



FABRIQUE DE L'ART N°2  
FABRICATE (FABRIC OF) ART

The yearly publication **FABRICATE (FABRIC OF) ART** in some respects resembles our world. It reflects its beauty across its planetary stretch, from west to east, from the Americas to Asia. We can feel its vibration of multiplicity and difference. Of course, it makes no claim to offer a portrait of the globe. But it is a unique enterprise, through the plurality it summons, and also as a singularised, and not eclectic, plurality, given that a very strong viewpoint underpins and supports it.

DENIS GUÉNOU  
for the launch of the journal in Paris on June 20 2016

La revue **FABRIQUE DE L'ART** ressemble par certains côtés à notre monde. Elle en a la beauté, dans son étirement planétaire, d'ouest en est, d'Amérique en Asie. On y sent vibrionner des multiplicités et des différences. Bien sûr, elle ne prétend pas donner un tableau du globe mais c'est une entreprise unique, par la pluralité qu'elle invoque, et aussi comme pluralité singularisée, pas éclectique, car un point de vue très ferme la parcourt et la soutient.

DENIS GUÉNOU  
lors du lancement de la revue à Paris le 20 juin 2016

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99 SARAT PALLY | KOLKATA 700070 | INDIA  
trimukhiplatform.org | contact@trimukhiplatform.org  
fabriqueedelart.trimukhiplatform.org  
fabricofart.trimukhiplatform.org

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# contemporary art: from a quarrel to a paradigm

*This text is made up of a selection of passages from Nathalie Heinich's book published by Gallimard in 2014: Le Paradigme de l'art contemporain. Structure d'une révolution artistique. With the author's permission, these extracts have been partially reorganised by Jean-Frédéric Chevallier: the following text does not therefore always follow the order of the analysis as presented in the book.*

In summer 1964, the Venice Biennale, instead of awarding its Grand Prix to the all-round favourite, French painter Roger Bissière, aged seventy-six and an exponent of what was known as the School of Paris, chose to crown thirty-nine-year-old American Robert Rauschenberg, standard-bearer of the brand-new pop art, and represented by Leo Castelli's New York gallery. Shock waves ran through the world of art. [...] Not only did Rauschenberg's *Combine* paintings — combinations of painting, sculpture and what would later be called installation — prove unsellable in France when Daniel Cordier showed them in his gallery<sup>1</sup>, but above all, criticism of them was scathing: one critic explained that "Rauschenberg's works cannot be considered as art" while others considered the jury's verdict "a serious betrayal of the very idea of art, an affront to the dignity of creators and a loud display of contempt for beauty, meaning and taste"<sup>2</sup>.

In 1955, Saburo Murakami from Japan, during a show of the Gutai group, presented what was not yet called a "performance", by piercing through frames across which paper was stretched, on the day of the opening, hence literally breaking off from painting<sup>3</sup>. Three years later, Frenchman Yves Klein organised at the Iris Clert gallery in Paris the well-known "Exposition du Vide" (Emptiness Exhibition), launched on 28 April 1958 under the protection of Republican Guards whom the artist managed to gather for the evening of the opening.

Not only did opponents of abstraction and even more widely, of modern art, decree the death of art, but in addition, painters deemed emblematic of modernity declared themselves to be disgusted by these innovations.

In an article published in 1999 titled "Pour en finir avec la querelle de l'art contemporain" [*To end the quarrel on contemporary art*]<sup>4</sup>, I suggested viewing contemporary art as a "genre" of art, distinct from the modern genre or the classical genre. This offered a

way of acknowledging its specificity, namely a play on the ontological frontiers of art, a testing of the very notion of the "artwork" as it is commonly understood; and not, as in the case of modern art, a testing of the rules of figuration matched with an imperative for expressing the artist's interiority; and even less, as in the case of classic art, a practice of the academic canons of figurative representation, whether more or less idealised (historical painting, mythological landscapes, official portraits...) or realistic (genre scenes, still lifes, trompe-l'œil...).

