
“Expectation” of art: the history of its theoretical bases

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- 1 The current publishing scene is simultaneously offering French readers a series of works with disparate themes and horizons, which all nevertheless invite them to dwell on what history can do when it makes art its object, and what that object does in the present from which its history is written. In this sense, these books will be as interesting for specialists in the disciplines and periods concerned as anyone who regards it as a given that works of the past are likely to find in the time they are set in—our day and age—the space transforming the future which *was fermenting* in them.¹ This is how Walter Benjamin saw in each period “a new possibility, but one that cannot be transmitted by legacy, which is peculiar to it, of interpreting the prophecies which the art of earlier periods contained in its expectation”.² So starting with this *expectation*, where art and history link up, in which, above all, art history consists when it manages not to cut itself off from the interests, anxieties, and motives of its time and

from the art which is contemporary with it. This is undeniably the case with the five studies presented here.

- 2 Each of the authors is part of a historical and conceptual field which is peculiar to him —although all the texts focus on the challenges of Western modernity, and mainly on the 17th century. But over and above academic divisions, and systems of periodicity, the crosswise use of knowledge is striking: the combination of the historian's rigour—and the erudition that it sometimes involves—and theoretical openness. Herein, firstly, resides the invitation made to us to reflect on what history can do and, in the end of the day, wants to do, once it is *worked* by philosophy and anthropology (Cousinié), semiotics (Stoichita), cultural history (Fleming), gender studies and even transgender studies (Fend). From here, it is less a matter of grasping the degree to which this combination is realized, the more-or-less factor of its performance, than the conditions of its implementation *on the basis* of the works examined. From this angle, one notion appears central, that of *theoretical object*.
- 3 The line of thinking introduced in the 1970s by Hubert Damisch and Louis Marin around the at once heuristic and programmatic notion of *theoretical object*—a line of thinking which is nowadays gaining ground—confronts the art historian with a renewed task. It implies that as far as the concern for historicity can be pushed—and it is just as well that it is—, the dialogue that the historian engages with art cannot be resolved in just the historical dimension. The theoretical object—in reality theoretical-cum-historical—is declared at the theoretical connection of the historical discourse, insofar as it, itself, *produces* theory, “provides meanings to do so”, and consequently gives rise to a reflection *on* theory.³ It thus acquires an emblematic status or the function of a model, which, in effect, were, for H. Damisch, those of the “cloud” and the “cloud” object with regard to pictoriality (*La Théorie du nuage : pour une histoire de la peinture*, 1972), those of the “portrait of the king” with regard to absolute power and its theological-cum-political definition for Louis Marin (*Le Portrait du roi*, 1981). Based on these two major groundbreaking examples, it can thus be established that the construction of a theoretical object is in no way a schematic way of extrapolating the visible, but, on the contrary, presupposes the closest possible attention to its materiality, its phenomenality, its singularities, its effects, and its uses. This is a function essential to its development: the tension created between the generality of the theory on the one hand, and, on the other, the singularity, not to say the exceptional nature of each object. Frédéric Cousinié thus creates tension between the unstable perceptive occurrence of bodily fluids (blood, water, milk, sperm, shit), the most changeable configurations of colour-matter (drips, sprays and spots) present in 17th century painting *and* the ordeal of devout vision or fundamental anthropological relations (gender, filiation, class), the very place of a theory of the *extreme object* capable of reintroducing the share of the perceptible.⁴ For Victor Stoichita, based on the detailed analysis of the solutions adopted by Spanish painters of the Counter-Reformation to present the visionary experience but without reducing it to the visible, it is also a matter of pursuing a fundamental work engaged in *L'instauration du tableau* (1999), where the challenge, which is to say here the object, is the “metapictorial” function of the painting.
- 4 This theoretical redeployment of the work of history also concerns the contemporary domain which it helps to decisively shed light on. So the contribution made by Juliet Fleming, at the crossroads of the anthropology of the image and the history of writing

practices, is not simply that she writes a new chapter on the burgeoning relations between language and the material world (walls, skin, clothes, utensils) in England at the beginning of the modern period but, returning to the notion of "text", that she presents for consideration their figurative forms like the exercise of a visuality, a plasticity, in a nutshell of an *exteriority* of language, whose contemporary artistic practices are the preferred place for us. In Mechthild Fend's *Les Limites de la masculinité*, "politics of the sexes" and "gendered culture" provide the theoretical motifs making it possible to analyze, with remarkable keenness the heroic ideal and the nostalgic refiguration of the body during the revolutionary period in France. In this case, the object is a direct function of a critical stance within the debate on *gender*, and we well know what part this has played in the deconstruction of artistic practices since the 1960s.

- 5 There can be no doubt that the strength of these authors lies in the fact that they have managed to refract the matter of the past in the present state of our condition.

NOTES

1. Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, new edition by Rolf Tiedemann & Herman Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main : Suhrkamp, 1991, vol. I, 3, p. 1046
2. *Ibid.*
3. Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier and Rosalind Krauss, "A conversation with Hubert Damisch", *October*, n°85, summer 1998, p. 3-17 and p. 8
4. This programme is outlined in: Cousinié, Frédéric. *Beautés fuyantes et passagères: la représentation et ses "objets-limites" au XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles*, Paris : Gérard Monfort, 2005