

Sébastien Ronceray

Thoughts about the Interstice

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Référence électronique

Sébastien Ronceray, « *Thoughts about the Interstice* », *Critique d'art* [En ligne], 44 | Printemps/Été 2015, mis en ligne le 01 juin 2016, consulté le 09 juin 2015. URL : <http://critiquedart.revues.org/17114>

Éditeur : Archives de la critique d'art

<http://critiquedart.revues.org>

<http://www.revues.org>

Document accessible en ligne sur :

<http://critiquedart.revues.org/17114>

Document généré automatiquement le 09 juin 2015. La pagination ne correspond pas à la pagination de l'édition papier.

Archives de la critique d'art

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Thoughts about the Interstice

Traduction de Simon Pleasance

This article is dedicated to Giovanna Puggioni.

- 1 “The brief of theory and art is no longer to divide, exclude and keep at a distance. Their gestures are installed in the fabric of reality and experience, in action.”¹
- 2 Who can we confidently trust to tell us about the world with their specific tools? With which narrator can we dwell, with whom we can walk, question and re-visit what is around us? What thinkers, artists and theoreticians help us to imagine and define things that shift our own boundaries? It is these questions which are tackled, in differing ways, by the three books discussed in this article. Who, in whose narratives we are told something about the singularity of the world, gives us enough to dream and think about, and how?
- 3 In 1933, in his essay *The Storyteller*, Walter Benjamin put forward the inspired idea that “the currency of experience has dropped”. The words of the storyteller (who by the same token quite often talks about himself) heighten his importance for us. The attention given him increases to the detriment of the life experience for the person listening. This shortcoming (failure) of the person/reader ends up by augmenting the distance separating him from the narrator. To defuse this distance, which culminates merely in mistrust or incredulousness with regard to the ready-made narratives which we are asked to believe at face value, it is as well to redistribute food for thought, and raw material. Listening to and reading artists’ ideas and the works of theoreticians helps us to move ahead by raising different questions, “off-screen”² as it were, both critically and artistically, in relation to our spatial and temporal consciousness of the world.
- 4 Broaching a way of thinking, a creative approach, be it connected to the works of one artist in particular or revealed by a transversal analysis, can draw on the ideas and explanations of artists themselves. In this case, knowledge passes perforce by way of studying, developing, interpreting and even comparing their words. This is what emerges from the three books in question here, dealing with visual artists, film-makers and authors of texts, each one bringing a way of looking at the task of creation and the task of analyzing their works. *Sculpture in Reverse* offers the first publication in French (its original version in English is included in the book) of a lengthy interview which the American artist Michael Heizer gave in November 1983 to Julia Brown.³ It raises many issues about creation and the need for the artist to propose “a new way of seeing and structuring something”. *Fabriques du cinéma expérimental* is a compilation of nine interviews conducted by Carole Contant and Eric Thouvenel with experimental filmmakers, French and foreign alike, whose shared direction gravitates around a pleasure in working with varied image-creating techniques whose bases and specific powers they are acquainted with, and also like testing. In *Les Chercheurs d’or : films d’artistes, histoires de l’art*, Clara Schulmann, for her part, relies on the art historian and philosopher John Rajchman. She focuses “on the way in which images, like ideas and concepts, travel and shift”. In a transversal way, and in three stages, the author broaches the bonds of kinship between different artists, stimulated by the ongoing exchanges, historical and aesthetic alike, between their works and the philosophical study of the visual arts. Each in their own way, these three publications question the study of the arts, based on artists’ ideas.
- 5 In his interview, Michael Heizer answers three very factual points, linked to his praxis, and to the choices he made about territories to be put back together, and materials to be worked. With the necessary hindsight in relation to his work, he draws lines moved by a desire for location really influenced by the territory in which his works develop. His words are forever weaving relations between the matter worked, the space used, the history of American art (taking into consideration “the Inuit culture as much as the Peruvian culture”, he specifies) and the points of contact with the society of the United States. “All this ends up by drawing an amazingly primitive and independent oeuvre, but one which was, in reality, dependent on

