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EDITOR'S NOTE

The following interview was organized and coordinated by Sylvie Mokhtari on Thursday 14 March 2019 in the ACA seminar room, and transcribed by Jelena Le Magoarou and Louise Quentel.

Going back over the 30-year existence of the Archives de la critique d'art (ACA) invites us, above all, to have clearer thoughts about the ACA's future: re-organizing the social uses¹ of the archives, while bearing in mind the latest artistic developments, as well as any changes in the critical discourse, in its various forms, and where exactly they are occurring; improving international networking; and identifying technological challenges in order to adapt to new forms of memory. While the creation of the ACA coincided with the fall of the Iron Curtain, the 2020 launch of a scientific partnership with the German Centre for Art History [Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte] in Paris will encourage us to define critical writings in the former "East bloc" countries. At publishing level, extremely interesting projects are taking shape with the INHA [National Institute of Art History]. Hitherto the written word has been especially promoted, but it has latterly become vital to also consider the place of the image, that other form of critical discourse, which will feature among our structural lines of thinking for the next few years.

Antje Kramer-Mallordy

Note :

1.- The ACA was created on the basis of the uses likely to be made of its resources and programmes by many different interlocutors (researchers, artists, critics, curators, journalists, institutions, publishers, teachers, students, and so on). According to Jean-Marc Poinso, the idea of social uses makes it possible to expand our methods of action

by incorporating a broader array of tools than those we might use or devise based on the notion of different kinds of public and users. Instead of a one-sided, not to say passive relation, this decompartmentalization enables the ACA to consolidate interactions associated with the cultural arena and these cooperative circuits.

Jean-Marc Poinso, President of the ACA / Christophe Domino, member of the ACA scientific and cultural board / Jean-Marc Huitorel, President of the ACA scientific and cultural board.

- 1 **Christophe Domino:** The activity of the initial associative Archives de la critique d'art (ACA) organization, created in 1989, has given rise, over three decades, to the development of an original model for putting together a unique archival collection and adopting original institutional editing. The ACA adventure—if you'll forgive me the expression—is the outcome of overlapping challenges, intellectual and institutional, professional and political, which are deeply etched in the landscape of contemporary art, and, more broadly, culture. It is part and parcel of the forms of historical awareness which, according to Michel Foucault and so many others, mark the demanding nature of constructive “archival” and memory-related work, a task rendered necessary by the cycle of modernity, especially in the field of art. For both of you—you, Jean-Marc Poinso, who has headed the project from the word go and now chairs it, and you, Jean-Marc Huitorel, who has headed the scientific and cultural board for the past four years—what points and what themes seem to you to hallmark the dynamics of an unprecedented scientific and patrimonial institution, but one that is now part of the national and international landscape of knowledge and research?
- 2 **Jean-Marc Poinso:** The idea behind the ACA came into being within the AICA (International Association of Art Critics) as a collective approach among members practicing art criticism—including Didier Semin, Elisabeth Lebovici, Anne Tronche, Ramon Tió Bellido and Jacques Leenhardt, who was then chairman of the French section. Over and above the debate concerning the crisis of criticism then under way, it

was a question of asserting an identity, when faced with a phenomenon typical of the late 1980s, which witnessed the artistic milieu changing for one and all, artists, critics, and dealers, alike... And more precisely when faced with the assertion that, at that time, it was much more important to hold exhibitions and involve a tangible societal interaction rather than being reduced to a symbolic interaction by way of text. The ACA helped to lend structure to an environment, among authors who were perforce individual figures. Marcelin Pleyne once said to me: "If you want to be a critic, it's up to you to decide!" Those were the words of an ego in the eye cast on things, which means that someone decides, one day, to be a critic.

