

**DISCREPANT CRITICISM. INTERVIEWS ON ART AND CURRENT
THOUGHT (2000-2011)**

**INTERVIEWS with Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh,
Douglas Crimp, Thomas Crow, Arthur Danto, James
Elkins, Hal Foster, Serge Guilbaut, Rosalind Krauss,
Donald Kuspit, Lucy Lippard, Griselda Pollock
2000-2011¹**

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BENJAMIN BUCHLOH (2000)²

¹ Spanish versión: Anna Maria Guasch, *La crítica discrepante. Entrevistas sobre arte y pensamiento actual (2000-2011)*, Madrid, Ensayos de Arte Cátedra, 2012. ISBN:: 978-84-376-3066-3.

²Published in: Anna Maria Guasch and Ferràn Barenblit, "La historia oficial del arte del siglo XX o la nueva historia. Entrevista a Benjamin H.D. Buchloh", *Arco Noticias*, n° 17, May 2000, pp. 51-53.



As a historian, and although he denies it, also as an art critic, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Modern Art History professor at Harvard University (Cambridge, MA), suggests a new way of writing art history based on the revision of classical formalism, but also on the sociology of canonical art. His writings published in *Essays historiques 1 and 2* (1992), *Postmoderneoavanguardie* (1993) and *Neo Avantgarde and Culture Industry* (2000) reveal a theorist interested in the creative activity of different artists: Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, James Coleman, Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Gerhard Richter, Martha Rosler, Thomas Struth, Andy Warhol and Lawrence Weiner, and concerned with methodology issues, mainly on how to integrate the historical, social, political and economic context in the analysis of the artistic object. What he is ultimately claiming is the political dimensions of subjectivity or, in other words, the public aspect of art.

During the exhibition on James Coleman presented in the Tàpies Foundation of Barcelona (Fall 1999), we held a long conversation with Benjamin Buchloh where we made special emphasis on what we later called *writing of history*. "In regard to how history has been written in the mainstream North American and European art currents from the sixties and seventies –states Benjamin Buchloh– I think a good part of it has lacked the studies of movements like Dadaism and the Russian Avant-gardes. It has been only in the last ten years that these and other absences have been resolved. The way to write a history alternative to the formalist history is a matter of methodology. We must start with a vision of the historical and social contexts where art is generated. This is the analysis made by historians such as

Antal or Hauser, but it was dismissed during the post-war years in favour of a structural and formal model. For me, to think about 20th Century history means reconsidering entire art chapters from this century”.

AMG/FB: However, your project is different from that of traditional sociology, but what does it contribute? When you speak of formalism, are you referring to Greenberg or Shapiro?

BB: It is a complicated matter. What we had called formalism in the American context represented a very limited standpoint that was closely linked to the post-war situation of the nineteen forties and fifties. The word formalism must be used carefully since, during that same period, several schools labelled it in a similar way. But there is certainly a formalist approach: that which dominates the formal definition of the artwork where ‘form’ is the work’s primary meaning. There is a big difference between the social history model and the formal. Ultimately, it is a matter of what prevails, whether the social, historical and political meaning or its ideological significance. At the end, it depends on this decision. I have tried many times, although unsuccessfully on occasions, to recognise the simultaneous variety of factors affecting the aesthetic meaning. The first essay I wrote and published in 1976 was entitled *Formalism and historicity*. Among other things, this work attempted to contextualise a series of procedures that are exclusive to post-war artistic production and which do not fit in any of the pre-existing models. This text exemplifies my personal way of understanding art’s social history which prioritises the study of ideologies over the aesthetic practice. But the ultimate issue lies in understanding the convergence and interrelation between both. Are they opposite, coherent, do they influence each other? In this sense, I’m interested in Adorno who suggested this matter very early on: aesthetics is the model that escapes, includes and identifies the ideological conditions of art production. Nonetheless, it is never entirely closed but rather undergoes a dialectical process.

AMG/FB: Do you identify yourself with the Marxist thought?

BB: More or less. I am interested in too many issues to give priority to a single one. However, I have been very much concerned with this matter throughout the years.

AMG/FB: During the 1980s, the New York intelligentsia was very interested in European thinkers. Were you also concerned with the post-structuralism that tried to fight the period's dominant formalism?

BB: Are you asking me if I joined the *October* group? I was never part of the structuralism and post-structuralism discussion. Although I did read these authors, an essential element for me was studying, talking and having contact with the artists themselves. I think the artists are the ones who have taught me the most. Knowing, speaking and observing the work of many artists, influenced my method more than anything else. On the other hand, it would be too risky to pretend to have a homogenous method enclosing structuralism, post-structuralism and the Frankfurt School. Roland Barthes said: "The work of art is the only thing indicating us that every object needs its own science". This assertion impressed me greatly. In this sense, I would say that the Frankfurt School provided my theoretical foundation, whereas my view on art was determined by watching and getting to know many artists: Marcel Broothaers, James Coleman, Gerhard Richter and others from whom I learned a lot. Personally, I believe there is not much sense in elaborating a theory that cannot be applied to the real world.

AMG/FB: And what about the artists from the first avant-gardes, like Rodchenko or Duchamp?

BB: Obviously that is also an important issue. In North America, at least during the last ten years, a lively debate erupted concerning postmodernism. In fact, I never understood the relevance of postmodernism. If we consider the real artistic practice during the 1920s, Duchamp and the Soviet Union would have probably been post-modern if we were to apply the current valid models. Following this line of thought, modernism concludes with cubism. For me, all of this does not make sense; it is an irrelevant theoretical model for studying the artistic practice.

AMG/FB: What can you tell us about your opposition to the arrival of Neo-expressionism in New York during the 1980s?

BB: Seen with a certain historical perspective, the situation was rather comical. Expressionism died quite fast and it is a movement that will probably have *revivals*; there are even those who suggest making a big retrospective. But if we look at the interests of the younger generation of artists and critics and even

collectors, we will see that neo-expressionism is no longer a core issue. What interested me back then and continues to interest me now is what has happened to painting. Has it died or is it still alive? But when you discuss these issues with Gerhard Richter he laughs and says that it is a senseless matter: painting is still alive.

AMG/FB: Do you believe art criticism fulfils an important social function?

BB: Above all, I think the art critic's role is over. And the reason for this is an internal motive of this system called art. There is not much we can do to prevent it. As a result of the public spheres' transformations, the art system was formerly defined by categories established by professionals. During the first part of the 20th Century, the art critic was one more piece within the complex entanglement that included public institutions, museums, collectors, art dealers and the market itself. In this scenario, art critics represented the disciplinary competence. This changed when museums started questioning the need of an art critic when they already had their own disciplinary competence. But afterwards, other art agents, collectors and art dealers began to formulate the same question. In this new system, each collector becomes a competent spectator who does not longer need an intermediary claiming to have a greater knowledge about art. There is nothing amoral in this. There is also nothing we can do to avoid it. This is a great step forward: ultimately what is being affirmed is that every spectator is self-sufficient and does not need a third person explaining what is being observed. In the same way that we no longer need a watchmaker ever since digital watches exist, the critic's function is coming to its end.