies at the nexus of a series of technological, epistemological and anthropological determinations common to many technologies of the gaze and modern cultural practices which, together, define modernity as a reform of vision. The “Copernican revolution” of the spectator proposed by Emmanuel Kant in the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787) in fact consisted in a “change of viewpoint” which opened the project of western modernity up to a “re-orientation” of the subject for which the museum has provided a special framework.
- 9 The museum, whose birth can be dated back to 1793 with the parallel opening in Paris of the Museum central des arts de la République in the Palais du Louvre and the Museum of Natural History in the Jardin des Plantes, is a place of assemblage for this modern subjectivity. The modern museum, first and foremost, is a place hallmarked by the dialectical reversal which it imprints in the “life” of things. As an object isolator, it de-animates previously “animate” entities by uprooting them from their “environment”, and is constantly re-animating “dead” objects by over-determining their meaning and projecting this latter into a concentrated field of attention: the modern cosmography of taxonomy is worked out here. The museum’s interior may be regarded as the interface between the domains for which René Descartes established opposites: *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, observer and world: the museum is the site in which an orderly projection of the world, of “extended substance” is made available for inspection by the mind.
- 10 It is possible to conceive of the modern museum as a system operating by way of “de-naturalizing” cuts creating the silent space of an exchange put to death, de-animated, then re-animated by a set of synthetic mediations. In this respect, the museum opens up a space of visibilities similar to the one that Michel Foucault⁴ identified in the clinic, promoting its method of outlining and cutting to the rank of anthropological truth determining modern knowledge in general. By upholding the process of the objectivisation of things, the clinic culminates in a system of visibility which has its vanishing point and its surface of inscription in the observer’s subjectivity. The clinic defines the “triangle of truth” in which modern epistemology finds its geometry: erected therein are borders and boundaries which, by delimiting objects in the world, in fact cross the world and Nature, but pass through the interior of the subject, through the body, and through modern culture. In this configuration, the very activity of observing an object projected into the de-naturalized space of the institution (clinic, laboratory, museum) implies a *decision* which consists in the negotiation of an ever deepening chasm, an unfathomable break on both sides of which subjects and objects are being constantly

redistributed. The museum thus takes part in the modern politics of vision: a technique of alignment of subjectivity with operations of objectification here details new procedures of individuation.

11 As has been shown by Stéphane Lojkine in his study of Denis Diderot's *Salons*,⁵ by accompanying the institutionalization of the exhibition space which precedes the birth of the modern museum, the birth of art criticism itself responds to this new geometry. For Stéphane Lojkine, Denis Diderot's *Salons* are nothing less than a visual system repeating that of the exhibition. They form the space of a "scopic crystallization" where new attention is paid to the geometricality of the pictorial space (its "stage-like privilege") whereby the "journalistic revolution" of criticism is accomplished: for reader and spectator alike, there is a polarity between attention and distraction, in which the notion of "figure" intervenes as a vehicle of transgression of the implicit "fourth wall" which separates the observer from the stage-like arrangement of the painting, finding its vanishing point in the spectator's eye and making the exhibition (or its critical account) the place of a very real *transaction* between subjects and objects.

12 Whether the museum (and the discursive critical system developed therein) exhibits natural objects or images, it positions the spectator's eye as the place of *naturalization* of the mechanics of cutting which underpins its system. In this respect, like many other modern institutions, the museum is the theatre of operations of what Giorgio Agamben has called "the anthropological machine":⁶ a technology for extracting the subject.

13 A Stereoscopic Horizon

14 We can thus guess how the Anthropocene concept, which sheds light on a network of continuities precisely where Western modernity has imprinted major discontinuities, can intervene in the history of exhibition systems. By operating through de-naturalizing cuts ceaselessly naturalized in the eye of the spectator, the museum is a technology of the gaze where the dialectical bond between the modern subject and the world is worked out in terms whose geometry is settled by the project of Reason of Western modernity. The Anthropocene in this respect appears like an epistemological opportunity for the history of art and its exhibition. In fact, as Jonathan Crary has shown in two major studies,⁷ the process of modernization which marked the end of the 18th century in Europe brought out an unprecedented mass of knowledge, which simultaneously produced techniques of capture and control of the human subject, as well as the conditions for possibility of an emancipation of vision, through formal experimentation within the Modernist theory of art. All consistent analysis of modern culture must, according to him, tackle the ways in which Modernism, far from being just a reaction, a redemption, or a transcendence of the process of modern scientific and economic rationalization, is inseparable from its operations.

15 The Anthropocene concept permits the inclusion of such an approach within universal anthropological frameworks, in which it becomes possible to sketch out the way in which the history of *mimesis* (and representation) and the history of capitalism are led by a third history, that of technology, and more specifically the technologies of vision. However, the major difficulty in introducing the Anthropocene concept into the Human Sciences, aesthetic theory and art history is that it consists in a unifying machine constantly invoking the broadest of frameworks (the planet, humanity...) in which the variety of expressions can easily fade into the background, thus becoming a tool neutralizing the host of political ramifications of the structures it makes visible.

- 16 A critical project, which would confront the space of visibility opened up by the Anthropocene, and this without sacrificing its political horizon, might consist in a twofold gesture, a posture which, together with Walter Benjamin, we might describe as “stereoscopic”. By simultaneously addressing the constitution of the objective structures and systems running through the modern great narratives, and the expressions, formal articulations and artistic experiments through which subjectivity is developed, placed and cut-up therein, this stereoscopy would consist both in a narrative archaeology making the systemic conditions of modernity visible, and in the assertion of the aesthetic space as an entity inscribed both in their dialectical constitution and their possible transformation.
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NOTES

1. We refer readers to the article by Jens Hoffmann published in n°41 (spring/summer) of *Critique d'art*: “Curating Between the Lines”, p.73-85.
2. From Bruno Latour’s work to the revival of interest in the issue of objectivity, and from the technical history of the symbolic system of observation undertaken by Jonathan Crary to the critique of anthropocentrism which in particular marks so-called “oriented object” philosophy.
3. Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern: Essays of a Symmetrical Anthropology*, Harvard University Press, 1993
4. Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of the Clinic*, New York: Vintage, 1975
5. Lojkine, Stéphane. *L’Œil révolté : les Salons de Diderot*, Paris : Jacqueline Chambon, 2007
6. See Agamben, Giorgio. *The Open: Man and Animal*, Stanford University Press, 2004
7. Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer*, Cambridge : MIT Press, 1992 and *Suspensions of Perceptions: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture*, Cambridge : MIT Press, 2001