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Which Interactions in Contemporary Art?

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A Linguistic Elucidation

Although the description and understanding of contemporary art practices seem a priori already to have been documented by aesthetics, art criticism, and art history, a linguistic approach to the problem is nonetheless relevant: linguistics affords us, on the one hand, a means to clarify a complex terminology (on the terms interaction and interactivity); on the other hand, linguistics (particularly the program of what is called “interactional” linguistics) can help us to rethink the “mutual actions” at play in contemporary art.

Action, Interaction, and Interactivity: Terminological Particulars

Without elaborating on etymological details, I will begin by defining briefly the terms that concern us in order better to grasp the issues at hand. Interaction initially appeared in the vocabulary of the natural and life sciences before being introduced into the humanities and social sciences to describe the actions exercised by persons or groups upon one another; the term thereby comprises a vast and relatively indeterminate grouping of phenomena. As for interactivity, it has a more restricted meaning that is linked directly to the development of new technologies, and it refers to the possibility of exchange between the user of a computer system and the machine through the intermediary of the screen. The use of these terms in “artistic” vocabulary necessarily proceeds differently: with interactivity, it is a matter of recognizing the role of new technologies in both the production of artworks and, correlatively, in their reception; thus, a specific meaning is at play (i.e., some artworks are deemed interactive while others are not). The notion of interaction, however, situates itself at a higher level of generality to problematize the relation between the visitor (1) and the work. Interaction can thus be included among those nomadic terms, re-contextualized to account for new phenomena—or those perceived as such. “Interactional” (2) artworks, therefore, are those that elicit the participation, the intervention, of the visitor, whether they are interactive (I’m thinking of installations by Indian artist Shilpa Gupta, such as *Shadow 3*, presented at MAC VAL in October 2007, or *Untitled*, exhibited at the last Lyon Biennale) or not (for example, Tino Sehgal’s protocols, such as his *Selling Out*, which consisted of a striptease performed by the “security guards” of the exhibition space when visitors would enter). In both cases, the work is set in motion by the visitor’s presence; we are dealing here with a means to radicalize the (now) commonplace idea that the work is produced by the activity of the public who looks upon it, who comments on it, and so forth.

I therefore privilege the idea of interaction as a result of its wider scope of application, yet mostly since it seems to reveal a pragmatic way to rethink the relation to the artwork. The term has a generic value, recalling different types of activities: interacting with a work is at once to look at it, touch it, sense it, enter it, manipulate it, comment on it, critique it, and so on. Perhaps it is all of these at the same time. However, beyond this specification of interactional activities, the foregrounding of action as a dimension of the work seems to be the determining aspect here: to address the work in describing what we do with it, in observing what it does to us and what we can potentially do to it, seems to be a radical means of moving away from a distanced contemplation in favour of an active, participative relation that is privileged by contemporary art practices. In this we situate ourselves within what would be, so to speak, a pragmatics of the aesthetic relation.

From Communication to Action

Integral to the relation to art one often finds the idea of a “dialogue with artworks.” To speak of interactivity, moreover, is to inscribe oneself in such a perspective, so long as the term qualifies precisely those communication frameworks that favour exchange: here we are fully within a conception of art as communication, which tends to turn art into a medium. Without developing further the concerns that such a conception (3) may eventually raise, it bears mentioning of course that communication is already a form of action (in conformity with the Austinian heritage according to which “saying is doing”). Nevertheless, it seems possible to go beyond such a framework with certain contemporary art practices. Notably, this is the case with Paul Ardenne’s notion of “otherness” [autrisme] that characterizes participatory art, which, “in an open and often spectacular manner, seeks to implicate the spectator. If, in a manner analogous to classical art, it derives sustenance from transitivity, then it does not offer objects to look at but situations to compose or with which to compose.” (4) Sophie Calle’s work *Chambre avec vue* (2002) can be regarded in this light: visitors came not only to see Sophie Calle stretched out on a bed at the summit of the Eiffel Tower, but also to lie with her and to tell her a story “so that she would not fall asleep. Maximum expected duration: 5 minutes. Extended time allowed if the story is exciting. No story, no visit.” (5) The stakes are extreme here, of course, but for Ardenne it is a matter of measuring the distance taken with respect to traditional art practices: there is no continuum but a clear-cut rupture, which implies a redefinition of the stakes and modalities of the aesthetic relation.

I regard as significant in this context the act of placing the visitor at the centre of the artwork; that is, his or her inclusion in the work not only as a subject looking but as a participating agent. From this perceptive, the notion of communication seems rather limited to account for the issues at hand. One can turn here to anthropological theories of the image put forth by Hans Belting, for instance, to gain a decisive understanding of this repositioning. Importantly, Belting reconsiders “analyzing the image in a triangular configuration, so to speak, through the relation shared by three distinct parameters: image-medium-gaze, or image-apparatus-body, so much so that I could not picture an image

without placing it at once in strict correlation with a body gazing and a medium gazed at.” (6) Here we are dealing with a mode of reciprocal action that is constitutive of the work. The fact that the body is taken into account is essential: from Belting’s standpoint, it is a matter of underscoring what he calls “the living connection to images.” For us, this approach implies analyzing further the mutual effects produced by the co-presence of the work and visitor in view of grasping as clearly as possible the interactions that can be played out.