- 3 **C.D.:** That collective consciousness, which was heightened in the early 1980s, was essential for contributing to the re-definition of authorship, and the critic's intellectual and professional legitimacy, scattered by the varied host of activities that have become complementary. That was also the time of significant changes taking place in public cultural policies and the institutional landscape, with the creation of the Regional Contemporary Art Collections (FRACs) in particular. You were involved in all that, Jean-Marc.
- 4 **J-M.P.:** By having worked in particular on a survey about international support for art, conducted in the early 1970s, I could clearly see the possibility of the complementarity between art centres, the FRACs, and the ACA, which were organizing the raw material for knowledge and memory. What is more, the concern with archives was the consequence of a documentary praxis in the publication of catalogues. What was involved was likening the production of the catalogue to the time it took to produce the exhibition. This led me to think that it was also important to deal with the living world, and work with living people.¹ The first collections that came the way of the ACA were gifts from Pierre Restany and Michel Ragon.

INAUGURAL MEETING OF THE ACA, UNIVERSITY OF RENNES 2, 20 NOVEMBER 1992. IN THE FOREGROUND: DANIEL SOUTIF © LOÏC LAMANDÉ

- 5 **J-M.H.:** Another decisive factor has to do with the new paradigms in artistic production. In the late 1960s, the work itself from then on consisted in an archive which conceptual artists would start to sell in the 1990s. The ACA was faced, *de facto*, with this issue.

- 6 **J-M.P.:** Work or document? Yes, we very soon came up against situations involving ambiguous statuses. The issue concerning collections was raised very early on by the Tate Gallery, in 1970, by its director who, in an issue of *Studio International* curated by Seth Siegelaub,² launched an appeal for gifts of artist's archives. The MoMA, on the other hand, would only much later organize its archives by focusing on artist's archives. And needless to say, 1989 also marked the beginning of computers and the Internet. People immediately felt that there were huge changes in the relation to memory going on throughout the art arena, making it necessary to set up a collection of books about art criticism and its history: to record the diversity of critical practices, from descriptions of the Salon by the art critic Etienne La Font de Saint-Yenne in the 18th century, and the Gustave Mirbeau-like polemicists of the 19th century, right up to the present day. Because the contemporary critical discourse about artwork is what concerns the ACA above all else.

- 7 **J-M.H.:** I often think of the grand heroic endeavours to conserve seeds, on a worldwide level: the Vavilov Institute in St. Petersburg, for the past century, and more recently the Svalbard Global Seed Vault on the Norwegian island of Spitsbergen. By conserving productions, texts and approaches, the ACA's beating heart is to be found somewhere between a conservation-oriented inclination involving a certain idea of criticism, and the turmoils and upheavals of our activities and functions. Critical discourse has been so watered down within the neo-liberalism all around us, and in the authority of the market... We are at the interface both of a place of sanctuary, and a place that is part and parcel of what is topical. And this also makes us prescribers of meaning and even of productive objects.

- 8 **C.D.:** The 568 collections of writings and archives now encompass several generations of critics, illustrating various intellectual and professional approaches and practices.

Inaugural meeting of the ACA, University of Rennes 2, 20 November 1992. Left to right, front row: Pierre Letreut, Harry Bellet, Frank Popper, Maria Teresa Beguiristain Alcorta; second row: Pierre Restany and José-Anne Decock-Restany; Third row: Ramon Tió Bellido, Anne Dagbert © Loïc Lamandé

- 9 **J-M.P.:** And all the more because, since the origins of the ACA, it is critics themselves who have been the organizers of their own memory. If university research was represented among them, after generations of authors often without any specific degrees, critics nowadays almost all have PhDs, just like artists, increasingly involved, too, in the area of research. For the ACA, the link with universities is a tangible relation: it's the students who have done the work, together with their teachers. Faced with the shortcomings of institutions with regard to the management of memory, researchers need to have access to a certain number of things. The initial student public has become the player in the structure of memorization.
- 10 **C.D.:** By often going with art school students to the ACA, I've been able to gauge their awareness of the historicization of the art discourse, which is imposed upon them like something obvious.
- 11 **J-M.H.:** And that's the first illustration of that virtue of resistance which archives have, resistance of the document in relation to the flux. Art schools have their rightful place in the ACA and, incidentally, they are represented on the present scientific and cultural board.
- 12 **J-M.P.:** The ACA is a reception area and a work place, but in order to develop collections, you need a specific know-how, which has to be nurtured with new input: critical production, the production of knowledge itself. So another level of organic connection is formed, through monitoring the current state of critical output.
- 13 **C.D.:** This critical dimension of criticism runs through all the ACA's activities, and has become broader over the years, by making the production visible.

