Art Criticism in the Expanded Field

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REFERENCES

Une Anthologie de la revue Texte zur Kunst de 1990 à 1998, Dijon : Les Presses du réel ; Zurich : JRP|Ringier, 2010, (Documents — Documents sur l'art) Sous la dir. de Catherine Chevalier, Andreas Fohr

- 1 The magazine *Texte zur Kunst* (TZK) was created in 1990 by Isabelle Graw and Stefan Germer, who had noted that the German art scene had no significant theoretical organ. Given the fame of German artists on the international scene, and the quality of the country's publishing houses and art schools, this diagnosis was, with hindsight, a surprising one. The moment chosen by Graw and Germer to remedy this situation was indisputably timely. The collapse of the market and the loss of references and landmarks caused by an end of art, as prophesied by Hans Belting and Arthur Danto, invited a re-positioning and a re-affirmation of a critical involvement which years of speculation had markedly sidelined. Drawing inspiration from the American magazine *October* and the no less mythical German magazine *Interfunktionen*, once headed by Benjamin Buchloh, TZK would, if we are to go by what the editors of this anthology say, aim at "linking present-day artistic production and thinking resulting from Art History, to explain art's social function" (p. 12). But also, in tune with the works of Diedrich Diederichsen, an author who would become one of the pillars of TZK, and whose musical magazine *Spex* represents another sphere of influence, "to maintain a dialectical connection between popular culture and avant-garde, and, to this end, introduce system theories, the quest for context, and issues of aesthetic reception" (*idem*, p. 12). "Art criticism", in the words of Graw and Germer in the preface to TZK n° 5, "interests us as a field in which [...] discourse overlaps, and as a field which thus permits links between society's different spheres. For us, art criticism means less a circumscribed field than a line of thinking, and more a critique "in the expanded field" than an art criticism which highlights social relevance through artistic praxis, in the

sense that, for example, it articulates psychoanalytical, political and feminist discourse" (1992, quoted in *Idem*). *TZK* authors would remain attached to this credo involving an art criticism "in the expanded field" throughout the magazine's career, ending up by assuming a stance which would, in due course, divide them from the generation and state of mind of *October*, whose "disciplinary doctrine" turned out in the end to be incompatible with the openness to the "Visual" and the "Cultural" claimed by *TZK*'s editors. Proof thereof lies in Rosalind Krauss's essay, published in November 1995 by the magazine, where the art historian blames the "interdisciplinarity" gnawing away at Art History, entailing a fatal "deskilling". "Without the skills needed to make a thorough reading of the structure of any object under examination", wrote Krauss in that essay, "we are condemned, at the analytical level, to repeat those problems of blindness and repression that we had precisely wanted to try and describe at the level of their social effects" (pp. 408-409). One of the interests of *TZK* is to be open, as is perfectly illustrated by this Krauss contribution, to antagonistic stances, and fall in step with a culture of dialogue, not to say confrontation¹ helping magazine members to better assert their own positions.

- 2 We find this culture of dialogue and confrontation in the many interviews included in the anthology, with Roberto Ohrt, Hal Foster, R. Krauss, Félix Guattari, Martin Kippenberger and Linda Nochlin. This selection says a whole lot about the eclecticism that prevails within a publishing/editorial policy which is still targeted at and attached to a diversified and coherent community of artists and thinkers. It is worth noting in this respect that *TZK* is relatively untouched by the hagiographical exercise, with its authors not hesitating to point the finger at such and such a shadowy ("delicate") zone of artists who have been or are their travelling companions. Graw's courageous and uncompromising contribution on Isa Genzken is dazzling proof of this². Some artists, however, are entitled to special treatment. Starting with Mike Kelley, whose work is dealt with in an unusual and engaging essay by Tom Holert. The Californian artist is described therein, in reference to Michel Foucault, as an intellectual artist who is at once "universal" and "specific". "It would be a mistake", writes Holert in what can be regarded as a crypto-manifesto for *TZK*, "not to see in the figure of the universal intellectual artist, whom Kelley seems to incarnate, a representative of specialization. For there is no clue here which makes it possible to say that Kelley has seriously involved his position as a plastic artist, based on which the increasing number of skills and interests is organized, because he would have angrily exhausted the limits right to the end" (p. 359). It would suffice to replace Kelley's name with those of the *TZK* authors and that of the artist, visual or plastic, by art critic, to grasp the ambitious and perilous tack taken by Graw and Germer.
- 3 All credit to Catherine Chevalier and Andreas Fohr for having triggered and executed his high profile project. There is nevertheless something regrettable about the self-flagellatory exercise which the editors of the anthology have inflicted upon themselves, lamenting in their preface that French art critics, unlike their German and Anglo-Saxon colleagues, are not interested in the "application of semiological, Marxist, structuralist tools issuing from the thinking of French theoreticians" (p. 7). Such an assertion would merit close examination. Some will thus riposte that certain "French" thinkers, like Georges Didi-Huberman, have for their part managed to draw from the loam of "German" theory (Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin) to underwrite an idea which German critics are far from being unaware of. Chevalier and Fohr are the first to

recognize the importance of the movement, import and export of theoretical texts. And this in spite of the inevitable “slips and misunderstandings” caused by these operations. So should we lament the fact that such and such an essay has been published in Cologne and not Paris, Rennes, or Dijon, once tools, like this anthology, can guarantee its spread? “All artistic excursion, all theoretical adventure requires that the boundaries be forever called into question, endangered, and re-incorporated” (p. 505), writes Trinh T. Minh-Ha, quoted epigraphically by Renée Green in “L’Artiste comme ethnographe” (1997). And there is no way we can gainsay her.

NOTES

1. On this subject, read Sabeth Buchmann’s “response” to R. Krauss’s essay: « La Prison de l’histoire de l’art » (1997).
2. Graw, Isabelle. « L’Image professionnelle de la femme artiste. Le monde du travail d’Isa Genzken » (1994). In this respect it is a pity that the publishers have not included the essay by S. Germer on Gerhard Richter (« Familienanschluss. Zur Thematisierung des Privaten in neueren Bildern Gerhard Richters », *TZK*, n° 26, June 1997).