“Small Publishers”?

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- 1 At our latest editorial board meeting we were surprised by the number of publishers we knew little about, plying their trade in the area of books about contemporary art. "Small publishers"? Critical, theoretical and historical work on contemporary art seems to have been totally co-opted by publishing houses which do not belong to major conglomerates, international groups (Taschen, Thames & Hudson) and traditional publishers of Fine Books. There thus seems to be an upsurge, alongside Macula, Les Presses du Réel (with the L'Ecart Absolu collection, edited by Michel Giroud), the Critiques d'Art section at Jacqueline Chambon, Allia, and so on; La Lettre Volée, Léo Scheer editions, the Nantes-based philosophy publisher Pleins Feux, Au Même Titre, Les Editions de l'Œil... Not forgetting the new collection Arts et esthétique edited by the philosopher Gilles Tiberghien at Desclée de Brouwer, focusing on publishing "confirmed researchers and essayists, as well as art historical translations, forming a bridge between historically very far apart periods, to restore memory to contemporary art and lend topicality to age-old problem sets."
- 2 Marion Sauvaire, in charge of supporting creative work at the FIACRE (Visual Arts Department at the Ministry of Culture), is nothing if not enthusiastic: "The small are making the big feel guilty. They have different methods, take no salaries (or small ones), and are happier taking risks. They are well aware of the dearth of basic essays. These publishers are also university folk, like Daniel Vander Gucht at La Lettre Volée, and Michel Poivert, for photography. There is new cross-fertilization going on between academics, who are beyond reproach, and young authors following and forming a corpus of writers for new collections. Henceforth, professionals are picked out."
- 3 Chantal Desmazières, chairwoman of the Art group at the Syndicat National de l'Edition (National Publishing Union), is pleased about the "dynamism of small publishers. Léo Scheer has joined us, as have Picard and Au Même Titre. Some publishers do not belong to the Syndicat National de l'Edition, but take part in our programmes: the Carré des Arts at the Book Fair (Paris), our specific activities at the Mai du livre d'art, and our book fair at Nantes, now in its third year. We have also introduced an information letter called Carré

des Arts, designed for bookshops, which presents our six-monthly programme, and distinguished us from the "*Beaux Livres*/Fine Books". Small publishers need us, just as we need them, because large groups are no longer producing art books, and it's small publishers who are taking up the slack..."

- 4 "At the DAP (Visual Arts Department)", Marion Sauvaire points out, "we put out invitations to tender, proposing books where we can cover translation and manufacturing costs, for example Gerhard Richter's *Ecrits*, and the third volume of *Art en Théorie* by Harrison, Wood and Gaiger... We are trying to involve about 50 publishers. But for Rosalind Krauss's *The Optical Unconscious* we have had two replies! Macula couldn't take it on, because they had three other titles being subsidized by us, which still hadn't been published. It was *Au Même Titre* which swung the deal, provided that the first fifteen pages of translation were checked. And it worked!"
- 5 "It was about two and half years ago", recalls Ingrid Filot at *Au Même Titre*. "We answered the invitation to tender. We're a really small organization, with just two fulltime employees. The venture was quite tricky, nobody had given us much advice about rights in the United States, but we ended up making discreet approaches to the American publisher MIT Press. Rosalind Krauss closely supervised the translation of *L'Inconscient Optique*. The layout was kept identical, because the book had already been distributed in France in its English version, with its very salient visual stamp. It's our intention to print 4,000 copies, because it's a work people are waiting for."
- 6 By stigmatizing those "collections that are totally pre-paid for by the Ministry of Culture with major publishers", Daniel Vander Gucht, one of the three people running *La Lettre Volée* in French-speaking Belgium (who, incidentally, also teaches sociology at Brussels University), replied to the DAP's invitation to tender for the writings of the American Hal Foster. "As a rule, small publishers often grumble about being trampled underfoot by large firms, but we're lucky enough to work very closely with authors and artists alike. This is what happens in all cultural productions, like, for example, small music labels. We set up this company in 1989: the pace has been stepped up, with 30-40 books published annually, with editions of between 1000 and 2000, and there's no problem distributing our titles in French-speaking countries. Our collection of essays is our backbone and mainstay, it's a successful but risky wager, because we have few colleagues thriving in this particular area, and above all we don't have enough translations! We're expecting there to be more competition, and we're hoping French publishers will give things a bit of a shot in the arm..."
- 7 The presence of professor of art history Daniel Arasse at the head of the "Arts" committee at the Centre National des Lettres, might—which would suit us fine—boost these translations and sought-after works. Unlike the DAP, the CNL only backs projects once the manuscripts have been read and selected by specialized readers. Nevertheless, there are some who completely—or almost—sidestep the divine hand of the Ministry, such as the Editions de l'Œil, run by Gael Teischer and Freddy Donaes: "We're five years old. We got into publishing quite by chance in 1997. We have close links with the film director Jean-Daniel Pollet, who gave us a book project about himself. It caught our fancy". Outcome: some 50 books, including those little "notebooks", 26 24-pages four-colour pocket books (selling for 5.50 Euros), devoted to photographers, film-makers, and painters from other continents (Mali, Congo, Thailand).
- 8 The result is that large publishers are having to make moves, "with small publishers hot on their heels", as Marion Sauvaire explains. She reckons that the incentive-based policy

"is starting to pay off, after ten years". There is still the problem of book distribution, which might well be thrashed out in these pages in the near future.