JEQU

IRL

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Interview with Luc Boltanski
Conducted by Laura Mitterrand
Introduction by Howie Chen and Jason Kakoyiannis

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PERSONAL BEST

ON JEQU

The JEQU program started as an attempt to assess the ongoing existence of certain themes in art practice and conversations of the recent past (from winter 2009 to spring 2011). We believe this period was defined by the continued erosion of art's "critical" potential and the ability for so-called "critical practices" to narrate and respond to the context of cultural production.[1] Our method has been to examine these issues from positions outside the art world, motivated by our personal experiences in fields such as academia, creative industries, law, and finance—fields that one does not associate as self-reflexively critical.[2]

1 By "critical practices", we refer to activities that take a critical view of social relations, knowledge and market formations, and that seek transformative possibilities toward emancipation from governmentality and determinism. Since the 1960s, critical practices within art have taken the forms of social, institutional, and self-critique—among others—but with an increasingly decisive bent toward anticapitalism. We are here focused on artworks that are "critical" to the extent they reflect some kind of second level meaning oriented specifically toward this economic register.

2 As two individuals with careers both outside and intersecting the art world, JEQU's practice participates in art dialogues and tries to augment them with information gleaned from other walks of life, without having to rely on art to provide core income (in effect, circumventing art's "all-in" existential demand). In this way, JEQU has always needed to incorporate the concepts of split life, semi-commitment, hedged bets, and quasi-outsider status. JEQU's work and activities are driven by a model of adequacy—given the press of demands IRL (in real life), what can we do with the modicum of time allocated for art practice? How do we leverage finite time and contribute usefully to those areas of critical investigation and expression we feel closest to? We have had to acknowledge that there may have been a period in our lives when we were objectively better equipped at art-making and theorizing—when we were closer to it every day, when we were more enmeshed socially, when success or failure registered differently, when the emotional investment in an ideological approach to art was halcyon. Perhaps a residue from our training and sensibility of those years has survived, blending with the other lives and personae we have lived since. Those days of attainment are past. It is all personal bests from here.

JEQU's perspective is one of exit, of the departed; and we look at art's persistent struggle for greater validity and coherence with a detachment born of knowledge that comes after a defection—chiefly, knowledge of the possibility for other choices and outcomes that can be positive even if impossible to imagine from within the current state.

From this vantage, what were dim intuitions have developed into validated observations that deal with the basic asymmetries of art (and are our own gloss on some well-recognized themes).

1. Why do artists lack fluency with and mastery over the economic models governing the exchange economy they dwell within, despite the omnipresence of discussion and reflection on capitalism and markets in art-theoretical discourse?

2. Why do artists tolerate a risk/reward paradigm that seems inferior to other sectors of the economy? Why are artist incomes generally lower than other cohorts (given their level of education and intellectual capability)?[3]

3. Why do business practices, ethics, and bargaining constructs in the art world generally seem informal, in some cases alarmingly lagging norms and best practices in other industries?

3 Howie Chen, "Usus Pauper," *DIS Magazine*, June 20, 2013, http://dismagazine.com/discussion/46472/usus-pauper.

ON RECENT HISTORICAL EVENTS

At the end of 2009, the global financial contagion had spread to the art market, causing the first major contraction since 1990, with values for contemporary, modern, and impressionist artwork falling over thirty percent.[4] As in past downturns (for instance, that of the early 1990s), a wishful "back-to-basics" narrative reemerged in the art world—a complex of arguments and mental models that seemed to overvalue anticommercial practices and approaches (perhaps this was not unique to the art world). The prior decade's hyperdevelopment and the ensuing bust became the backdrop for a new type of retreat fantasy, one where artists were enjoined to return to producing "meaningful" (as opposed to "commercial") art under scarce conditions. The reemergence of this retreat narrative was suspiciously timed and seemed to be an obvious script that voiced a longing for the prelapsarian homeland of art-for-art's sake myth. It was as if this homeland were the natural order of things—where a reset button could be pressed, causing art speculators to disappear and an ethically purifying cascade of critical, self-reflexive, market-autonomous art to fill the void.

4 However, this contraction was short lived. "The crisis spreads to the art market," *Artprice*, March 30, 2009, http://web.artprice.com/artmarketinsight/483/The+crisis+spreads+to+the+art+market?l=en.

As we now know, despite a short downturn, the financial crisis ended happily (so far, so good) for the art market, as the emergence of BRIC and Middle East market wealth supplemented the outflows from developed markets. New collector classes included art in their luxury portfolios, and major collectors whose wealth was not locked into roiling financial markets continued to consume. Art's viability as both status good and asset class has largely remained intact.

In the shadow of these events, the rhetorics of "artistic critique" suddenly became important again. There was an urgent need among institutions and artists to respond to and narrate the effects of the collapse.[5] This revival of the rhetoric of critique prompted some obvious and automatic questions: What did it mean in 2010 to say that art had a "critical" ability and imperative? From where does this complex around critique and art derive its potency, such that it could be resurrected in this instant, just add water fashion, and acknowledged to have specific meaning? What were the enduring assumptions embedded in it?

5 For example, the "Recessional Aesthetics" questions posed by prominent art historians in October reflect a shared critical stultification at that moment. Hal Foster, Yve Alain Bois, & David Joselit, "Recessional aesthetics: an exchange," *October 135* (Winter 2011): pp. 93–116.

In the midst of the financial crisis, JEQU hosted a presentation by sociologist Olav Velthuis at the inaugural Independent art fair in New York. His talk, titled "The Return of the 90s. The Art Market in Times of Crisis" discussed what he terms the "symbolic meaning of prices."[6] Velthuis argued that, after the latest market crisis, the return to rhetoric that wanted to negate the economic within art was not simply a naive fantasy. It looked equally like a tactic for gathering and consolidating symbolic value at a time when economic value was scarce. Such a negation of the economic in relation to art has a long history, as does the view that the market is simply a contaminating or profane force.

6 See transcript: "The Return of the 90s. The Art Market in Times of Crisis," JEQU, March 5, 2010, http://www.jequ.org/files/olav-velthuis.pdf.