technology and society”, he explains. Michael Heizer stands apart from the Land Art artists who, according to him, focus their interest essentially on the landscape. He begs to differ by being interested above all in the matter of the elements which he chooses to develop his works. The weight of stones, the gravity they are subject to, the colour and texture of the elements used all determine the artist’s choices. This latter makes this the primary subject of his sculptures: “the object itself”. “Sculpture is the study of objects”, the artist concludes. In this interview, Michael Heizer reveals his real passion, no less, for machines that are tools (crane, mechanical digger, tracked machine...). This link between natural matter and machines (on which he is dependent) turns out to be especially stimulating for the reader who, faced with the large number of photographs present in the book, broaches the artist’s work in a total questioning of his praxis, going beyond the scope of its aesthetic reception. The French edition of this interview (at once splendid and sober) supersedes our emotion as an *in situ* onlooker, increases our sense of discovery of a space that is restructured (both mentally and physically) and duplicated (spatially and temporally); the photographs recreating the process of the works offer diversified and complex viewpoints, shifted because they are made up of a novel interplay of confrontation between words and images in the “territory” of the book. This cartographic approach (initially describing spaces in volume by way of a flattened recomposition) enables us all the better to grasp one of the roots of Michael Heizer’s profound inspiration: painting. This flattening (by the book-object) of his work and also of his thought (reconstructed in the interview which broaches quite different time-frames of his work) beings forth a reading of the work which passes through another assemblage, a close relation to the plane and to a reconsidered territorial perspective.

6 The nine interviews conducted by Eric Thouvenel and Carole Contant in *Fabriques du cinéma expérimental* offer a homogeneous compilation for anyone raising questions about the various uses of this film form. The analytical task is succinctly undertaken with the film-makers themselves in the form of open discussions. The preface, with its enriching tone setting forth a stimulating approach, announces that this establishment of the highlighted word has to do as much with aesthetics as with film praxis. “So our hypothesis involves starting with simple questions, and staying as close as possible to the work of the film-makers, to enable them to develop, with what they have to say, what in reality goes to make all the complexity of their work. [...] Showing that the creative moment is rich in questions, with a long period of maturation, and that it is also the arena of a very special relation to the technical system, which is not relegated here to the mere role of a “recording box”, but is part and parcel of what makes their work absolutely special”. The questions raised are adapted to the distinctive features of the respective works of the film-makers encountered, and tend towards influences, particular careers, techniques, innovative economic models (totally independent, often collaborative and always on the sidelines of commercial production circuits), aspirations, desires and poetic balances. This is indeed a eulogy for experimental film and its numerous practices, but one put forward through the raft of approaches formulated by these film-makers. Before our eyes are defined the at once fundamental, aesthetic and reflexive forces of experimental cinema. This collective book illustrates what the cinema develops when it is considered in its most innovative forms, by way of a general assessment of the composition of films (filming, editing, projection, relation to media, appropriations of the classic use of the tools, chemical and digital manipulations...).

7 The titles of the three chapters of the compilation outline a coherent approach to the subject: “Film as a Manual Activity” (Frédérique Devaux, Rose Lowder, José Antonio Sistiaga, pp. 23-95) or how the immediate relation to the film tape is developed in the form of collages, the chromatic score and the application of paint to the film; then “Alchemists” (Nicolas Rey, Olivier Fouchard, pp. 99-159), or how to further work with the film beyond the images captured through laboratory work, among other things; and lastly “From silver to digital, from film to performance” (Ken Jacobs, Christian Lebrat, Martin Arnold, Silvi Simon, pp. 161-273) or what variations the works undergo depending on the choice of production media and the conditions in which they are shown. Throughout these extremely interesting interviews, the question circulating is indeed the following: what happens to the works when other practices