Just as we are willing to recognise the right for several genres to exist simultaneously, even if a hierarchy divides them, in classical painting (historical painting, portrait, landscape, etc.), so should we also tolerate the simultaneous existence, in today's world, of contemporary and modern art, and even classical art although the latter has hardly any more practitioners (even if it still has many amateurs). This is why I suggested, "to end the quarrel on contemporary art", for it to be considered as a genre among others rather than a "paradigm", for the latter notion reintroduces a claim to exclusivity.

It is an understatement to say my suggestion has been long-lived: far from ceasing, the quarrel has stretched out and even been amplified [...]. So we can now state things as they stand: the idea of making contemporary art a genre was less a pious vow — a prescriptive proposal, as the title incidentally indicated — than a cold analysis of what was actually happening. For what was happening before our eyes was well and truly the building of a new artistic paradigm.

As stated by historian Julie Verlaine, the "rupture is far more than stylistic or aesthetic: it establishes a new relationship between art and the real, its objects and images, that demands a liberated eye"<sup>5</sup>. This liberated eye is the one that frees itself not just from the conventions of classic figuration (this is no longer where we're at), but also from this basic requirement for modern art to be an expression of the artist's interiority, whatever the forms. For what is there in common between the gestures of Rauschenberg, Murakami or Klein, and between the major targets or flags of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Julie Verlaine, *Les Galeries d'art contemporain à Paris. Une histoire culturelle du marché de l'art, 1944-1970*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2012, p. 416, 467.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 469.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Hors limites. L'art et la vie, 1952-1994*, catalogue, Paris, Centre Georges-Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Nathalie Heinich, "Pour en finir avec la querelle de l'art contemporain", *Le Débat* n° 104, March-April 1999 (republished the same year by Éd. de l'Échoppe)

<sup>5</sup> Julie Verlaine, *Les Galeries d'art contemporain à Paris. op. cit.*, p. 458.

Johns, the geometric compositions of Stella and the cobbled-together blends of — once again — Rauschenberg, other than that they can in no way be perceived or interpreted as an expression of their interiority? [...] Yet this expectation was precisely what constituted the specificity of modern art.

It is true, as is always the case with classifications, that there are borderline positions, intermediaries between two categories. In this way, Pollock's drippings still belong to modern art due to their expressionist dimension while announcing contemporary art through a technique that breaks with continuity between the artist's body and the paint thrown onto the canvas. One generation later, the French movement, Supports/Surfaces, would be perceived in the United States as being associated with a modernist formalism supported by Clement Greenberg, while in France, it was associated with the brand-new trends of minimalism and contemporary conceptualism<sup>6</sup>. However, if instead of looking at exceptions, we take into account cases that are typical (in a double sense, both recurrent and representative of the category), then the difference between modern art and contemporary art stands out clearly.

This difference is not a question of era, or hardly at all: Duchamp's ready-mades are emblematic of contemporary art whereas his *Nu descendant l'escalier* belongs wholeheartedly to modern art — even if both were produced in the same decade.

Contrary to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which there was only a single “art world” concentrated by a few emblematic institutions (including the famous Salon de Peinture), the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought in the coexistence of several worlds: the traditional world of academic art, which was losing speed, survived in only a few institutions or remote segments of the market; the modern-art world, which had recently attained a dominant position, had conquered the market and was penetrating institutions; and the emerging world of contemporary art which only existed marginally but which was in the process of seriously competing with modern art or even taking it over. As Pomian insists, 20<sup>th</sup> century art, far from being confined to “the radical avant-garde” which many art historians

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Hélène Trespeuch, *Fin de partie, nouvelle donne. L'historiographie de l'art abstrait en France et aux États-Unis, 1977-1990*, doctoral thesis in art history supervised by Philippe Dagen, Université Paris-I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2010, p. 81.

prefer to focus on, was a plural art in which two heterogeneous conceptions of the avant-garde coexisted with the fine-arts tradition.<sup>7</sup>

Despite all these pointers, the radicality of this rupture strangely seems to have eluded numerous analysts who still cling to a purely chronological definition of contemporary art: they therefore refuse to consider the adjective “contemporary” beyond its literal sense (i.e. pertaining to a timeframe) as a generic classification (whereas it would occur to no one to suppose that the expression “contemporary music” includes all musical forms produced at the present time).