Velthuis catalogued the various stories and logics employed by art-market actors to justify the prices of work. His work captures the mode and mechanism of subjective value-creation in the act. Under Velthuis, prices become dynamic artifacts of meaning. Prices reflect information collected and implied in them by participants who produce justifications and invent rationales to validate them.

Velthuis discussed the enduring failure of art history and its critical rhetoric to recognize that the art market, like any other market, is first and foremost a cultural phenomenon. In this scenario, the art market is constituted by participants who trade for value according to subjective goals—it is not external, remote, abstract, or monolithic. It is participatory. Everyone is implicated. This is a frontal attack on critical approaches that tend to partition the artist from the market, cordoning her/him from value exchange and constructing a separation between the two.

Given Velthuis's model, where all are implicated, the artist would need to be cognizant of and responsible for the art market s/he produces within. The market is tangible—not beyond the grasp of patient description. However, the "back-to-basics" narratives recirculated at that time seemed to describe the opposite, persisting in a vision where artists were like miners trapped in a collapse; human blowback of a macro-level process they couldn't engage. Responsibility and guilt were reserved for outside forces—the speculator, the auction house, the gallerist, the art fair, the jpeg.[7] In 2010, the domination, contamination and profanity of the market was part of a script—one that acted along the register of symbolic value. Work is either endowed by the critic, dealer, or curator as "economically valuable" and priced accordingly; or it is endowed as symbolically valuable because it resists, slips past, or "critiques" the marketplace. It goes without saying that this symbolic value will later be cashed in—because, functionally, it is a store of value that will be unlocked once the market is back on track.

7 This approach is antiquated in its formulation of the question "who is to blame?" because its logic ultimately remains within what philosopher Francois Ewald, writing on the "technology of insurance," called "the universe of fault"—that is, the form of governmentality and legal reasoning that presumes that where there is damage, there must be a responsible party. This logic implies and reinforces a de-responsibilization of the worker (the artist) and was later replaced by a concept of risk; where instead of asking "who is responsible for the damage?" one now asks, given the character of modern society which is defined by the ubiquity of risk, "how is risk best managed?" (See Michael Behrent, *The Journal of Modern History* 82, September 2010: pp. 585–624.) Risk management and allocation became key themes for industry over a century ago, whereas the art economy has not self-consciously undergone the same evolution. If it were to occur, the antagonism in the market between the artist and other market actors (collector, dealer, speculator, etc.) would be reenvisioned as a form of solidarism—a "we-are-in-this-together" relationship. Thus, norms would be arrived at through negotiation of parties and stakeholders, making negotiating skills, economic fluency, and other related bargaining and strategic skills into core parts of the artist wheelhouse rather than afterthoughts.

Regarding the complexities of governmentality and its interpretations, see also Tristan Garcia, *Hate: A Romance: A Novel* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2010).

And yet, despite all of this flux and the unfolding revelation that "critique" was an alternate pricing script—quintessentially economic—the core thesis of advanced art stayed the same: Advanced art must fulfill the imperative to remain autonomous and remote from the market. Artists continue to inherit this imperative of "critique". It has become dogmatized the more art training has merged with the university, even if its origin has become more obscured. What could the content of this critique be?

ON THE CURRENT INTERVIEW

The New Spirit of Capitalism, by sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, was published in 1999; however, the text reached the shores of art discourse much later, after its English translation in 2005, just in time to fulfill the descriptive demands of a "network" meme in art theory, fueled by interest in post-Internet ontologies and modes of production within hypercapitalism.[8]

8 Much of this text and research used in recent art writing makes superficial use of Boltanski and *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Specifically, it tends to mine Boltanski for a vocabulary on the qualities of globalized, network capitalism and the connectionist imperative that emphasizes values such as creativity, flexibility, cooperation, openness, communication, information sharing, trust, etc. This descriptive framework of "network" is talismanically invoked as an attempt to situate artistic production in a larger condition of production and market constructions or to further identify the connectionist values reflected in the artist's work or role. The current discourse of "network painting" suffers this critical anemia, as if art's contemporaneity needs to be constantly verified as a program of art criticism.

Boltanski and Chiapello's formula for defining critique is useful and simplified: At its most basic, critique is a developed criticism of *what is* (reality), and a yearning for what *could be* (other possible worlds)—born of both a general rejection of the structures that repress possibilities and a resistance to governmentality, orienting itself toward an emancipatory horizon for the full realization of humanity.

Reacting against dehumanizing factors in modernity, two different critiques aim toward the radical transformation of social conditions:

1. "Social critique." Developed as a workerist reaction to early industrial society and the inequalities, poverty, exploitation, and dismantling of traditional culture it produced. Social critique countered with demands for equality and solidarity, using the social form of the collective as its unit.

2. "Artistic critique." Inspired by bourgeois individualism and lifestyle, artistic critique countered the oppression of factory discipline, societal uniformity, and commodification of life with goals for realizing freedom and authenticity for each human individual. Its unit of organization was the individual.

"Artistic critique" as used by Boltanski (or "Artist critique," for Chiapello) is an umbrella term that refers to a quest for life outside of the commodity form—that is, a life beyond convention, committed to an exploration of the highest forms of human existence.[9] This authentic lifestyle is crystallized in the romantic notion of the artist as a form of unalienated bohemian. These are the registers in which critical values somehow infuse and validate exceptional art.

9 "Artist critique," as defined by Eve Chiapello, "Evolution and co-optation: The 'artist critique' of management and capitalism," *Third Text*, Routledge, Volume 18, Issue 6, 2004: pp. 585–594.

Within the art field, artistic critique and the exchange market are naturalized opposites; this relation is continually recycled despite holding limited (at best) truth value. To a great extent, art has identified itself in the critique of capitalism, despite a relationship that is fraught, as art is itself embedded in capitalism through a shared critique of traditional society. Capitalism has been the dominant motor of societal change since the eighteenth century, and artistic critique as a liberal project has often entered into an alliance with capitalism against traditional society. Boltanski and Chiapello illustrate this by posing artistic critique and capitalism as a codependent dyad rather than polar opposites. In this way, capitalism has provided the tools, conceptual territory, and content of the critique developed by art. Capitalism is the object of an artistic critique that it can surpass, absorb, and redeploy; and it is thereby justified against other forms of economic relations. This is capitalism's amazing capacity for "self reform," according to Boltanski.

