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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/27116>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.27116

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

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

Printed version

Date of publication: 21 November 2017

Number of pages: 15-25

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Sophie Cras, « *Art and its Values* », *Critique d'art* [Online], 49 | Automne/hiver 2017, Online since 21 November 2018, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/27116> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.27116

This text was automatically generated on 19 April 2019.

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REFERENCES

Enrichissement : une critique de la marchandise, Paris : Gallimard, 2017, (NRF Essais). Texte de Luc Boltanski, Arnaud Esquerre

L'Art et l'argent, Paris : Amsterdam, 2017, Sous la dir. de Jean-Pierre Cometti, Nathalie Quintane

Nathalie Heinich, *Des Valeurs : une approche sociologique*, Paris : Gallimard, 2017, (NRF)

Gregory Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism*, Londres: Pluto Press, 2017

- 1 Where moral, economic and aesthetic issues all converge, the idea of value involves a noteworthy re-involvement within the human and social sciences.¹ The financial and economic crisis that has marked the past decade has probably made such a project more urgent. As a symbol of the arrogant prosperity of the world's wealthiest people, the art market is displaying its record results, and, for many, becoming the incarnation of a cynical disconnect between speculative value and artistic value. In order to make the idea of value intelligible (and operative), sociologists and philosophers have chosen art as a preferred turf. In it, value in fact finds its full semantic richness: I can observe the "value" (the price) of an artwork on the market, and regret that it does not reflect "its real value", and that it clashes with "my values". Without claiming to do full justice to the books here discussed, or offer explanations about the shared intellectual loam which they are part of² and the opposing lines which run through them,³ this essay will highlight the way in which these books are nurtured by artistic facts, and what they can offer, in return, to art historians, art critics, and artists.
- 2 Art has long been regarded by economic theory as a domain all of its own, avoiding the rules which govern the other areas of commercial production.⁴ It is this exteriority which permitted it to appear as a model for thinking about alternatives to the capitalist

economy.⁵ If the books being looked at here share in common the fact that they reflect upon value outside the context inherited by classical and neo-classical economics, none of them renews this myth of exceptionalism. On the contrary, starting from the principle that art cannot be dissociated from all other social activities, and is fully part and parcel of systems of production, trade and consumption, this domain has to be regarded as a summary of the challenges of contemporary society; otherwise put, not as the exception but as the rule. Through the prism of art—seen in a broad continuum which links creation, heritage, the culture industry, entertainment, luxury and craftsmanship, which is one of the major contributions of this research—new tables for interpreting value (and values) are being proposed, and they can be generally applied well beyond just this field.

- 3 The book by Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichissement : une critique de la marchandise*, lives up to its title: it adopts an approach that is turn by turn historical, analytical and critical, and links up with the goal of 19th century treatises on political economics. The book describes a far-reaching change in contemporary capitalism, which henceforth derives the essence of its value-creating capacities no longer from the production of new objects (based on an industrial model), but from the “enhancement” or “development” of existing objects. Areas of activity as diverse as tourism, luxury, art and fashion consist, as the authors explain, in “enriching” objects (the way metals are enriched), either by physically processing and transforming them (for example by restoring a monument), or by associating them with a form of ‘storytelling’, a discourse (be it to do with aesthetics or with marketing) which fashions our perception. Examining the different forms of the way objects are “enhanced” or “developed” enables the authors to make an analysis of the “structures of merchandise”, i.e. a model for understanding how even seemingly similar objects can occupy very different social spaces and attain very different prices. An industrially produced chair thus stems from a “standard form”: it is promoted as long as it fulfils its function (offering something to sit on) at low cost. As time passes it devalues it, to the point of reducing it, in the end of the day, to waste. But if someone decides to purchase this chair in a secondhand shop to make the most of its vintage look, then it re-assumes value through the “trend form”, at least as long as that particular fashion continues. Even more effective in the economics of enrichment is the inclusion of this chair in “collection form”. The chair could turn out to be a model that is nowadays nowhere-to-be-found, made by a designer who is recognized today. A contemporary artist might promote it to the rank of a work (of art), or alternatively it could be presented as the chair upon which Général de Gaulle sat to write his memoirs. In this case, time is on the object’s side, and no longer working against it, and it is up to storytelling to explain its authenticity and rarity. Thus “enhanced”, the collector’s chair is well-suited for speculation, and can easily shift to the “asset form” which, like the financial product, creates added profit and capital gain by betting on the future.
- 4 Like economists, Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre are interested above all in goods, meaning things given value by a form of commerce. But they contrast them with a comprehensively renewed approach to the notion of value. Starting from the infinite variability of observed prices, they think of value not as a cause of exchange (be it intrinsic to the object or peculiar to the subject evaluating it), but as its consequence: value is what takes place in the criticism (or explanation) of prices; it is analyzed through a model with four “forms” of enhancement (“standard”, “trend”, “collection”, “asset”)—which turns out to be especially stimulating for understanding the strategies borrowed from the domain of art (and in particular from its “collection form”) by the luxury