The term “postmodernism” or “postmodernity” (or even “post-avant-garde”) has long served as a cover-up for this definitional haziness, but its own instability has finally rendered it incapable, explains an art historian, of “standing out in the artistic field as a new paradigm”<sup>8</sup>, due to its vagueness.



Impressionism developed collectively within a small group. This group implemented practices that raised a controversy amongst art professionals as well as art lovers. What caused the controversy was not disagreement on the right way to practise the academic canons of figuration, but far more fundamentally, the question of whether art truly consists in such a practice or whether it instead allows the artist to express his or her own vision of the world. Several generations would pass before a new definition of art — this new paradigm — was adopted not only by artists, then critics, but also the general public: [...] a change that resulted in what we call “modern art”, which in turn would be challenged, during the 1950s, by “contemporary art”. This corresponds perfectly to the way in which Kuhn defines scientific revolutions as “non-cumulative developmental episodes in which an older paradigm is replaced in whole or in part by an incompatible new one”<sup>9</sup>.

Those who took for granted the foundations of what, for centuries, had defined what should be art according to common understanding as well as for the lettered (figuration in two

<sup>7</sup> Krzysztof Pomian, “Sur les matériaux de l’art”, *Technè* n°8, 1998, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Hélène Trespeuch, *Fin de partie, nouvelle donne*, op. cit., p. 207-208.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, 1970, p. 62.

or three dimensions, according to the canons transmitted from generation to generation, thanks to an accumulation of skills developed more or less individually) refused to accept the validity of a conception of art which did not respect these canons, which freed itself from the major genre of historical painting and failed to take into account, more generally, of the hierarchy of genres, and which, above all, subordinated the depiction of “nature” and the idealised portrayal of figures to a personal perception that the artist holds or wishes to give, to the point of breaking off from the very requirement of resemblance, or even figuration. This was the revolution of “modern art”.

It is thus possible to reread the history of the major stages of the rise [...] of modern art in the light of what Kuhn has said about the characteristics shared by all scientific discoveries: “the previous awareness of anomaly, the gradual and simultaneous emergence of both observational and conceptual recognition, and the consequent change of paradigm categories and procedures often accompanied by resistance”<sup>10</sup>. Here, the “anomaly” was probably the growing gap between, on the one hand, the tastes of an increasingly wide public and an increasingly widespread population of artists, and on the other hand, rigidified academic canons held by a small number of official artists who were also (given the *numerus clausus* admitted into the Institute) elderly, hence rather conservative: a gap that became more and more evident at each Salon de Peinture during the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>11</sup>.

Representation of the world, as offered by the Impressionists, was neither more nor less “natural” than that put forward by traditional “firemen artists”: it was simply less “idealised” and more personalised in its perceptive depiction. In addition, critics of modern art ridiculed its disparity with reality (the real-life sky is not purple, etc.) even if we, on the contrary, have since praised the capacity of Impressionist painting to convey the “true” sensations produced by the spectacle of nature. What has occurred is not a change in distance in our relation to “nature”, but the replacement of a certain paradigm of figuration by another.

<sup>10</sup> | Thomas S. Kuhn, *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>11</sup> | Cf. Nathalie Heinich, *L'Élite artiste. Excellence et singularité en régime démocratique*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> | Cf. Hélène Trespeuch, *Fin de partie, nouvelle donne*, op. cit.

Modern art has cohabited for several generations with classical art, in the same way that contemporary art has cohabited with modern art for around two generations.

This type of coexistence is furthermore facilitated, in the case of art, by the fact that unlike the type of truth sought after by science [...], the perceptive experience that art involves can easily accommodate plurality on condition that it is inscribed in social frameworks that are also plural. This is well and truly the case with art where a coexistence has been established between fairly differentiated institutions, markets and publics.