come into play? This form of shifting the capacities of film in fact makes much better account of all the specific features of cinema in the field of the arts: here we are at the crossroads of many different lines of thought, initiated by artists who refuse to regard the cinema as merely a recording tool, but much more as a poetic way of thinking (José Antonio Sistiaga, talking about his films painted directly on the film, defines them as “biological processes, but seen poetically”). The idea of “factories” plunges us into the tangible stuff of cinema, questioned and worked in its actual foundations, and in which one has to “look for accidents, and have experiences”, as Silvi Simon puts it. This idea of the cinema nurtured on chance, appropriation and invention, involving different practices taking the bases of cinema into account, also refers to another “factory” published in 1543 by Andreas Vesalius: *De Humani Corporis Fabrica—On the Fabric of the Human Body*. In that ground-breaking tome of modern anatomy, Vesalius advocated study and discovery by means of observation, perception, liaison and comparison of ideas which seem removed from one another, as well as the analysis of the effects caused by these collisions. The approach of experimental film-makers is based on identical bases.

8 This issue of collisions also informs the brilliant study by the art critic Clara Schulmann. Her “gold diggers” make their way into worlds still to be discovered: that of territories and of the sensation of reality which escapes from it, but also that of images where the question of creation and study informs the artists she examines. Her point of departure is organized around an observation and an absence. In the footsteps of the American philosopher and art historian John Rajchman, the author points out that the coded system of images stemming from traditional narrative cinema (and also from documentary forms) only usually tells us about a “façade-like integrality” whose dominant principle involves changing the world but without taking part in the metamorphosis of cinema. The boundaries between fiction, documentary, experimental film and theoretical writings are drawn differently, in particular through the action of questioning the world and, with the very tools of cinema, taking part in its metamorphosis. This proposal, which illustrates the cinema’s capacity (and necessity) to change the world, defines Clara Schulmann’s study. Based on many works of artists and film-makers (from the 1960s to the present day) who focus in a vigilant way on observing, beyond reality, the link that reality weaves with the cinema (and also for most of them with its theorization), Clara Schulmann develops a form of analysis advocating, on the one hand, transversality (temporal and conceptual alike) and, on the other hand, the link to the experiences which artists go through, their creative objects and even the people viewing these works. What this author brilliantly demonstrates can be posited in terms of reconsiderations: dealing with fiction as a form of recomposition, and document as fable or utopian discourse, the installation as creator of meaning through association, and reconstruction as the emergence of both affect and emotion.

9 This gesture which reshapes creative and theoretical capacities links up with that of Michael Heizer renewing our perspective in relation to modified spaces (trying, in his words, to “reverse the data”). It also links up with the reflections and revelations of experimental filmmakers who venture, without any compass, into territories that are as plastic and economic as they are physiological (as is asserted by the film-maker Rose Lowder, keen to know how to intervene within the system of perception). In distinct ways, these three books offer food for thought, be it in an immediate way (thanks to the interviews) or analyzed and processed. In order to tell us about the world, it is enough to traverse the economic, cultural, socio-historical, geographical and aesthetic interstices. It is in these interstices that thought moves.

Notes

1 Schulmann, Clara. *Les Chercheurs d’or : films d’artistes, histoires de l’art*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, p. 10

2 The expression is Clara Schulmann’s.

3 This interview was published in the catalogue for the exhibition *Michael Heizer: Sculpture in Reverse*, Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art – MoCA, 1984.

Référence(s) :

Clara Schulmann, *Les Chercheurs d'or : films d'artistes, histoires de l'art*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2014, (Dedalus)*Fabriques du cinéma expérimental*, Paris : Paris Expérimental, 2014, (Classiques de l'avant-garde). Sous la dir. de Carole Contant et Eric Thouvenel *Michael Heizer : Sculpture in Reverse*, Paris : Lutanie : Centre national des arts plastiques, 2014

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

Sébastien Ronceray, « *Thoughts about the Interstice* », *Critique d'art* [En ligne], 44 | Printemps/Été 2015, mis en ligne le 01 juin 2016, consulté le 09 juin 2015. URL : <http://critiquedart.revues.org/17114>

Droits d'auteur

Archives de la critique d'art