industry. This is dealt with by Olivier Quintyn's article in the collective work *L'Art et l'argent*, which proposes a way of thinking about how art acts as an "aura distributor" (in the sense given to this term by Jean-Pierre Cometti)⁶, within the economy of enrichment, spreading symbolic prestige "by commercial contiguity".⁷ Because the work of art increases the status of the collector, who increases the status of the business he owns, which subsequently increases the status of the products sold under its brand, and gives rise to collector attitudes, the real economic impact introduced by art is far greater than just the numbers of the art market.

- 5 Nathalie Heinich's book, titled *Des Valeurs: une approche sociologique*, shares some of Luc Boltanski's and Arnaud Esquerre's postulates, such as the idea of looking for value in the tangible situation in which it manifests itself, the "trials" represented by controversies, debates, and explanations. But it broadens the spectrum not only to goods, but to everything that is the object of a value judgement (things, people, acts, states of the world), seeking to account for the conditions of evaluation, rather than the forms of status-enhancement. Based on the findings of her earlier research, most of it focused on contemporary art and heritage, Nathalie Heinich's book shows a powerful methodological and epistemological ambition. After an initial analysis of what a value judgement is, based on the principles of "axiological sociology", the book proposes a "rise in objectivity": from values as magnitudes (qualities attributed to things) to values as things themselves (valorized goods and entities), to values as a principle governing valorization, in order to construct, by induction, an "axiological grammar" making it possible to comprehend all evaluation-based situations.
- 6 One of the most interesting things about this model is the fact that, in theory at least, it puts the object and its description back at the heart of value analysis, re-balancing a trajectory in human and social sciences which, broadly outlined, had largely been that of a shift from the intrinsic towards the extrinsic. Almost simultaneously, in the latter half of the 20th century, so-called "analytical" philosophy came up with an approach to art that was independent of its observable physical properties, and the sociology of art embarked on an exploration of all the activities framing the artwork in the strict sense (institutions, reception, the artist's professional status), while the economy of art developed quantitative methods for processing art-related data (prices at public sales, admission fees charged by museums, the cost of cultural policies, and so on).⁸ It is noteworthy that today, under the influence of anthropology in particular,⁹ the social sciences put defined objects at the core of their analyses of value, choosing the "bias of things", to borrow the expression used by Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre.¹⁰ Like the "enrichment" described by these latter, it is indeed "a thing's altered state—so no longer its physical state, which may remain unaltered, but, if we so put it, its "social", categorical and representational state",¹¹ which exercises Nathalie Heinich's attention. For this author, the discourse about objects can only be secured on the "grips" offered by these latter, which make it possible to articulate both description and evaluation: "the nature of the object is added to the properties of the context and to the equipment of the subjects to determine the axiological resources which can be mobilized".¹² In this sense, it would seem that sociology would gain from
- 7 allying itself more with art history to bolster (and historicize) its relation to description, which is so central in the process of "enrichment" and evaluation. The tendency of the authors discussed here to favour the reading of texts—including when they belong to the

literary arts—to the detriment of an eye cast on visual and perceptible arrangements (be they to do with “art” or not) possibly deprives them of a rich analytical resource.