As an unconscious model that formats the sense of normality in art, an artistic “paradigm” applies not only for the creation but also for the perception of works. Indeed, a “paradigm” characteristically encompasses not only the chronological dimension of periodization, familiar to art historiography, and the generic dimension of classification that is also interesting for aesthetics, but also discourse on art, economy, law, institutions, values, modes of circulation and of perception of works.

Not only is it the appearance or the definition of works that find themselves overturned [...] (for example, contemporary art tends to exclude framed paintings and sculptures on pedestals), but also the descriptions and classifications of them put forward by specialists (for example, the figurative/abstract art opposition which long occupied discourse is no longer relevant<sup>12</sup>), the view taken on what art is or should be (for example, the modern idea of linear progress backed by a succession of avant-gardes has given way to a “postmodern” rupture of practices that escape from the idea of progress).



No longer is the artistic approach characterised by a search for beauty but rather a quest for emotions, sensations, excitement: “In fact the most important thing for me is to feel excitement, to be stimulated by something, so it doesn’t really matter if it is provoked by good or bad. The tension that you feel inside you the moment preceding the realisation of a work is really the most intimate and the most important reason for continuing to work”<sup>13</sup> — with the same thing applying for the spectator.

It is the very notion of art, in its commonly understood version — classical or modern —, that the most emblematic works in contemporary art play on, starting with Duchamp’s ready-mades and above all his famous urinal (*Fountain*), which radically broke off with this fundamental expectation of the work made by the artist himself, or under his direction at least. Here again, there has been no shortage of radicalisation of gestures, substituting the work of representation, whether figurative or abstractive, with the literality of presentation.

The inscription of art in the singularity regime is not specific to the contemporary paradigm for this regime already defined the modern paradigm. [...] What is specific to contemporary art is the stepping up of this regime and its radicalisation amongst artists themselves; singularity no longer lies only in what is expected by spectators, but also what is knowingly targeted, sometimes as a priority, by artists.

Radicalisation can also be explained by an endogenous cause. For given the very logic of the regime of singularity, the transgressive principle inevitably leads to radicalisation whenever productions are socialised, integrated, accepted. Here, the effect — the radicalisation of the singular — offers us the cause — its normalisation. In other words, we behold the famous

<sup>13</sup> | Maurizio Cattelan, Catherine Grenier, *Le Saut dans le vide*, Paris, Seuil, 2011, p. 80.

“tradition of the new” pinned down by American critic Harold Rosenberg.<sup>14</sup>

↳

In the modern paradigm, art demands a convergence between conception and execution: when the work is credited as being capable of expressing the interiority of the artist, the hand of the latter is indispensable for the former's realisation. But this requirement, that seemingly goes without saying, belongs neither to the classic paradigm nor the contemporary one. Indeed, in [...] classical art, it was perfectly acceptable for a master to delegate to his “companions”, or even his “apprentices”, the execution of certain parts of the painting, or else studio copies. While conception (*invenit*) was the business of the patron, it was entirely possible for realisation (*fecit*) to be delegated. Contemporary art has partly returned to this model.

But contrary to the case in classical art, the contemporary artist's competence is no longer merely aesthetic and technical, but also and above all relational as it is a matter of making others work on projects that require sometimes out-of-the-ordinary skills.

Contemporary art [...] is as much an art of relationships with humans as a relationship to objects [...] — with works being increasingly less reducible to a single object and increasingly equivalent to an open set of realisations.

↳

The “visual arts”, as we now say instead of the traditional “fine arts”, tend to no longer only be arts of space but also of time. [...] Ready-mades that are re-fabricated to be sold long after their design; performances that are reinterpreted after their first presentation; systems updated for every new exhibition (like the works made up of stones or tree branches arranged on ground level by Richard Long); installations accompanied by “scripts” or “scores” indicating how they should be replayed: [...] the different genres specific to

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New*, Poole, Horizon Press, 1959.

contemporary art are pulling away from visual arts and drawing nearer to live performance arts (theatre, music), literature or film.

