

From discourse to art: a contradiction?

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2400>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.2400

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

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

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 1999

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Sylvie Coëllier, « From discourse to art: a contradiction? », *Critique d'art* [Online], 14 | Automne 1999, Online since 27 March 2012, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2400> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.2400

This text was automatically generated on 1 May 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

From discourse to art: a contradiction?

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Kessler, Mathieu. *Les Antinomies de l'art contemporain : l'influence de l'évolution des techniques d'impression et de graphisme sur le langage de l'art contemporain*, Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 1999, (Perspectives critiques)

Art at the Turn of the Millennium, Cologne : Taschen, 1999

- 1 Nicolas Bourriaud and Mathieu Kessler have little in common, save the fact that when each of them writes on contemporary art, they abandon their area of reference--respectively, criticism and philosophy--without there being any evident reason for it to develop: art history, criticism.
- 2 Nicolas Bourriaud's *Formes de vie* comes across as an articulation of the theories underpinning his perceptive approaches to recent art in *Documents sur l'art*. But this «essay» risks disappointing even those readers who have been persuaded by *L'Esthétique relationnelle*, because a swiftness of topic squanders the best of hunches as early on as in the introduction. Yet these hunches were stimulating: decentering contemporary art history based on attitudes and «life forms» eluded by a general discourse invariably based on painting and (now) the ready-made; re-focusing on the term of modernity, taken right up to current practices, under the aegis of the interrelation between the artist and industrial society; the dandy as model for artists' attitudes; a parallel between cinema and ready-made... The title, too, is stimulating, being a tribute to Focillon's famous *Vie des formes*, for, over and above the formalism, it re-embraces the need to grasp form as a critical preliminary, provided that «the methods of production and existence that define

it» are not obscured. For the modern work «is characterized by its extreme reliance with regard to the dynamic device in which it is caught, just as the projection of the film involves images which follow on from one another; the terms are not valid *per se*; only the relations count.» But beyond such utterances, which apply more to current art than to the century, the theoretical points are abbreviated (simplified Marxist-like analyses, juxtapositions masquerading as arguments). Let us take just one constituent one. To define modernity, Bourriaud refers to a concept developed by Habermas and revised by Foucault. A modernity appears «whenever tradition goes into crisis». It is «the on-going criticism of our historical age». It is also a criterion for the works: modern practices capture and criticize the signs of their historical and societal context (the present-day artist is a semionaut). There is a dynamic link with history, which does not involve any teleological necessity (what is more, recent works prefer to act on an everyday structure that can be re-arranged rather than on a hypothetical perfect future). But by further connecting modernity with the industrial revolution (which justifies re-making its artistic «genesis»), the author creates a hiatus between modernity as the rejection of a tradition that is crystallized, and modernity as the denomination of a specific period (which would thus, all the same, have had utopian projects, which are here scanned under the aegis of instantaneousness). This was an insoluble point. When left unbroached, it is simply one of the many non-demonstrated aspects which turn this essay into a discourse on legitimization, and thus make it lose its plausibility as an activator of art history.

- 3 Mathieu Kessler, for his part, acts as critic for four artists, Dubuffet, Dunoyer, Gober and Broodthaers, to exemplify his resolution of the *Antinomies de l'art contemporain* as set forth in the first part of the book. This puts forward the Kantian model of the contradiction of taste, in order to relate the recent discussions to contrasting principles, and show that a simple linguistic solution might sort out such tiffs. But whereas thesis and antithesis in Kant were organized about an ontological unity, Kessler, with his concern for topicality, turns them into stages of the history of art criticism, which, in effect, puts historical dynamics on hold. The thesis is thus represented by the «specific artwork», whose historical moment is the age of Kant, and the antithesis by the ready-made. This enables the author to say, with historically-oriented linguistic arguments that are rather swiftly outlined, that it is not possible to call certain contemporary works «artworks», but rather «objects of thought». With a fondness for a Heidegger-like quest for the truth of art, the critical part, which takes up the second half of the book, demonstrates that the said «thought» should be taken in its most discursive sense. «The initial condition of a proper way of looking at artistic work, the author actually announces, is the use of an appropriate vocabulary.» This slip in the exercise of the eye on a linguistic manipulation has direct consequences: the criticism of Dubuffet and Dunoyer is a paraphrase of artists' writings, that of Gober a pretext for holding forth about the simulacrum (without quoting Baudrillard). The author does significantly better with Broodthaers, if we accept his linguistic distinctions. The «formal» approach is thus minimal and despite the author's desire for an inclusion in art history, the overview approach of this latter often leads him to puzzling evidence.
- 4 Is it the method, rather than the overspill *per se* of the assigned field of skills, which makes these discourses disappointing? No more than the aggressivity in question, this happily in no way affects the vitality of contemporary art, as is shown by the most heartening catalogue *Art at the Turn of the millennium*. The works in this *Who's Who* of

creative art in the period 1980-2000 are neither pigeonholed between «pictorial art and art of objects» (Kessler), nor are they mainly oriented towards relational art. Rather, they put across their wonderful diversity, made thoroughly accessible by the 1200 representative reproductions and the short but effectual notices. Over and above a declared eclecticism, the book, which is organized on the basis of an egalitarian division between 137 artists chosen for their international participations, evinces a tone, a distinctive hue, and a shift between an underlying minimalism and an organized dispersal. This publication is a fine tool, which should act as a model. Needless to say, its sequel will be interactive and multimedia...