Also according to Boltanski and Chiapello: The sun has been setting for both social and artistic critique over the twentieth century. Many of the original goals of social critique have been partially met, and the concepts of artistic critique have been successfully incorporated into management philosophies embracing the values of experimentation, flexibility, and creative autonomy in the workplace.[10] Artistic critique has been subsumed by managerial discourses as competitive business pressures have forced firms to adapt to creative modes of working. Individualism, self-management, non-hierarchy, flexibility, and creativity "for all" have become features of the innovation revolution that began in the 1970s.

10 This transition has been heavily documented in postindustrial discourse and organizational management studies.

Chiapello's research maps how artistic critique has become increasingly less plausible as the role of artists in society has been repositioned.[11] The original complaints and sources of indignation—artistic alienation and destitution—are now harder to fathom. Art has found itself increasingly aligned with elitist cultural production to the point that art and money are near synonymous terms (despite how poorly the art economy distributes wealth). Artists are culturally prominent, educated, and have likely had a variety of career and lifestyle options. Because of these associations, artistic critique cannot maintain belief in its assertion that artists are marginal figures, or that art is a vulnerable class of activity.

11 Eve Chiapello, "Evolution and co-optation: The 'artist critique' of management and capitalism," *Third Text*, Routledge, Volume 18, Issue 6, 2004: pp. 585–594.

Artistic critique has further dissipated as other creative activities emerge that are art-like in nature: entertainment, fashion, information management, or related fields. These activities blur the lines around around the fine artist, lessening the uniqueness and power of her or his existential insights. Contemporary art has become a ubiquitous cultural category, and what it has gained in visibility has been matched by a loss in special status of the artist, as romantic concepts of creative genius are replaced with demystified labor-like production. Overall—in a reversal of symbolic fortune—artistic critique has been largely neutralized as its demands have been partially fulfilled, or shown to inherently contradict themselves. If artistic critique has achieved its horizon because its demands have been fulfilled, one is bound to ask: What are the concrete results for artists? How has their condition improved?

The responses to these questions are baffling, from our perspective. Despite the tremendous change being wrought by factors such as the formalization of art education, market expansion, the erosion of the role of the critic, the importance of art fairs, and internet sales—at the level of native concerns for artists, there has been little adaptation or evolution. Key features remain in place: the persistent authority of institutions that lack transparency; uncompetitive markets that are easy to manipulate by well-capitalized players; imbalances of information, sophistication, and bargaining positions; and the increasing predominance of celebrity social logic in different degrees of intensity for more than a generation.

One might venture to say that the art world since the economic collapse has become *more* institutionalized and *more* resistant to innovation in a way that is less favorable for the primary value producers (i.e., artists). The result is an art world and market that lacks diversity, where few of the benefits of a competitive market dynamic come to pass, now fully controlled by a curator-collector-gallerist complex and a crony political class that holds all the cards.

Domination of Critique

What has been established above? Artistic critique has essentially exhausted its potency and run aground. Yet in the art world—perhaps *only* in the art world—artistic critique still retains currency. Perhaps there is nothing notable in this phenomenon, as the art world has a history of wringing vital essence from the runoff of other intellectual epochs and disciplines. But it supports a finding that what passes for critique or self-reflexivity in art does not actually deliver actionable insights or practical gains; rather, these practices end up as rituals that reaffirm an established order. Critique as it is configured now is exterior facing (oriented toward an onlooker or outsider), a formalized script for generating and confirming symbolic value, and a necessary (but not sufficient) element of the marketing mix in advanced art practices. In other words, it is institutionalized.

Artistic critique has been neutralized because it has been thoroughly *dominated*, in the technical sense.[12] The terms of *what matters*, *what is the case*, and *what has worth* now, have all been redefined by another form of agency that overmasters and outmaneuvers the thought-tools of critique and artistic agency. While critique clings to a historically dated model based on an ideology of exploitation and antinomies where art and economy can be separate in concept (if not in practice), this other agency, that of managerialism, adapts and redefines the terms up for debate on behalf of institutions. Managerialism is permissive and informal too. Managerialism is also creative. It collapses polarities (like art), maneuvers through contradiction (like art), and has absorbed the values of flexibility and improvisation of artistic critique.[13]

12 "'Domination' (*Herrschaft*) is the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons ... A 'ruling organization' (*Herrschaftsverband*) exists insofar as its members are subject to domination by virtue of the established order." Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978: p. 163).

13 The question is whether artistic critique in the art world is responding to an older, rigid conception of ideological domination despite the fact that reality reflects a new regime of managerial domination adapted to and immunized against the practices of critique. This would largely explain the diminishing ability for critical art practices to contribute to new paths or access a world beyond the present reality. On managerial domination, see Luc Boltanski, *A Sociology of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

Recognizing this, the challenge—according to Boltanski—is to overhaul critique by centering it around the physical individual. If domination and managerialism are oriented toward the construction of reality by bodiless institutions on behalf of individuals who have ceded their powers, agency for individuals would be the ability to form a critique of this injustice that registers as a communicable refusal. Only individuals can mount the refusal, because only individuals can pay the physical price for doing so. In artistic critique, this physical price for critique becomes a simulation, a pantomime, a gesture. The depletion of life force, the draining of vital essence, and the mockery of life's productive energies are what critical art and artistic subjectivity seem to put into practice in actuality. The more urgent task for critique is to tap the visionary capacities of individuals to imagine and enunciate alternatives before institutions close them off, but to do so without falling into the trap of remaining localized, or consigned to the realm of "private, particular, idiosyncratic, even being treated as bizarre or crazy." With this in mind, the last few years have made it more difficult to believe that "advanced" art, because it is thoroughly dominated by and beholden to the managerial paradigm of artistic critique, will be capable of articulating a new path that can have broad relevance and impact.[14]

14 We believe that the persistence and immutability of the close-to-home economic anomalies in the art world cited at the beginning of this introduction are evidence of the fact that "critical practice" is itself actually the format of managerial domination of art by institutions. Artistic critique and the artistic subjectivity it produces are paradigms of domination, not escape. The tired, broke, ill-of-health artists whose body and psyches are battered should stand up against this institution of critique and its presence in their lifestyle. A wracked body is the very sign of domination, not a symbol of vital resistance to oppressive reality or an expression of yearning. Enacting the imperatives of critique lands artists in precarious situations, and our point of view is that precarity and poverty in and of themselves have no critical potency or political content. Rather, they are the physical manifestation of managerial entrainment through the rhetoric of critique.