For what is being created cannot be described as works as much as experiences, as noted by philosopher Yves Michaux: “Where there were once works, there now only remain experiences. Works have been replaced in artistic production by systems and procedures that operate like works and produce a pure experience of art, the purity of aesthetic effect almost without ties or support, or else perhaps a configuration, a set of technical means that generate these effects. A video installation like those found these days in any gallery or luxury prêt-à-porter boutique is the paradigm of this type of system which produces aesthetic effects. [...] The creator of works is gradually becoming a producer of experiences. [...] Yet this is not the end of art: it is the end of its object regime.”<sup>15</sup>

In contemporary art, what is created is not so much a work as an experience.

So

When materials are too heterogeneous and too removed from artistic tradition to belong to a stabilised category, questions will not fail to be raised on the right classification for these propositions.

Take Wodiczko’s *Homeless Vehicle*: is it a sculpture, an installation, or else a set-up for social intervention? Only the context can offer an answer. [...] As for the difference between an installation and a sculpture, it basically lies in the ephemeral on-site nature of the former [...]; in concrete terms, the transportability of the work in identical form, with its original components, characterises sculpture whereas installation, difficult to transport in the one form, can be recreated with other materials.

The question arises for all genres of contemporary art. In this way, should the artist who practises performance be considered a visual artist or an actor (that is, a live performance artist)?

Here, we see that the allographic drift of

contemporary art goes hand in hand with a redefinition of the materials used by the artist — the body and the environmental context in which he or she operates — as well as with a blurring of borders between genres, or even domains of creation.

SS

Curator Eric Mangion once said: “The artist is today a producer, a broadcaster, a theatre director or an actor of his or her own works, for which his or her presence during hangings becomes an absolute necessity.”<sup>16</sup>

SS

Other than problems relating to context, and sometimes, to multisensoriality, it is difficult for installations to lend themselves to reproduction due to the fact that they rely on the presentation of objects far more than their representation.

In *Le Monde* of April 22 2011, it was written (my emphasis): “A work by Cameroonian artist Pascale-Marthine Tayou, *representing* a 7-metre-high stack of saucepans, displayed at the Saint-Bonaventure Church in Lyon, has been vandalised.” [...] The confusion between presentation and representation is evident in this description, which is incorrect, for the work, literally, does not represent anything: it presents a stack of saucepans. Yet this substitution of the mere presentation of something trivial by its representation, moreover in a religious context, no doubt largely accounts for its being the object of an attack. Here, the falling back of the description to a vocabulary drawn from classical and modern paradigms, prevents the nature of the work from being pinned down.

The term “hermeneutic doggedness” is not an exaggerated description of the recurrence, insistence and systemisation of this process of searching for meaning, associated with an imputation of the latter to the interpreted object rather than to the artist’s effort. “What these works seek to represent” (or “to express”) is one of the

<sup>15</sup> Yves Michaux, *L’Art à l’état gazeux. Essai sur le triomphe de l’esthétique*, Stock, 2003, p. 10-11.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Mangion, “La production de l’exposition”, in *L’Art contemporain et son exposition (2)*, dir. E. Caillet, C. Perret, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2007, p. 177.

commonest expressions in contemporary-art discourse, implying an intentionality on the part of the work itself in the search of a meaning to communicate between the mind of the artist and that of the spectator.



The competence required in contemporary art is no longer limited to the capacity to select the most “interesting” works, but lies primarily in the capacity to organise their combination.

This is the role specific to the commissioner, or rather, these days, the curator: a matter of arranging, combining works of which the latter is not the author<sup>17</sup>.

A fundamental aspect of the work of the curator comprises not so much the “hanging” as the installation of works in the space, or more precisely, “scenography”. The question is no longer to decide the order in which paintings will be hanged or sculptures presented, at what height and in what type of light, but to organise an itinerary considered as a proposal in itself and not merely the result of passages from one work to another.

Far from limiting oneself to the best possible exposure of each of the works making up the exhibition and a certain overall harmony in the room, the work of scenography links works to one another in such a way that something else springs up from their presentation.

The whole art of the curator consists in playing with the characteristics of a venue, in adapting the scenographic proposal to its volume, its lighting, or even its inscription in the city.