Critique d'art no.1 (May 1993), published by the Archives de la critique d'art. *Critique d'art* celebrated its 25th anniversary last year (2018).

- 14 **J-M.P.:** French production, first, then French-speaking production, and then international production, is an observatory, which also provides testimony about this landscape. This is the direction that the journal *Critique d'art* takes, keeping up with the vitality of publishing production through its headings and sections: books and essays, exhibition catalogues, magazines. On paper, but also by way of the electronic review.³ By being indexed to publishing production, *Critique d'art* has in its turn produced a public. All that organizational work, and the task of diversifying forms of public, was introduced over time.
- 15 **J-M.H.:** But it's certainly there, and can be quantified, with, for example, almost 1,400,000 consultations of the quarterly review in four years.
- 16 **C.D.:** This diversification is also based on the diversity of partners.
- 17 **J-M.P.:** The international AICA is still the base, the source, and the consciousness. It represents a professional milieu which illustrates its own development, and its history, and reminds us, in the way it currently operates, that it is, indeed, there. At the international level, the AICA has become aware of the interest of the ACA. But also, with the National Institute of Art History (INHA), which has become a donator and decision-maker, it's the French State that now owns the collection. By undertaking to leave the collections in Rennes, the INHA has understood a potential for decentralization, given the ACA the guarantee of the expertise of its library and archive curators, and contributed to the ongoing sustainability of its collections. What is more, since its creation, the ACA has established a partnership with the university which tends to regard us, today, not only as a research organization, but also as the medium of a research policy. Our intellectual and territorial installation helps us to have links with national and international partners. This is the *raison d'être* of the GIS (Group of scientific interest). This is an agency of shared management between different partners, intended to make it possible to pursue the intellectual dynamic by strengthening the university construct. It's the wish of individuals involved that held sway at the start, in a mode of militant commitment. The challenge of the present-day

development is a consolidation of the structure, for the whole team made up of the four permanent staff members, but also of the management, with teacher-researchers.

- 18 **C.D.:** Today, these institutional questions of organization, operation and funding still take up a major part of the management's agenda?
- 19 **J-M.P.:** Yes, and all the more so because we are bound by a political consciousness and an ethic inherent to criticism, which could not be dissolved in any operation peculiar to liberalism. By abandoning the associative form, it was necessary to maintaining a balance between the different components, by preserving freedom of action and autonomy.
- 20 **J-M.H.:** So we are at a crossroads, between the renewal of the men and women who are making the ACA work, the preservation of the know-how underwritten by a very small and very committed group, and the expansion vital to their proper operation.
- 21 **J-M.P.:** It is actually quite important that the project carries on, on a basis of skills, scientific involvements, and artistic convictions, and that these factors find their place in structures which assure the reproducibility of managers at the same time as the continued existence of the institution. We have had the experience of a scientific, and no longer just administrative, management, with Nathalie Boulouch and the scientific and cultural board at her side, chaired by Jean-Marc Huitorel. Their collaboration for a little over four years has contributed to an enrichment of the scientific programmes, the collections, and their promotion.

