At one with Judith Butler

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REFERENCES

Butler, Judith. *Ces corps qui comptent : de la matérialité et des limites discursives du « sexe »*, Paris : Amsterdam, 2009

- 1 Reading Judith Butler in French is to discover her work in a state of disorder. It is also a very late encounter with this philosopher who teaches in the Department of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at the University of Berkeley, has been publishing books since 1987, and earned herself an international reputation in 1990. To give a swift overview of her French bibliography, it was not until 2001-02 that Epel and Leo Scheer published her 1994 title *Marché au sexe* (with Gayle S. Rubin), and her 1997 title *La Vie psychique du pouvoir : l'assujettissement en théories*. In 2003, Epel also published *Antigone : la parenté entre la vie et la mort*, which originally appeared in 2000. From 2004 onwards Amsterdam published *Le Pouvoir des mots* (from 1997), *Vie Précaire : les pouvoirs du deuil et de la violence après le 11/9/2001*, also at the same time as the English publication in this instance, and *Défaire le Genre*, in 2006, likewise very soon after the original English publication. In 2005, Amsterdam also put out a hitherto unpublished compilation of interviews given by the philosopher between 2001 and 2004. So Butler's works written in the post-9/11 period came first, at the risk of disorienting, explains her editor Jérôme Vidal, "the very readers, male and female, who would have accommodated her more favourably had she remained in the terrain of gender deconstruction and heterosexuality¹".
- 2 It was fifteen years later that one of the ground-breaking books on queer theory appeared in French, *Trouble dans le genre : pour un féminisme de la subversion* (Découverte). Butler has tried hard to understand this "delayed action": "the book's apparent Franco-centrism putting it at some remove from France and the theory being practised [there]", she explains in her preface to the second edition of the English book

in 1999. Butler adds to this paradox: “*Trouble dans le genre* proposes, in its own way, an intersecting reading of different French authors, male and female (Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva, Wittig) who, in France, have almost nothing to do with one another, and whom are rarely if ever read in France”.

- 3 *Ces corps qui comptent* is the work we are here concerned with (and whose title does not take into account the meaningful split entailed by the ambiguous ‘matter’ of the English title, *Bodies That Matter*, published in 1993). As she says in her preface, what was involved was a follow-up to the debate opened up by *Trouble dans le genre*, her previous book, where the following injunction was addressed at her: “And what about the materiality of the body, Judy?” It goes without saying that Butler took the question and turned it inside out. Instead of thinking of the materiality of sex, she highlighted the sexual construction of materiality: a materiality seen not as an intelligible remnant, but as a process, a history of powers, boundaries, and exclusion. For this, it is not a matter of contrasting construction and materialization, but, on the contrary, of linking them together, and observing the constraints—the reiteration and ritualization of norms—whereby bodies are naturalized as gendered and, at the same time, invariably destabilized, thus creating a crisis, norm-wise. By way of a critical genealogy of its formulation, from Aristotle to Plato and from Foucault to Irigaray, Butler observes the matrix of gender at work in the classic association of femininity with materiality, and even with maternity as a “site of generation and origin”. This is not unimportant for a history of art, including its feminist critique, forever prey to the naturalization of these regulatory gender norms, which essentialize the articulation of the body with a matricial femininity, once it is seen as a tool versus formalism.
- 4 “Le Phallus lesbien”, its second chapter, refracts the mirror image of the body—as a condition of knowledge—on the Lacanian investment of the phallus—as a condition of signification—to shift the “heterosexist” version of difference (men “have” the phallus, women “are” it), and posit the possibility of an “alternative *imaginary*”.
- 5 The importation of these reflections into the aesthetic field seems to me immediate, given the place of the “body” in today’s art and the ongoing reflection on the “Mirror Stage” in the constitution of representations. Reversing the equations, which are too often self-evident, and understanding the gender norms at work in critical concepts, can help to include within critical judgements certain “abject”, excluded identifications and attribute to them an alternative potency.
- 6 It is also through her chapters on “ambivalent” cultural productions that Butler matters to us. So when she focuses on raising questions about Jennie Livingstone’s film *Paris Is Burning*, making observations about Willa Cather’s writings, and reading the report of an imposture in *Passing*, Nella Larsen’s novel (not translated into French), it is also a matter of seeing “how heterosexual identification occurs not through the refusal to identify oneself as homosexual but through identification with an abject homosexuality, which must, as it were, never be displayed”, and how the hegemonic position of heterosexuality finds its counterpart in the just as hegemonic position of “whiteness”. Lastly, her final chapter is devoted to the production she has helped to invent—queer production. Describing the immediate appropriation, the term having been an opportunity as an autonomous—and thereby identity-based—“critical” category, Butler argues for a twisted use, “made strange in relation to an earlier use”. In the political theatricality of queer activism, she unearths the hyperbolic manifestations of gender norms, haunted by their constitutive melancholy.

- 7 Butler has written little about art—apart from an article on Diane Arbus, in particular²—but has been much published in magazines and catalogues, and she has put in numerous appearances at museums. The link woven by her *œuvre* between politics and theory also shows through by reminding us of all the forms of exclusion and abjectness either hidden or revealed by imagery, and with this constant leitmotiv of showing us new “powers of action”. Which is tantamount to saying that a method for art criticism is also, perhaps, taking shape.
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NOTES

1. J. Vidal incidentally underlines the additional decontextualization brought to bear by delays in the French translation of those with whom J. Butler is in dialogue: Denise Riley, bell hooks, Judith Halberstam, Teresa de Lauretis, Donna Haraway, Seyla Benhabib, Drucilla Cornell, Rosi Braidotti, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha...
2. Butler, Judith. “Diane Arbus: Surface tensions”, in *Artforum*, vol. XLII, n°6, February 2004, pp. 118-124