The Means of the End of Art

François Albéra

Translator: Simon Pleasance

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2262>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.2262

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2000

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

François Albéra, « The Means of the End of Art », *Critique d'art* [Online], 16 | Automne 2000, Online since 24 April 2012, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2262> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.2262

This text was automatically generated on 30 April 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

The Means of the End of Art

François Albéra

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Rush, Michael. *Les Nouveaux Médias dans l'art*, Paris : Thames & Hudson, 2000, (L'Univers de l'art)

Douglas Gordon : *déjà-vu, questions & answers* (vol.1, 1992-1996 ; vol. 2, 1997-1998 ; vol. 3, 1999-2000), Paris : Paris-Musées, 2000

Len Lye, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou, 2000

- 1 Michael Rush's book dealing with the "new media in art"¹ presupposes that many basic issues of contemporary thinking on art are resolved by looking at art by the yardstick of the "new technologies"—to wit, video and things digital. Even though what is involved is "deterritorialization", "dematerialization" and "explosion of boundaries", everything happens as if these "new technologies"—which some are happier calling the "latest" technologies²—were simply *renewing* the means of art. Like Florence de Mèredieu some years back³, envisaging new media, new supports, and new practices by singling them out as causes of a redrafting of art, blurs what they are the symptom of. The historian "overviews" these techniques by arranging them along a linear chronological axis: after the "prehistory" of avant-garde and experimental cinema, we proceed from performance to video art, and from this to installation, and then to digital art. Another level of this same chronology starts out from "temporal art" and ends up at "virtual reality". There are actually one or more preconditions to these descriptive, evolutive approaches, which are consequently "late", and these preconditions involve rethinking certain concepts such as: the place of technology (should we understand it in Benjamin-related terms where it redefined art on new bases—reproduction, mass distribution, social linkage, etc.?), the ongoing quality or otherwise of the autonomy of the artistic arena, in particular. Do we get a "Copernican upheaval" if we strive, invariably, to look for a definition of the

media as medium [in other words, lending it the dignity of a “specificity”—and “liberating” it (p.86)] then deeming successful works where this medium “tallies perfectly with the visions of artists or, conversely, when artists are in perfect symbiosis with technology” (p.192)? It is probably more than likely that the said upheavals stem less from changes within the artistic arena than are the refracted effect in this albeit uncertain site of external phenomena, affecting all of society and social practices. Douglas Gordon’s propositions in the three slim volumes of *Déjà-vu* attest better to the nature of this shift. Like Vito Acconci saying that the possession of a “technology” or “technique” presupposed, for him, “assigning [himself] a terrain from which [he] would have to be constantly exhuming [himself] as one technique stands for the next” and that, as a result, he “deviates” from this type of concern to become an “instrument... acting on any kind of available terrain” (*Steps into Performance*). D. Gordon lays claim to his “amateurism” in the areas he broaches and is above all eager to make the media a “channel”: “I work with ideas which can be... communicated, for they use the mass culture. Even if people don’t know why I do this work, they know what I use” (vol.3, p. 34). Here we have a stance on the artistic approach which goes beyond the issue, properly so-called, of techniques and technologies, and which has to do with its object. Since the artist’s approach uses his own body, found objects, mass imagery, or all of the above, the technology selected is of less moment than the type of link made with the recipient. On the other hand, the fact that technologies—of communications, duplication and virtualization—have to do or are one of the bases of this general upheaval is to be considered, needless to say, in the extension of the notes made by Kracauer and Benjamin on patterns of urban behaviour, gestuality, and so on, worked out with a view to prospects opened up by G. Simmel’s “sociology”. But Jean-François Lyotard’s thinking in his *Immatériaux*—new technologies as replacement for mental operations—are probably at the hub of such an investigation. In this respect, cinema film clearly has a special place for a growing number of artists, both as narrative and discursive model, and as a universal “referent”, and again as a refraction of the social uses of the body, circulation, and exchanges. M. Rush refers to a “cinematographization of video” in the 1990s, due to the revival of several processes (slow motion, repetition, change of view point, in particular) and the ongoing reference to the projection device in installations (which an artist like Dan Graham had painstakingly dismantled in the 1970s); this observation certainly explains why the author devotes his introduction to “experimental” cinema from Muybridge to Ken Jacobs, which is rare in this type of book. However, we would benefit from having a broader definition of film than that ordinarily admitted—and which is “preserved” by the protagonists of the cinematographic field, properly so-called—and from seeing it, extensively, as the “interpreting factor” of all the phenomena affecting communication, representation, and 20th century memorization. The forms of discourse going along with its development from the late 19th century include all the parameters which every “new technology” (TV, video, IT, the digital and the virtual) brings to the fore, often emphatically: ubiquity, immediacy, storage, memory, information, and even the connection with death, etc.

- 2 The New Zealand artist Len Lye (1901-1980), who was involved all at once with writing, painting, sculpture, photography and film, and for many years pigeonholed in the “experimental film” slot—in the formal sense of the word—dovetails and condenses all this—he who included his activities in what used to be called “kinetic art”, lending this term a less technical and formal than anthropological dimension (his artistic commitment dates back to his interest in the tribal cultures of Polynesia and Micronesia,

where he betakes himself armed with Freud's *Totem and Taboo* and Flaherty's *Nanook*). "Walking, running, sitting, eating, reading and sleeping", these actions "which are all carried out by monitoring, balancing and endless manoeuvring our body weight", such are the elementary units of an "art of movement", which he pinpoints in dance and sport, and for which film is "one of the most eloquent forms of expression"⁴. These basic units are the very ones which were worked by such as Bruce Nauman (*Slow Angle Walk*), Dennis Oppenheim, Richard Serra, Robert Morris, and many performers and video artists. For Len Lye, movement was the medium and, as such, it is time.

NOTES

1. The title of the English edition of the book, published in 1999, specified: *New Media in Late 20th Century Art*.
2. Dubois, Philippe et al (ed). *Cinéma et dernières technologies*, Brussels ; Paris : De Boek, 1999
3. De Mèredieu, Florence. *Histoire matérielle et immatérielle de l'art moderne*, Paris : Bordas Culture, 1994
4. See his writings "Le Cinéma est-il un art ?" (1959) et "L'art en mouvement" (1964) in *Len Lye*, Paris : Pompidou Centre, 2000