Luc Boltanski, "Domination revisited: From the French critical sociology of the 1970s to present-day pragmatic sociology," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal of the New School for Social Research*, Vol. 29, no. 1, 2008: pp. 27–70.

LUC BOLTANSKI

It was in the midst of thinking through the contradictions described above that we hosted Luc Boltanski at Artists Space in spring of 2010. The goal was to engage him on the meaning and future of art's critical potential—both as it was being invoked vigorously at that time and in the past. We wanted to understand what he made of the fact that *The New Spirit of Capitalism* had gotten so much traction with artists and art critics, that in it they recognized a tool for enunciating specifically artistic problems, even if the larger argument regarding the impasse of critique had failed to register.

Boltanksi was additionally compelling for us because he is a creator and cultural producer as well as a theorist. He has authored numerous books of poetry and several plays. We recognized in him a fellow trafficker of several worlds, who appreciates the gesture of an analysis launched from outside an official position: "Economic evaluation is as sure a system of selection as artistic evaluation, and the two follow each other and become mixed up in each other. In a universe like that, if you criticize the art world, you are necessarily identified, quite simply, as a failure full of resentment. So being a critic of the art world becomes almost impossible."[15]

15 See following interview.

At Artists Space in 2010, Boltanski had planned to deliver some brief notes and then respond to a series of audience questions around *The New Spirit of Capitalism* and his forthcoming book in English, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*. However, for reasons that remain unknown to us, he departed from that plan and delivered instead an incandescent spontaneous riff on several topics—touching on his own creative output, the role of the art critic, critique as justification, and poetry as the ideal art form, among other themes.

The current interview was compiled from further conversation with Luc in the summer and fall of 2010.[16]

16 Any inaccuracies, contradictions, translation errors, or inconsistencies are entirely our fault.

INTERVIEW
LUC BOLTANSKI WITH JEQU

Edited interview conducted in July 26, 2010, by Laura Mitterrand on behalf of JEQU in Paris

JEQU **You describe your book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* as having reformist goals. Can you describe its reception after it was published and how you have situated your work in relation to this response?**

LB *The New Spirit of Capitalism* was written a long time ago now, between 1995 and 1999. It has a theoretical dimension related to a book I wrote five to 10 years before called *On Justification,* in which I developed a concept of the "cité"* as a sphere of justification.

The theoretical objective of *The New Spirit* was to analyze the formation of a new cité called the "projective cité," which is otherwise equally associated in analysis in terms of justification and an analysis of balance of power. I would say that the historical part of the book, which goes from 1965 to 1995, is still valid. I've tried to complete the theoretical part in the last book I wrote, *On Critique*, because it was based on the formation of the cités but not at all on the relationship between justification and the balance of power.

There is a whole part in *The New Spirit* concerned with an analysis of the ideology of management in the 1980s and 1990s, a management in part obsolete, because the accent was put on something very important at that time, autonomy, while today a big part of the managerial discourse has moved to the social mission of the corporation, or the response to what corporations now call the ethical crises—that is to say, the type of critique that was developed with interglobalism (i.e., the Nike crisis, the kind of corporation who has little kids working in Thailand). Overwhelmingly, the current corporate discourse is a discourse of response to ethical crises. I don't work on that but Eve Chiapello does. So that part of the book about autonomy is by now a bit obsolete.

As for the formation of a projective cité, one feels the coming of a certain number of signs, and that's why we are reformists. In reality, the projective cité doesn't correspond to all of our personal choices, but we can credit capitalism of the 1990s for putting in place a new cité, i.e., the systems of self-control that allow a support to be given to justification. Personally, I've abandoned, for the most part, the reformist perspective in trying to reflect on capitalism in a critical way. It's not at all that I was a reformist myself, and neither was Eve Chiapello, for that matter, but we thought that one must give capitalism credit for its capacity to reform itself in order to avoid global crises as heavy of those of 1929.

That which is far from being sure: I want to talk about the capacity of capitalism for self-reform.

*Referring to the Augustinian concept of "city" and broadly rendered as "polity" by the authors

How do you regard the reception and dissemination of your work in art contexts? Who do you normally see as your audience?

My public has been sociologists, although now my work interests more philosophers and anthropologists. But normally, I write mostly for the university. For a while now, a part of what I write was read by those in the art world, which really surprised me. And in general, what has surprised me in the art world is the interest in theory, which I think is something new that dates from the past twenty years, and which I think is an indication of an important change. And the fact that theory interests artists as well. We've moved past a model or archetype of the intentional artist, in the sense of philosopher/scientist Daniel Dennett—for whom intentionality is not conscious—to an artist who is capable of having a theoretical discourse on that which he produces, and on the intentions of what he produces. That, I think, is something fairly new.

People in the art world who say they are interested in extremely technical things, like Gilles Deleuze for example, who is frequently referenced in the art world ... I always find a little strange because there is, in certain works of his, a dimension of extremely technical philosophy, which largely escapes me. It's the same for theater, you have these works in theater that have introduced these theoretical texts, notably Deleuze's texts, and I really can't understand why.

In the framework of *The New Spirit*, artistic critique embodies a type of productive life force defined by autonomy and self-expression. To go further, there is a sense at this point that art principally mines and traffics representations of these energies, which is the source of its special value.

This intrigues me. One cannot have another productive force other than life. I can't see how you could do anything else. Unless this is a critique in order to say that in art, life is *détourned*. That's the typical critique of the Situationists. The typical critique of art or theater, or of representation, in general.

