

The artist as theoretician

Reciprocity between theory and artistic practice between 1965 and 1985

During the second half of the sixties, a peculiar figure appeared in the US and Europe afterwards, a figure that is still challenging the dynamics of the artistic « scene » : the artist-theoretician. In the wake of the conceptual claim for a reinstatement of the use of language in the artistic field, the critical and theoretical activity of numerous artists constitute a topic still largely ignored. Although being heirs to the artists of the Soviet avant-garde, who broadened their own intellectual prerogatives, the artists-theoreticians in the sixties until the eighties have yet a specific role. While the status of the former is based on a progressive and positivist paradigm – considering art theory as a science that needs to be enhanced and taught –, the status of the latter seems to correspond to many issues – of which this one-day symposium would like to render an account.

The formation and the evolution of this figure could be roughly divided in two phases. During the first decade (65-75), the rise of the artist-theoretician seems to testify to a critical response to the modernist program, above all to the « medium specificity » and the position of the artist, confined away from language. Judd's *Specific Objects* (1965) and Morris' *Notes on Sculpture I & II* (1966) constitute the first significant examples challenging the Greenbergian and Friedian ideas. Besides, from a formal point of view, the status of these essays is, most of the time, « ambiguous » ; despite their intellectual rigor, some artists use literary or journalistic devices (Robert Smithson, Dan Graham), while others consider their philosophical arguments as mere artworks (Joseph Kosuth, *Art & Language*).

The second decade (75-85) can be characterized, at first, by the more admitted form of artists' writings. While being both subsumed into the general category of « practice », theoretical discourse and artistic practice belong to separate registers; their relation is one of complementarity rather than one of confusion. Besides, the year 1975 is the scene of numerous translations of the so-called *French Theory* (Barthes, Lacan and Foucault above all), and thus marks a turning point regarding the themes and conceptual tools used at that time. Three specific but tightly bound features can be pointed out in the field of artists' theories. First, a politicization of the critical activity is more and more salient ; the division of labor is questioned in order to conceive the unity of artistic and theoretical practice. This

tendency is notably linked to a criticism of the first conceptual artists, challenged for their political neutrality and for aestheticizing theory. Second, semiotics debates are marked by a kind of « psychoanalytical turn », from which some artists-theoreticians benefitted (Victor Burgin, Mary Kelly). First and foremost, the use of Freudian and Lacanian thought addressed the feminist issue. And third, even if photography was familiar to most of the artist since the sixties, it is not before 1975 that one can witness a real analysis of its function in the society and its problematic understanding as an artistic medium (Victor Burgin, Allan Sekula, Martha Rosler).

This one-day symposium does not intend to define the problem entirely, but to highlight specific itineraries. By examining how and why the most significant artists-theoreticians maintained the « liaisons dangereuses » (Rosenberg) between ideas and artistic practice, one would like to throw light on the very foundation of the complex status of the contemporary artist.