Like scenography, theatre direction has become, in a short stretch of time, an artistic competence and a whole function in itself after being ignored for centuries<sup>18</sup>.

For the gallerist, “producing has become a profession that is more and more aligned with the economy of live-performance”<sup>19</sup>.

We not only transit [...] from the art work to scenography, but also from the exhibition to installation. However, here the term

“installation” no longer refers to a single work — a blend of different materials, ephemeral and modifiable depending on the exhibition context — but to a set of works “installed” in space, or even a reconfiguration of this space with the help of different objects, either borrowed from the everyday world (screens, chairs, beds...) or made by the artist (photographs, films, strip of paint...).



The installation (in its limited sense this time) sometimes also requires a special protocol explaining how to present it, via written instructions, images, diagrams, or even a video — exactly as for works for the theatre. [...] The shift from exhibition to installation constitutes a major component in the slippage of contemporary art towards an allographic form, in other words, its shift from a “cultural heritage economy” to an “economy [...] that can be assimilated to the economy of living art”<sup>20</sup>.



In *Le Monde* of January 16-17 2011, we could read: “The National Museum of Modern Art (MNAM) recently purchased, from the Marian Goodman Gallery, *This Situation* (2009), a ‘performance’ by Seghal [...]: six flesh-and-blood actors discussing themes dictated by the artist, on the basis of quotations from important thinkers, including Situationists. [...] Seghal intends for his performances to be transmitted orally. There is no written trace of the work. No visual trace either, for he refuses any filming, photographing or even recording of it.”



The importance of present time in contemporary art owes not only to the existence of works that are by definition ephemeral or even fleeting, such as happenings and performances, some on-site installations,

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Laurent Jeanpierre, Séverine Sofio, *Les Commissaires d'exposition d'art contemporain en France. Parcours social*, Paris, Investigative report conducted for the association Commissaires d'Exposition Associés, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Serge Proust, “Le metteur en scène de théâtre: une position à partager?” in *De l'artification. Enquêtes sur le passage à l'art*, dir. N. Heinich, Roberta Shapiro, Paris, EHESS, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> *Le Journal des Arts*, October 7-20 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Nathalie Moureau, Françoise Benhamou, *Les Galeries d'art contemporain en France: portrait et enjeux dans un marché mondialisé*, Paris, La Documentation Française, 2001, p. 101.

or else relational or participatory art. There are also works that invite long contemplation and produce a lasting impression, in the form of a halo rather than a flash.

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This portrait of the world of contemporary art makes no claims at exhaustiveness but it sets out to be globally accurate — as accurate, at least, as a map can be, that indicates prominent features but does not claim to restore the landscape in full or even to draw eyes to its finest areas.

After studies in philosophy at the University of Aix-en-Provence that led nowhere in particular, and a stint as a freelancer for *Cahiers du cinema* that was hardly any more fruitful, **Nathalie Heinich** turned to sociology, of which she knew nothing about, and finished up with a PhD on the status of the artist at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. After surviving for five years as an intellectual with no stable job and making a short film under a pseudonym, she eventually found a post, thirty years ago, with the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, and has since followed her career in research units of the EHESS. She has taken advantage of this position to publish a certain number (some would say, too many) books, translated into fifteen languages, on the status of the artist and the author (*La Gloire de Van Gogh, Du peintre à l'artiste, Le Triple jeu de l'art contemporain, Etre écrivain, L'Elite artiste, De l'artification, Le Paradigme de l'art contemporain*), identities in crisis (*États de femme, L'Épreuve de la grandeur, Mères-filles, Les Ambivalences de l'émancipation féminine*), the history of sociology (*La Sociologie de Norbert Elias, Ce que l'art fait à la sociologie, La Sociologie de l'art, Pourquoi Bourdieu, Le Bêtisier du sociologue, Dans la pensée de Norbert Elias*), and values (*La Fabrique du patrimoine, De la visibilité*). Her last work to be published is *La Sociologie à l'épreuve de l'art*, and her next will be called *Des valeurs*. And there is more to come.



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