There is a book I like a lot from an author named Jonas Barish entitled *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice,* where he traces the history of the theater critic from antiquity until Rousseau and after, and it's obvious it's a critique of representation. I find that for Guy Debord it is very much present, that life is falsified once it is represented, and that representation is a movement towards commodification, etc. That is largely a Christian idea; I think it's an idea that has a strong Christian origin. So, the choice must always be to prefer life to art. It's something that was invented by the Surrealists. I think that it's quite interesting as a basis for art criticism, but critiques often are caught up in loops and dragged down by things, and then reinserted or recovered by the art world. Performance has come back in this context, which I guess is a way to say that since art is fostered by life, one must prefer life.

It works the same way for the critique of representation and the commodification of representation. I am very skeptical of the consideration given to that critique. It's in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Lettre a M. d'Alembert sur les Spectacles* (1758) on [shows] spectacles, that we should celebrate that people hold themselves as ideals in contrast to the [show] spectacle, which is held at a distance. In Jacques Derrida's first books, there are very beautiful analyses of this type of critique. But, myself, I don't see that very well. That poses problems of reflexivity. Either you are uniquely in the immanence of life, unreflexive, and you live and there's nothing more to say. Or, there are these loops of reflexivity and at that moment you are already in the representation and there's no reason not to turn to art.

For example, in the work I do outside of sociology, i.e., my work in poetry and theater—that which interests me, actually—there is artifice and distance, but not a necessarily a high level of reflexivity. I am not drawn to the forms of artistic activity which present themselves "as such," because in reality it's never the case that things appear as pure immanence, improvised, instinctual, vital. I would be incapable of making similar things and I don't really like to see them either.

In *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation* (2011), you explain that reflexivity can take form in a set of rituals that confirm pre-established relations between symbolic forms and the reality of things. What does this mean for art's critical agency? Has art been relegated to rearticulating the realm of things as they already are?

I think that it is currently very difficult in general to maintain a critical function through symbolic instruments. It's particularly difficult to have a critical function through art. I have two arguments there. The critical function in its modern form is fairly recent, dating from the mid-nineteenth century until the 1970s and 1980s, so around a hundred years. And this criticism seems to have two aspects which are linked—the first, which used art as support for a criticism of the social world, that which is not acceptable in the social world, the injustices. The second used art to support a criticism of the art world.

Why cap the critical function of art to the 1970s and 1980s?

Because I don't think that worked. For twenty years, the changes that occurred in the art world, and that continue to occur, have made criticism very difficult.

I have two ideas here. In the academic system of the nineteenth century, critical notions were simply refused by the jury as a system that was state controlled, and thus you had the fact that even an exhibition held elsewhere could be a mode of critique, such as Gustave Courbet exhibiting across from the Salon in 1855. In the domestic system of circulation—dealer, artist, critic, consumer, who we can say is bourgeois—the circulation is slow, implying a relationship between bodies, a relationship of presence. The dealer goes into the studio, between the stove, the fat cat, has some wine, he sees things on the canvases, he says that it's really great, he transforms it into a work with the help of the critic who interprets it, the artist can never say anything, his intentions were put down in the work, etc. And at the same time transporting a work of this type into a [patron's] home, it's practically like inviting the artist to the table, to have a piece of the substance, a piece of the artist's body and, thus, of his critique.

The question of attribution is central to art. Which is to say that one must analytically distinguish the attribution in the evaluation and that of the first substantial gesture: To say "*That* is a work" does not work unless the condition of the attribution of "that" as an event is attributed to me as an entity. This process assumes that it passes through the channels of circulation that can be domestic, bodily spaces, or remote spaces. But in order to make an attribution in these remote spaces, one must pass through codifications. The entity itself must be coded in a way that the body can be replaced by an analogue body comprised in code: a certain number of anecdotes, images, photographs, and links with others which will circulate in an intellectual media-artistic space. The work itself must be become coded.

The role of the critic in the art market is to interpret these works in a way that makes up the entity. The artist is supposed to produce, and the critic gives meaning to this production, to show a unity despite the changes. But this assumes a bringing together of bodies and work that are slow to communicate.

In my opinion, with a system of quick circulation such as in the present day, the works are pre-coded by the artist, and that's why artists need to have a theoretical language, previously the privilege of the critic. Thus the relationship of attribution is no longer bodily; it's a link between coded works and a representation that is itself coded. At the same time, if you introduce the works into collections or apartments, it's no longer the body of a person you are introducing, it's never anything but an image. You introduce Mr. So-and-So who paints corpses, it becomes his brand to paint corpses, or you introduce such-and-such artist who paints dicks, well, great then, that's his brand to paint dicks, but you never engage that in a more personal way. Distance is introduced.

So that is the first point, but I think one which makes clear what the great difficulty of the critic today has to cling to. It's a fascinating phenomenon in these last 20–30 years that political censure is no longer necessary, or almost no longer necessary. The critic is no longer efficient in regards to practice.

In the market system, the critic functions through the slowness of recognition and on the temporal discrepancy between the pre-recognition by these small groups of circulation and a broad one, official recognition coupled with a broad economic circulation. That's what happened in the 1980s but especially in the 1990s and 2000s, and it was linked to the establishment of this vast network—first of public organizations with wide management over art, staffed with circulating officials, and with roughly similar criteria for choice and with benchmarking, and then with the construction of best-of lists allowing for rational investments.

Basically, until then, there were no markets. We know today that a market is something that formalizes the tools of analysis. There were of course market dealings, but no market. To speak of the art market before the 1970s or even 1980s did not make much sense, especially for contemporary art. Thus, with the establishment of market control and with benchmarking notably supporting and maintaining the leaders of major art organizations, the tension between the avant-garde and sanctioned art has diminished. It's been put into place by artists. I've heard artists say that—the idea that to have an unknown but great artist today is an impossibility. But soon enough the system will detect him, so the system is somewhat fair.

Economic evaluation is as sure a system of selection as artistic evaluation, and the two follow each other and become mixed up in each other. In a universe like that, if you criticize the art world, you are necessarily identified, quite simply, as a failure full of resentment. So being a critic of the art world becomes almost impossible.