Art as Social Experience: Towards an Interactional Approach

At the origin of such an approach there are, of course, the writings of John Dewey, the aim of which was to re-establish a continuum of experiences between life and art; to remove the work from its autarkic status and to re-inscribe it into a comprehensive experience; or to make art—as production and as reception—a social activity among others. This theory found its concrete application in collaboration with the art collector Barnes, and was put into practice at the Barnes Foundation. It is this particular dimension that engages me: Dewey’s theory envisions the aesthetic relation as a social experience structured by exchanges that take place around artworks better to apprehend them or better to reinsert them into an emotional and (or) cognitive flux. Such an approach seems to resonate strongly with the program of an interactional linguistics, which seeks precisely to describe and understand the organization of social relations by situating exchange at their very core, as a fundamental unit. Interaction, notably defined by Goffman, becomes a pivotal key in this line of questioning: “Interaction (that is face-to-face interaction) may be roughly defined as the reciprocal influence on individuals upon one another’s actions when in one another’s immediate physical presence. Interaction is defined as all interaction which occurs throughout any one occasion when a given set of individuals are in one another’s continuous presence. This is also known as an encounter.” (7)

If such a definition is more restrictive (i.e., interaction as a process of situated social activity), then it does, however, allow for the re-centring of the issues at stake: taking into account the interactional activities that unfold in exhibition spaces (museums or other) concerns not the (aesthetic) relation between an artwork and a visitor but the (social) relation between visitors surrounding a work. Furthermore, it allows us to perceive how meaning is socially constituted in contemporary art. As we have defined them above, “interactional” artworks are thereby significant inasmuch as they favour exchange among visitors: seeing a crowd gathering around a work can be a factor of attraction; observing people “experiment” with a work (i.e., touch it, enter it, and so on) can incite us to experiment with it ourselves; finding ourselves in an installation with other people can favour exchange; the unfolding of a visit can lead to our finding, from one work to another, the same visitors and permit us to elaborate micro-conversations; participating in a guided tour creates specific relationships between the guide and other members of the group, and facilitates the formulation of commentaries on the works; and so forth. The visitors thus find themselves engaged in collective activities, which can determine their relation to the work and their own respective

visiting practices: one is faced with a series of factors to evaluate the “political” dimension of contemporary art. Finally, one recognizes here that the relation to the work is a situated and locally organized process, which comes into being as a socially structured activity.

Given its nature and modes of accessibility, contemporary art seems particularly to lend itself to this type of analysis. It would no doubt be of interest to consider these conclusions in light of research conducted in classical and contemporary art institutions. Naturally, I do not feign to propose here a definitive and stable theory of the stakes of contemporary art practices; rather, my aim is to shed some light on these practices from another point of view, which is complementary to the work undertaken, notably, in the sociology of art or in the field of cultural mediation. The objective, therefore, is neither to evaluate works by their reception nor to evaluate the ways in which they are visited, but to account for the way in which the social practices constitutive of the meaning of exhibited works are organized. Ultimately, making this type of interaction into a full-fledged object of study corroborates Bourriaud’s thesis of the existence of a “relational aesthetics”: “The possibility of a relational art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art.” (8) I contend that in observing the practices of visitors, one obtains a good means to measure and assess this upheaval.

[Translated from the French by Vivian Ralickas]

NOTES

1. I speak deliberately of the visitor and not of the spectator to demonstrate that I locate my argument at a “concrete” level, that of situated interaction, which takes place in the act of visiting an exhibition space (and not at the more abstract level of aesthetic theory, for example).
2. Notably, this expression is found in Nathalie Heinich, who speaks of “interactional apparatuses” [dispositifs interactionnels] regarding Joseph Beuys and the defenders of sociological art in France, in *Le triple jeu de l’art contemporain* (Paris: Minuit, 1998), 101.
3. Such shortcomings stem principally from my theoretical framework, insofar as I regard verbal exchange as a situated activity rather than as an abstract concept. To formulate it naively, there is no dialogue with the artwork because it does not speak, and there is no exchange with the artist because he or she is not present. I employ the language paradigm metaphorically here, of course, but I would like to avoid having recourse to these expressions to describe the relations at play.
4. Paul Ardenne, *Un art contextuel* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), 181.
5. Sophie Calle, *M’as-tu vue?* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2003), 209
6. Hans Belting, *Pour une anthropologie des images* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 8.
7. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), 15.

8. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland (Dijon, France: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 14.