- 8 Nathalie Heinich squarely challenges “axiological neutrality” in the sociological study of values: from this angle, the researcher limits himself to observing and analyzing the normative judgements expressed by those involved. She herself would not take sides or express a standpoint. This is not the case with the other authors studied here, who combine theoretical analysis and critical reflection. Once abandoned the traditional dichotomy between, on the one hand, a “pure” art, laying claim to the extra-economic status of exception and, on the other, design, fashion, tourism and entertainment, shamed as the sole culprits of connivance with capitalism, how are we to think in new terms about a possible critical function for art?
- 9 Rather than seeking a new exceptionalism in art forms which dodge contemporary capitalism, it is perhaps more productive to take a close look at the critical areas opened up within artistic capitalism by its recent changes. In the tradition of his famous *Dark Matter*,¹³ the compilation of Gregory Sholette’s writings recently published under the title *Delirium and Resistance: Activist art and the Crisis of Capitalism* places at the hub of his line of thinking the issue of the artist as producer, something that is almost absent from the analyses made by Nathalie Heinich and those of Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, for whom the object is always “already there”, capable of being developed and appraised. For Sholette, the economy of enrichment (which he does not call this way) is based on an economy of structurally inegalitarian artistic production, which thereby gives rise to opportunities of strategic alliances for mobilized collectives. It remains to be shown how such situations of reflexivity can be incarnated in plural and rich forms, without being confined to a certain activist “style” likely to become a “trend”, or even “collected”.

NOTES

1. For sociology, readers may refer to the report proposed by Michèle Lamont, “Toward a Comparative Sociology of Valuation and Evaluation”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 38 (21), 2012, p. 201-221. See also, among other recent publications: Fassin, Didier, Lézé, Samuel. *La Question morale : une anthologie critique*, Paris : PUF, 2013 and in the field of aesthetics the issue: “Faits et valeurs en esthétique : approches et enjeux actuels”, *Nouvelle revue d'esthétique*, 2016/2 (n° 18).
2. In particular so-called “pragmatic philosophy and sociology. See the issue devoted to “Pragmatismes”, *Tracés : revue de Sciences humaines*, n°15, 2008/2.
3. Especially in their relation to “criticism” in human and social sciences. See: Boltanski, Luc. *De la critique : précis de sociologie d'émancipation*, Paris : Gallimard, 2009.
4. Beech, Dave. *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economies*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015
5. See the introduction of Pierre-Michel Menger, *Portrait de l'artiste en travailleur : métamorphoses du capitalisme*, Paris: Seuil, 2002.
6. Cometti, Jean-Pierre. *La Nouvelle aura : économies de l'art et de la culture*, Paris: Questions Théoriques, 2016

7. Quintyn, Olivier. "La Valeur somptuaire de l'art et la pauvreté des artistes", *L'Art et l'argent*, Paris: Amsterdam, 2017, p. 32. Ed. by Jean-Pierre Cometti and Nathalie Quintane
 8. Needless to say, this is not the place to dwell on this plentiful literature. For basic references in these three fields: *Esthétique et Poétique*, Paris: Seuil, 1992. Ed. by Gérard Genette ; Heinich, Nathalie. *La Sociologie de l'art*, Paris : La Découverte, 2nd ed., 2004 ; Ginsburgh, Victor. Throsby, David. *Handbook of the Economics of Arts and Culture*, Amsterdam: Elsevier North-Holland, 2006.
 9. Let us mention for example the considerable interest in that of Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* [1986], Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
 10. Boltanski, Luc. Esquerre, Arnaud. *Enrichissement : une critique de la marchandise*, Paris: Gallimard, 2017, p. 101
 11. Heinich, Nathalie. *Des valeurs : une approche sociologique*, Paris: Gallimard, 2017, p. 151
 12. Heinich, Nathalie. *Des valeurs : une approche sociologique*, *Op. cit.*, p. 331
 13. Sholette, Gregory. *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press Books, 2006
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