What's very interesting is that there is, in general, an identical situation now in the social sciences. But it started in the exact sciences. In general, for at least 70 or 80 years, you have a field of unified academic authorities distributed around the world, but in communication. They have a monopoly on the question of knowing what is and is not science, with a slightly varied mainstream inside of a very limited space. That is what has been introduced in the social sciences—in linguistics and economics but not yet in sociology, because it's a minor science. This is why sociology is much more interesting, because you still have a fairly large dispersion.

I have a brother who is a linguist, and in linguistics you have a mainstream with a dominant model; you have someone who will find a flaw in the model, they will circulate a paper on the Internet between the 50 sites which count, which will trash everything, while also sending it to two to three important journals who take six months to publish it and then that responds again. That, in my opinion, is a mechanism that must have close proximity with the mechanism of the art world today, which I find somewhat troubling: There are very important economic investments, and ultimately a critique of the system makes no sense. Either you are making a critique to improve things, so that it flows a little faster, or that the critics are not really the good ones, etc. But if you are really critical, you are outside the system.

In her book *High Price*, Isabelle Graw delineates the heteronomous relationship of art and the market and situates the artist at the nexus, dealing with the contradiction through an art practice that is fully immersed in the art market and does not pretend to be outside of it. Do you think this view allows for new productive critical positions of our market reality? What do you think of this analysis?

I really appreciated her book, which I found truly excellent. There has been a major crisis in French academic politics in the past 30 years because the spaces of external circulation have collapsed and left the space of internal circulation alone. This has created a space of evaluation that is very sophisticated with microcliques in competition with one another in a struggle for internal recognition, and all this has produced work completely unfit to interest people on the outside. Which is why I think that Isabelle Graw is quite right to not launch into the eternal discourse after Adorno, the anti-market, which destroys the work; or the anti-institutional discourse, a discourse for which only the space of autonomous circulation has a right to evaluate the work, because there are no more autonomous spaces in which works can unravel. But at the same time, I think the autonomous space has a prerogative not in determining value but in the attribution. It's the only thing that has the power to say, "that is a work, and not a thing," so that the space of evaluation is dependent on the space of internal circulation (because for it to be economically evaluated, it must have already been implemented as a work, and more or less aesthetically evaluated). If the space of economic value takes precedence over the space of artistic value, the risk is that the space of economic value collapses or is extremely strong and volatile, as in the evaluation of pop music. One can imagine that the crisis in art is not the crisis of artistic overproduction or overaccumulation, but the crisis in the balance between difference spaces of evaluation.

There is, in my opinion, a general problem which is a problem of balance between the spaces of evaluation, which is why I use poetry as an example. Poetry has never had a market, because it's a multiple and doesn't interest very many people. It has a specifically poetic, artistic space for evaluation, made up of connoisseurs, and then a large institutional space (i.e., the academy, church).

Can you describe the difference that you establish between poetry and visual arts?

Poetry is a poor art *par excellence*, which is to say that when you take music or you take visual arts or theater, there is an immediate effect on the body, on the senses. You take poetry, and there isn't much to it, 25 words on a sheet of paper. The question which obsesses me is that someone who finds a short poem by Paul Celan underneath a bench, who has never read contemporary poetry and has never heard of Celan—how he would treat it differently than a laundry bill? That's how I arrived at the question of attribution. For a long time I was indignant of the fact that poetry critics or commentators always focused on the lives of the poets, the fact that René Char had resisted, the fact that Anna Akhmatova was persecuted by Stalin. Now in fact, I think the relationship to the person is absolutely necessary.

Do you know Louise Labé, who took part in the Lyon group of poets, around Maurice Scève, who wrote the major poem "La Délie"? In this group it was meaningful to have Louise Labé; she didn't write much but she became very famous around the sixteenth century, from the 1550s on, as she had introduced feminine desire in poetry. Now there are interpretations that Louise Labé never existed, that she was an invention of Scève and his friends, and that they took the name of a whore from Lyon. I don't know if it's true, but that completely changes all the interpretations of the work of Louise Labé.

Poetry is, in particular, in need of a space of circulation. Another thing is that poetry pushes the use of language to a limit or an idea of translation which becomes impossible. It's a refusal of the arbitrariness of a sign. For example, the fact that the word "chapeau" finishes with the sound "o" and that "chameau" ends with the same sound of "o" is purely arbitrary—whereas if you introduce a rhyme in a poem between "chapeau" and "chameau," you will introduce a meaningful link between the two; and thus you will have constructed a network of meaning which will go from a metaphorical usage of words that are not usually sounds and rhymes, to reinventing familiarities which have been forgotten, making it very difficult to circulate.

Poetry works well in two situations: when you have circles of proximity, like salons or royal courts in which you have a small number of people who circulate works, or when you have moments of nationalist pride in which the national language becomes important, as was the case with the poetry of Louis Aragon, etc. But in the moments where the national is no longer important and the circulation is far and fast, the field of poetry collapses and the institutions which support poetry collapse. Currently it's not a good market for poetry and I don't know what must happen to bring it back to us a little bit.

Does this model above apply to other immaterial art such as conceptual art and performance, which were constituted in part to resist circulation and complicate attribution?

I think that in the case of performance, it exists even more, simply in that it's not transportable. But it's transportable in other ways, by photography for example, like with Land Art. It's transportable by photography, by history, by video, by the reproduction by others. The recreation and restaging of performances is problematic. One can imagine that performance was used in the years after 1968 as a medium to disrupt the possibility of commercialization but in fact entered immediately into the circuits of commercialization. It's the same thing for conceptual art. It just shows that the act of attribution is still powerful, and that there must be a great effort by the critics, and in fact by the artists themselves, to sustain the link between the body of the artists and its conceptual traces.

So a truly noncommercializable art object doesn't exist. This is an old argument.

Yes, all is able to be objectified, or in any case, sufficiently able to be objectified in order to create room for sellable copies.

To what degree is the artist conscious and participant in the attribution and circulation of his or her work? And how has that evolved?

I think that there is a very large difference between the artist model that was put in place around 1980 and the artists who came before. If we say that the works are an event, the events are meaningless, they are pure singularities, so it must be that someone gave them their meaning, produced a discourse on the work. It was obviously the role of the critics themselves; they've been in relation with the intellectuals, the philosophers, etc., since the postwar era. The artist was thought of to be only an artist, unable to say himself neither what he had done nor why. That, I've seen change. The space of circulation is much larger, the number of pieces exhibited in the large international fairs is immense. It's become the case now that the artist must himself code his work so that it becomes easily identifiable. For the code requires that there must be a discourse which gives meaning to what he has made.