Compilations (2014-2018) taken from the collection of the INHA-Archives de la critique d'art as part of the seminars of the Master 2 Recherche en art contemporain « Histoire et critique des arts » (Rennes 2)

- 22 **J-M.H.:** Institutions rely on people. The conjunction of our two mandates, for Nathalie Boulouch and myself, and our friendly relations with Rennes, and the city's proximity, have made the work a whole lot easier, by being in constant dialogue between the management and the scientific and cultural board. Needless to say, I wanted this committee—today known as a board—to be dedicated to a proposal involving the validation of gifts and programmes, but also an agency of reflection, not to say a forward-looking one. The ACA cannot live without constant work being done on the issues that lie at the base of its existence: that is to say, the status of art criticism, the state of art criticism in different countries, avenues of research, the identification of

interlocutors, and the extension of the notion of archive. The question of being open to other types of archives is a recurrent one: those of art centres and art venues, and even galleries. But the ACA is not a receptacle for everything that is out there: we must be permanently refining our criteria for accepting gifts and loans. Some critics are also writers: do we accommodate just the archival part of art criticism, or the complete archives? A gift of archives is also a portrait. In my eyes, it cannot be split up, but this must be discussed collectively, like all the variations and orientations to do with what we might expect in terms of archives of the future. With the issues associated with the new technical media, the ACA must get ready to widen the archive notion in order to accommodate the things which, on the face of it, it did not think itself capable of accommodating. In any event, we are managing to bring together collections which are not to be found anywhere else, including internationally, with the help, in particular, of Henry Meyric Hughes, honorary chairman of the international AICA.

- 23 **J-M.P.:** The scientific and cultural board is consultative and as the primary agency for validating proposed gifts and donations, it guarantees the specific character of the collections, and their quality.
- 24 **J-M.H.:** One third comes from critics who have submitted their collections to the ACA, and this represents criticism in the field. A second third comes mainly from university laboratories. Institutional partners form the third third, with representatives from the INHA, the AICA, the DCA (French Association for Art Centre Development), the CEA (Associated Exhibition Curators), the ANdEA (National Association of Advanced Art Schools), the German Centre for Art History, and the Hartung Bergman Foundation. The renewal currently under way is bringing in new figures. It is open to the up-and-coming generations. At the level of the scientific dimension, our main programmes are coming full circle. We are in a state of transition, ready to build new ones. The cultural section also involves our engagement in events and shows, through the loan of documents, and even works. The board must be a forum of creation, discussion and forward-looking ideas. From now it will be working with Antje Kramer-Mallordy, who is taking over from Nathalie Boulouch.
- 25 **C.D.:** Let's get back to the principle of donating authors' collections, which is the hub of our activity.

Symposium *La Critique d'art en Europe*, Musée des beaux-arts de Rennes, 21 November 1992. Left to right: Giovanni Careri, Rainer Rochlitz © Loïc Lamandé

- 26 **J-M.P.:** The collections are put together little by little. We've had the example of Pierre Restany, a treasure trove for the ACA, which took place in stages. Each donation calls for much lengthy work, like the current task involving the Rainer Rochlitz archives. Major documentary processing work is necessary before developing research programmes.
- 27 **C.D.:** A specific project, which is echoed on the now international scale.
- 28 **J-M.P.:** We are being asked to share our experience. Recently, in Shanghai, with Power Station of Art, we organized a conference on archives which attracted many already old ACA partners, who came in from London, Brazil, Moscow, and Mexico. One learns lots of things from the Chinese, and in particular about Asian art archives, who handle archives solely in digital form and are not concerned with conserving original documents. There's a challenge involved in exchanging skills with archive creators, who have a quite different conception of both the time-frame and the status of documents likely to avoid being forgotten about. The ACA owes its originality to lessons learned from these other experiences.

NOTES

1. The ACA collections are not limited to the 60 collections of archives held there, but include 478 collections of writings which attest to the current activity of critics, from all generations. For a

complete list and access to each author's bibliography, see the "Répertoire des critiques d'art" online at <http://www.archivesdelacritiquedart.org/auteur?filter=A>

2. *Studio International*, volume 180, no.924, July-August 1970

3. <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart>