

**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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This book, entitled *Dialogue Criticism. Interviews on art and current thought* (2000-2006), but which could also have been entitled *Criticography of contemporary art*, was born out of the need to contribute a 'new format' for the various existing works on 'artistic literature' as a source for the theoretical study of art. This format is biographical and even autobiographical and applies a subjective approach that is absent from most of the existing works. For reasons of conceptual affinity, our aim is to focus on the evolution of theoretical thought and its different genealogies, from the first signs of deactivation of the formalist system of 'high modernity' to the thought derived from the crossover of ideas between post-structuralism and the Frankfurt School.

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.

Our study of the art critics, theoreticians, and historians who have had the strongest influence on the understanding of contemporary art and aesthetic theory, such as Benjamin Buchloh, Donald Kuspit, Thomas Crow, Arthur Danto, Hal Foster, Serge Guilbaut, Rosalind Krauss, Griselda Pollock, Lucy Lippard, Douglas Crimp and Yve-Alain Bois, has not been made in the third person, histori-fying, X-raying or systematizing things that may be too close in time, but on the basis of the first-person voices of the actors, using the genre of the interview – an interview that is closer to interpretation and opinion than to information or to the personal/emotional.

We choose interviews as a format for ‘artistic literature’ because of the boom this literary genre has experienced in the study of the contemporary art system and its different agents (the artist, the critic, the curator). As Michael Diers² claims, the use of interviews as an authoritative voice in contemporary art is a ‘fad’ which seems to be in tune with the ‘conversational society’ that presides over public expression, in what Guy Debord describes as the ‘society of the spectacle’. Although, possibly, we feel closer to Maurice Blanchot, who in his *L’entretien infini*³ considers criticism as the product of a relationship or contact, of a staging of, and a preoccupation with, this relationship. This particular two-way journey is the source of any authentic interview. Interviews are a different genre from journalism genre: they are half-way between reflexive text, comment, and philosophical discussion. And in all cases, criticism would, according to Blanchot, consist not so much in an act of judgement as in an act of discernment aiming to identify in the present the signs of the future.

The word “interview”, which derives from the French term ‘entrevue’ which means ‘agreed meeting’, deriving in turn from the verb ‘entrevoir’ or ‘to see each other at short distance’, has indeed been widely used as an academic method in the social sciences, as well as in psychoanalysis and cultural studies, as one of the

² Michael Diers, “Infinite Conversation” or the Interview as an Art Form”, in *Hans Ulrich Obrist Interviews*, vol. 1, Milan and New York, Charta/Fondazioni Pitti, 2003, p. 13. See also *Hans Ulrich Obrist Interviews*, vol. 2, (Charles Arsene-Henry, Shumon Basar, Karen Marta and Hans Ulrich Obrist, eds.), Milan and New York, Charta, 2010.

³ Maurice Blanchot, *L’entretien infini*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969.

vehicles of contemporary critical discourse, which considers it as the ideal method to obtain information through oral testimonies. As an example, let us mention some titles we have selected at random of interviews with artists only: *The artist's voice*, Katharine Kuh (1960); *L'intérieur de l'art 1954-1960*, Dora Valier (1982); *Art Talk. The Early 80s*, edited by Jeanne Sigel (1980); *Writing as Sculpture 1978-1987*, Louwrien Wijers (1996); *L'art? C'est une meilleure idée! Entretiens 1972-1984*, Irmeline Lebeer (1997); *Speak art!. The best of BOMB magazine's interviews with artists*, edited by Betsy Sussler (1997); *Art Recollection. Artists' Interviews and Statements in the Nineties*, edited by Gabriele Detterer (1997); *Interview with American Artists*, David Silvestre (2001); and *Artist talk 1969-1977*, edited by Peggy Gale (2004).

Interview as a type of documentation that combines the qualities of authenticity, authority and subjectivity is also interesting to other authors who interview not only artists but also critics, historians, architects and urban designers. This is the case of two recent projects: the first, by Karen Raney⁴, *Art in Question*, a series of interviews with a group of thinkers and artists, such as W.J.T. Mitchell, Bill Viola, Okwui Enwezor, Barbara Kruger and Griselda Pollock, approaches visual culture and art practices; the second is by Hans Ulrich Obrist, who in 2003 published the first of his series is *Hans Ulrich Obrist. Interviews*⁵ with a collection of 66 interviews with architects, artists, curators, film directors, musicians, philosophers, social theoreticians and urban designers, which can be understood as a web of biographical itineraries, of relationships, ideas, projects, facts and stories with which to write the history of a new genre and define the relationships between art and culture in the twenty-first century. The model Obrist proposes differs both from the journalistic genre and from any purely academic enterprise and, as M. Diers⁶ claims, is closer to a philosophical and encyclopaedic model. He understands conversation as a fruitful exchange of ideas, and, following Hans-Georg Gadamer⁷, as the main form of communication in an oral world which

⁴ Karen Raney, *Art in Question*, London, New York, Continuum, 2003.

⁵ *Hans Ulrich Obrist Interviews*, vol. 1, *op. cit.*

⁶ Michael Diers, *op. cit.*, p. 22

⁷ See Hans-Georg Gadamer's replies to Obrist in this volume, p. 244.

has taken priority over the written world, becoming a laboratory for interdisciplinary dialogues.

Under this concept of dialogical and interdisciplinary 'laboratory' we present our book of interviews, carried out, in our case, with art critics, theoreticians and historians only. Beyond their conceptual and generational differences, they believe that modernity is a problematic project which should be rewritten or at least deconstructed.

These interviews were carried out over a period of five years (from 2000 to 2005), some of them in the US and some in Spain, all published in specialized art journals (*ArcoNoticias, Kalías, Lápiz, ExitBook*) and newspapers (*La Vanguardia, ABC Cultural, El Periódico del Arte*), and conducted as fieldwork with a variety of geographic locations, professional interests, academic contexts and biographical circumstances both of interviewers and interviewees. The basic assumption was always that the interview was a 'place' for knowledge construction: hence the absence of a connecting thread or an 'a priori' script in the book we are presenting. Readers will not find thematic sections or chapters grouping the main trends of thought that define, delimit and characterize the 'intellectual personality' of interviewees.

All the materials are presented chronologically (based on the date when the interview was published). This provides an autonomy to interviews and authors and frees this characteristic 'criticography' from any positivist reading that would be limited to making an inventory and describing the object of study monographically. We have therefore been careful not to produce a mere list of authors, ideas and trends of thought, or to limit this thought to stale labels and simplistic and schematized explanations.

Faced with the impossibility of guaranteeing the distance that historians seem to require in order to interpret or narrate facts from the outside, we have chosen the opposite process: we work from the inside, at a short distance. And we have used 'questions' as our work tool, in the conviction that knowing how to ask questions is not only a basic skill for life, but also an essential element for

approaching the genre of the interview, which always requires prior knowledge of the topic and interviewee.

Possibly not all art critics, theoreticians and historians who have participated actively in the construction of the theoretical scaffolding presented in these dialogues on current art and thought are present here, but we did not write this book with the aim of 'telling everything that happened when it happened', but to present the different episodes and fragments with which, we trust, readers will be able to map a good part of contemporary art discourse.

And although the scientific criterion was the rule (all thinkers included in this book have been strongly committed to reality since the end of the 1970s and have influenced how a whole generation has thought and acted), I should acknowledge here a certain personal 'empathy' or certain intellectual affinities that made me choose these authors and not others and design for each of them a specific questionnaire according to my intellectual interests and those of my interviewees.

In fact, everything I have written here can be traced back to my preparation of the text *La crítica de arte. Historia, teoría y praxis*⁸, in which I wrote a chapter on the situation of art criticism in the US. Already then I was deeply interested in designing some kind of genealogy of thought that would compile a variety of approaches, from a modernity based on purity, the autonomy of means and a self-critical tendency represented especially by Clement Greenberg, to a postmodernity which, from the pages of the journal *October*, began to be vindicated by a new generation of critics intent on participating in the break-up of the modern epistemological system on the basis of their particular set of 'authoritative figures' from Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno to Roland Barthes to Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard and Jean Francois Lyotard, each with his own 'anxiety of influence'.

In the book, even respecting the chronological order in which interviews were carried out and published, it is possible to identify certain 'conceptual' groups or 'episteme production' underlying the cultural production of a given

⁸ Anna Maria Guasch (coord.), *La crítica de arte. Historia, teoría y praxis*, Barcelona, Ediciones del Serbal, 2003, pp. 109-146.

moment. One of the first groups is the interviews with Benjamin Buchloh, Thomas Crow and Serge Guilbaut, who, in spite of their differences, call for an urgent updating of the critical perspectives and the repeated declarations of the end of Marxism within the framework of a renewed 'social history of art' for which the main priority is the study of ideology beyond aesthetic practice. A second category includes the interviews with Rosalind Krauss, who focuses on topics such as ideology, content, narrativity or 'theoretical value' and seeks to go beyond the innocence deriving from the objectivity advocated by the formalist dogma, and with Hal Foster, who in his early criticism of 'pluralism' began a process of reconstruction of some of the paradigms implicit in modern discourse and, like Krauss, defended a 'semiotic turn' within the framework of 'textual criticism'.

The search for content under a common situation of 'pluralism' could be the common denominator of the interviews carried out at different moments and under different requirements with Donald Kuspit and Arthur Danto, who share, although from different standpoints (Kuspit from a symbolic dimension and Danto from the defence of interpretation as meaningful work mediated by the immersion in a system of multiple and complex cultural references), the same ethical concept of art.

From a different standpoint, the interview with Lucy Lippard should be placed in the context of a political feminism parallel to the peace movements in the United States which approached sexual difference from the position of a repoliticization of sex. And, whereas Lippard rescued women's personal experience and self-exploration and its representation in the sexual arena and the body, thus promoting a new interpretation of sensitivity and aesthetics which would no longer be contemplative and feminine, but militant and feminist, Griselda Pollock, on the other hand, was closer to a fundamentally critical feminism in the sense that, without giving up the concept of subjectivity (that is, authorship or its intentions) nor the artist's gender experience, she would seek to break power systems, systems with implications on ideology, sex and social difference. In Pollock we find theory, art, literature, ideology and autobiography combined, including issues related to trauma, the Holocaust and recent artistic and philosophical expressions.

We can place the thought of Douglas Crimp within the context of gender identities and politics, but marking a 'different' essential pathway, in the sense of advancing the postmodernity of difference and *queer* theory, from his defence of photography to his criticism of museums, to his positioning between the public and the private and his commitment to different forms of cultural activism, such as the movement in support of AIDS sufferers, and to feminist criticism. In turn, the art historian and theoretician Yve-Alain Bois, on the basis of Barthes's poststructuralist thought, formulates a formalism "of substance" which, leaving behind the strictures of style, focuses on representation and the richness of interpretation.

In all cases, we believe that the particular and subjective 'tracing of critical thought' that we propose contributes a comprehensive study of how the concepts, horizons, methods and historiographical results of thinkers evolve. At a later date we may have to identify the works and contributions of these art theoreticians, critics and historians in their corresponding historiographical, social, intellectual and political contexts, and to establish references and classifications that establish clearly the different trends of this 'criticography'. But for the moment we trust that through the intellectual affiliations of the different authors we have provided sufficient meeting points, influences, and circulation networks to account, ultimately, as Walter Benjamin proposed, for the 'cultural climate' of an age through works and their individuals and authors – and also to account for the individuals and their work as a complex expression of their own time.