One can argue that the artist has always been calculating and rational, i.e., conscious of his intentions and conditions of circulation. How do you reconcile this idea of artistic calculation and pre-formatting of work for the market with unconscious inspiration?

This question is stupid. If you want to quarrel with the idea of spontaneous or unconscious inspiration, it is very present in poetry. There was a whole movement in France in poetry of anti-inspiration. It was considered as something completely ridiculous because inspiration had always been associated with spiritualist folklore, as a muse, sunsets, etc. Obviously in this way it was ridiculous. It's like in linguistics, you can't speak and think about the grammar you're using while talking at the same time, it's absolutely impossible. Thus the question of knowing who is reflexive or conscious of what makes absolutely no sense. There is no one who is completely nonreflexive nor completely reflexive. It's rather two ways of constructing the artistic entity. The reflexive modality encourages something that Isabelle Graw describes very well, which is in the new spaces of economic circulation with the collectors, the direct contact with collectors, without going through dealers or critics. The collectors need artists who appear like them, who are capable of holding a discourse, of traveling, who can be there the day we wait for them, to calculate and make solid works which last. For this calculating and rational artist, that is also part of his ability to make a form simple enough to give a sense of what he did, and to code it in a way that is somewhat simple and visible.

I think there are two main ways of artistic emotion and aesthetics, and it's also true for poetry. You can generate an interpretation which is difficult to establish, if you take, for example, contemporary poetry of the past 20 or 30 years—an interesting poem is one where you don't understand the meaning but you are convinced by reading it that there is one. A game is triggered, and in Celan, it's typical to have these games and competing interpretations. That assumes these are spaces of short circulation, in my opinion. And then you have the other way, the way of Michelangelo, you make these very large things and which create an immediate emotional effect. I think that the new way of circulation favors this effect over the effect of a long interpretation.

Is a human body necessary for the formation of an art object?

Here we enter into science fiction. This would not be impossible. I don't think that would work. Because, for example, in the case of attributing ancient works, you can attribute them to unknown artists, as in masters of altarpieces. But we assume that there is a body. Even if this body isn't revealed and is attributed to collectives, it's still an entity, with an intentionality and an identity but still less powerful than when there is an individual entity, such as Nicolas Bourbaki in science. Bourbaki is a group of French mathematicians which noted theories in the 1930s, always signed "[Nicolas] Bourbaki." But I think it's easier in science because of the assumption of objectivity.

So, coming full circle, does the artist's body become a requirement in order to be able to engage in a critique or a critical public action?

It simply means that it allows you to put your body in danger. It's among the costs of critique. There are costs implied in the body, and together it's a technical system built on gestures. In one way, performance art of the 1960s and 1970s was of this order. For Joseph Beuys's "I Like America and America Likes Me" (1974), if he hadn't had a body, there wouldn't have been the risk of being eaten by the coyote.

The interesting problem this poses is: Does a work need to have any critical salience to be interesting? Actually, I think there must always be a slight critical dimension simply to establish a distance from culture, as it's very close to media celebrity culture—if there is no critique, there is no possible critical interpretation or, what we call, the second degree.

When artists reject the mandate to be critical, they sometimes do so because it is perceived to inhibit their right to sell work and participate in the market system with a clear conscience. They think they are thus defending their right to "live well." One strategy often employed is that of the artist who spends the first part of his or her career outside of this system in order to build avant-gardist credibility, and then later chooses at a certain point to participate in the traditional market/gallery structure without constraint. In this way, the artist has the best of both worlds—a reputation that is consecrated as being against the market and established norms, and then a realistic opportunity to make money within that system. What would you say about this strategy—is it a contradiction or a pure response?

That's not a question, it's a response. I think they are totally right.

That's something that we see quite often now. This question of attribution brings to mind something you have written about in expanded terms—"selection" is the technical term you use. How does the troubled role of attribution in the art context relate to the broader action of "selection" across other parts of culture? What would a strategy against selection look like if it were implemented in the art world?

That's a real problem. Pierre Bourdieu said quite rightly—when he wrote *Distinction* thirty years ago—distinction was a problem. It's really the criteria of the bourgeoisie, etc. And today, it's really about the procedures of selection and its fantastic intensification in the name of justice and competence. I think that actually, today, a revolutionary movement must first be a movement against selection. But, in practical terms, what could that be?

The first point is a classical point, which is to not choose. It's like the Salon of 1848 in Paris, which was open to everyone. When we talk to people about this, people say, "But then, you think that everything is equal." But that's not at all the problem. The problem is the deferral of judgment, to have judgments which will always be reversible.

I think the first task would be to think about the route of selection, which is to say: What is being selected positively or negatively at this one stage affects the next stage. It's a problem of the memorization of selection, of curriculum, so that to have these ways of disorienting the accumulation of selection, especially to remove selection each time. The fact that selection will not fossilize a person, a curriculum, a memory. It's more so at the level of inscription of selection.

To fight against selection, there could be hyperized strategies of selection for all. The problem with competitions is very simple: If you have very few candidates with an overall equal value, the competition is not valid. We had a recent case at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales where with one of the competitions, there were two positions, and three candidates; and none were good. So it was a problem. And that completely devalued the competition. But if you have tons of candidates, the contest can no longer be organized, since it's too expensive. So there will have to be strategies for this sort of saturation. Because a good competition is one which presents people who have no chance, but don't know it, but in a limited number, in which case you have legitimized the contest. This would not be possible in a scenario where there are only those who were sure to win or if there were tons of people, making the organization of the contests impossible. This would be a subversion of the form of the competition.

But for the major exhibitions, like *Documenta*, it's not really a competition, it's a choice made by curators who go directly to the artist and say "I invite you to participate."

It's the same at Princeton University. But don't you have both? At Princeton there are two: You go look for people, but other people present themselves.

In art, there are competitions, but it's generally for projects by small nonprofits who rightly want to help young artists who haven't yet had the occasion to show in an important exhibition or who don't have galleries, and they have competitions for residencies or they do public projects. It's really for the large number of artists who are not yet recognized in the market, and will subsequently have the chance to be known in the market.

But in general, I think that if really there was a collective moment, it would have invented techniques to play with this system. But that would be very costly. No one would do it because it has real power. I saw this at the École des Hautes Études, which is hardly a place of real prestige. But the level of conformity is extraordinary and basically the smallest difference is penalized if it's a voluntary difference; let's say a political one. It moves very easily into unfamiliarity so it wouldn't be feasible if there were quasi-global political movements like "fair trade."

In our conversations, you've mentioned the idea of "slowing down" things and resisting the temporal equations of connections, selection, and circulation through social networks. To regulate the pace of events is an important component of controlling outcomes. In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, you describe this action as "slowing down, deferring, delaying, spacing, etc." Can you discuss this idea more?

There are still reactions of this kind—it's very typical in Europe now—where the modern world begins to lose out because it is too fast. We don't take any more time to meditate, we don't take any more time to listen to the little birds, etc. All this has neither head nor tail. We've repeated this for at least 300 years. No, I think that the problem, that we said before, is to diminish the number of tests of selection. Diminish the moment where all your action is transformed into a quantitative evaluation put into competition with others in saying who is the best, towards a meritocratic justice.

This is why I always say I am against justice, because it is much better to be in a world that is less just in the meritocratic sense. Where the best wins more than the worse, that is a just universe. And it's true that justice is hell. I think that currently—as I see my students—they have submitted to a rhythm and power of meritocratic, quantitative evaluations, which is astounding. Effectively, this makes a world that has all the appearances of justice (i.e., he passes four exams vs. the other two). And obviously the wrong response would be to say that these exams are unfair because they aren't precise enough, because the criteria isn't good. It's a device in itself. And so we must take them even more, must control them even more. It's a device in itself, which is terrible.

Many on the left say that reformist efforts are exhausted and they seek to move another level more in line with "revolutionary" aims. But this assumes there is a separation between capitalism and critique (i.e., total revolution). In *The New Spirit*, you make the point that artistic critique is a merely a refinement of capitalism's critique of traditional culture.

They aren't combined at all. Which is to say, it's a grand scheme; it's always capitalism that has made the revolutions. And basically, the revolutionaries have always been late for a revolution in capitalism. On the issue of reformism and revolution, a radical reformism would be a revolution. The real problem behind it, which I don't really want to discuss, is that of violence. Basically the hypothesis is that from the late 1970s, the use of violence in the balance of powers was eliminated. Which is a good thing I think; I am pretty nonviolent. Having said that, the possibility of a profound change or even a not-very profound one in capitalism by reformism is not yet present since inequalities continue to rise, etc.

You finish your new book *On Critique* with a short discussion of the imminent horizon of revolt. Can you speak about the relationship between the reconciliation of the reality presented and one people are ready to accept?

I think we should ask what is currently preventing the revolt, because the number of people who would like to revolt is very important. I think that government intelligence, forms of government and governance are at a much higher level than in the recent past. In my opinion, it's because they have incorporated elements of corporate management, which themselves have incorporated all the thinking of economics and social sciences.

This is what we examined last month in my seminar. We were supposed to do a series of sessions with Céline Lemieux on the new forms of critique, and I said no, we have to work on new forms of governance because the problem is not so much that the critique is weak, it's that the government is infinitely more sophisticated than in the past. And so we brought a guy into the seminar who was a former spy, a former soldier who now teaches in business school and is a consultant in crisis management and in economic intelligence, which is to say, in economic espionage and the ethics of espionage. This is an area which has developed a lot in the U.S. and it's true that it was infinitely more interesting to interrogate him than to interrogate a far-left militant. He knew infinitely more about the current situation than a far-left militant. A second point is that currently in Europe and especially in France, there is a plurality of seeds of revolt which in general cannot come together because....

It's what we spoke of, a lack of common ground.

Yes, that's it. Which is to say that you have a revolt of the old proletariat but it's mostly for one party, the ex-communists, and now for a party that is extremely right, mostly foreign, etc. You have a revolt of the proletariat in the suburbs, where there starts to be a bourgeois revolt, exactly against the establishment of a post-bourgeois world, that which we call "former ability."

Last year, there was a very interesting moment called *L'appel des appels* (The Appelants' Appeal), which was a union of protestors against the governing of theater directors, social workers, doctors, university professors, lawyers, jurists, and so on. The bourgeois, but outraged. I thought at once of the loss of their prestige and the loss of ways of financing their existence, and the feeling that their dignity was scorned. Actually, I think that we've come to this type of society where the separation is much higher up, that the separation is between the bourgeois and the top of the top, which we call "the bling bling world," an international, post-bourgeois top of the top and actually, a justification for the base in terms of meritocratic justice, and a control drawn from corporate management. So it's a type of state corporation, if I can say that, in which the appearance of a revolt will be very difficult. I think that one of the fears of power comes from the revolt by unknown artists and intellectuals.

The reason there was a large effort to reduce the number of actors, PhD students, etc., to reactivate a theme which has existed since the seventeenth century—seen in England in the sixteenth century—was the excess of reputable people as a cause of revolutions. This was the first explanation of the British Revolution, when there was a university system that produced too many priests for available churches; they became dangerous puritans who began the revolution. That was used again in the nineteenth century to explain the French Revolution and then again through the twentieth century to explain anarchy and communism. It's the student character of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and it's been very strongly reinstated.

I'm not sure that if that is all true, because a current problem is that the general public does not revolt. First, they do not have many ways to war between them, as they are still in competition. So for now, there is nothing. It's possible, I hope, but nothing allows the provision that we are on the verge of a new 1968. There is a state of intense exasperation, but it's a state of disgust.

So there isn't a scapegoat. We must find one. The current French government seems to be a good example, wherein the whole world can rally to say that there is a problem. It's possible. Until a certain point. No one can wait for that.

The idea that people are not revolting because there isn't an alternative, because historically, all the major revolts were done with an alternative, is not true. There was, at least, a common spirit. A common spirit, but not a ready alternative. I'm not an expert in revolutions.

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