What the Artist’s Book Makes Us Rethink About Esthetic Theory: Hubert Renard interviews Leszek Brogowski; traduction française inédite en annexe

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To cite this version:

Hubert Renard, Leszek Brogowski. What the Artist’s Book Makes Us Rethink About Esthetic Theory: Hubert Renard interviews Leszek Brogowski; traduction française inédite en annexe. JAB (Journal of Artists’ Books), JAB, 2015, Spring (37), pp.9-14. hal-02065439
What the Artist’s Book Makes Us Rethink About Esthetic Theory

Hubert Renard interviews Leszek Brogowski

HUBERT RENARD: Les Éditions Incertain Sens (Uncertain Sense Publishing) was born in the year 2000 with the Inventory of Destructions by Éric Watier; the Cabinet du livre d’artiste (the Artist’s Book Reading Room) opened its doors in 2006 at the University library in Rennes; the first issue of Sans niveau ni mètre, the free journal of the Cabinet du livre d’artiste appeared in November 2007; while the Collection grise (‘gray collection’) dedicated to writings about artist’s books has just published its firstopus, The Artist’s Book: ideas for the future of Art? papers from a symposium of the same name at the University of Rennes in 2010. Over fifteen years, that’s a publishing house, an archive and exhibition center, a magazine, and scholarly papers, all dedicated to artist’s books, all under your responsibility. I’d like to know how you think of these four entities: are they completely independent and equally indispensable for you, or is there in fact a hierarchy among them? Do you have any preference or ‘little weakness’ for any one of these activities?

LESZEK BROGOWSKI: These four ‘entities’ are organically linked, of course. Rather than being in a hierarchy, each one fulfils a specific function. I work at a University, as a researcher in Art, and each of these activities is linked to the University. Having written my Philosophy thesis on Wilhelm Dilthey, the first theoretician who worked on epistemology in the humanities, I had no need to go through the laborious process which a sociologist would follow to discover that research in the social sciences implies taking into account values (a little like Max Weber, who was greatly inspired by Dilthey). If you carry out research into Art without taking values into consideration, it’s immediately suspect; in general, it’s not consciously thought out; it’s an ideological position which is adopted unconsciously or cynically. This often happens in the case of artist’s books: not respecting the values which inspire and orient the works of the artists involved in the root cause of those well-known and endless controversies about the definition of what an Artist’s Book constitutes. I’m sure we’ll be coming back to that point. Respect for those values thus guides the choice of practices in art publications, which are the ones which guide our activities (books published and archived, artistic and editorial collaborations, research problems and so on); this respect allows us to not simply stay at the level of abstract approaches to our definitions. On this matter, I consider myself as an art critic who defends a certain vision of art, and who considers art to be above all a carrier of values, which are, by the way, just as much artistic as political. Hence, that whole sphere of values. In fact, the way art operates in a network where the main nodes in the network, nevertheless keep their distinct prerogatives and roles, but they are all actors – that is, at the same time active and passive – in the phenomenon of art which, itself, cannot be reduced to a ‘collection of works’. There is – and there has been – a lot of confusion on this point. I am a publisher and a researcher, and obviously also a reader/consumer of art, and I never consider myself to be an artist or a collector: yet the magazine of the Cabinet du livre d’artiste gives rise to the production of works, just as les Éditions Incertain Sens sometimes proposes the realization of, or even the ideas for artist’s books. A ‘little weakness’? At heart, I am still a philosopher. My greatest satisfaction therefore is when I realize in my work as a researcher all that these efforts of artist’s publications – which I follow avidly and to which I contribute as an editor/publisher and critic – oblige us to rethink in esthetic theory.

L.B. Your question, Hubert, is a common one, that is, the common-sense view about scientific objectivity: in this way of looking at things, the scientist finds himself in front of his object of research, to which he should remain ‘detached’ as an ‘observer’. But that’s a model from the natural sciences, and already quite old-fashioned, because in those sciences also referred to as ‘pure sciences’, nature ‘replies’ to ‘questions’ (new theories, possible experiments, interpretation of data, etc) formulated by the researcher. But in the...
Véronique Hubert. But there are also books made by artists – very project of Farfall. There’s even one book which is completely encrypted, whose historian and a right-wing historian will write the same history. Happens to be your case, you take part in our panel discussions, much more complex. Take the historian, for instance. The famous functions as a laboratory, not as a brand, avoiding a little of that production of historical reality by conferring meaning on the various functions, with institutions, with simple resources, are struggling with artists to take the initiative in their field, where artists no longer write manifestos, in a time when there is a general fragmentation of society, maybe a new, trans-field, where artists no longer write manifestos, in a time when there is a general fragmentation of society, maybe a new, trans-

But to answer your question, I’ll come back to what we spoke of at the beginning, which is the meaning and the importance of the ‘complementarity of our four “entities”. We work in the context of university research. If you read the editorials of Sans niveau ni catégorie, there is one kind of author particularly close to my heart, the author is consequently anonymous. The easiest would be to reply with a hermeneutic circle: no unnumbered, unique due to its intrinsic interest, surprising

Some publishers have a very clear editorial line, and build a sort of ‘ecumenical’ aim, because we are artists who have been forced to defend which have made possible the crystallize, if neither through an epoch, nor a generation, nor a place. The easiest would be to reply with a hermeneutic circle: no...
I still think that none of these artists either belong to, or would consider themselves part of, a value system that you so well characterized as spectacular, authoritarian, productivity based, professionalized, industrialized, and monetized. In one of my definitions of the artist’s book, there’s the specific question of de-territorializing the practice of art in book culture which remains... for the moment. I’m not espousing the ‘book’ as a radical anti-free-market policy, with borrowing from libraries (a practice which questions the relationship between private and public property), with the presence of the book and the project of a new public space, and the potential of books to be available in most major cities in the world, in daily life and where it takes place, in bed, in the bathroom, in the subway, in public parks, at the table when you eat alone... that stands in contrast to the traditional forms: museums, galleries, the Hotel Deutschr...”. 

Personally, the choice of the book is also the possibility to work without only being concerned with the plastic form (even if the book remains the well-made object, or the impact of the image, but rather through the values of the tale told, sharing, of critical strength, of its construction site, as we said. But we should still clearly state the way the definition of an artist’s book as Aurélie and I see it. We don’t have a ‘thermometer’ we can slide between the pages of a book: we’re so lucky to be able to practice and think about art within the environment of the book. You can see its contours better. Changing the environment of the book is then a way of attempting to escape from the tyranny of form for form’s sake. That’s also why I believe that why we should give up on exhibitions as an aesthetic pleasure... the de-esthetization of art, should be a way of attempting to...
which is rather poorly adapted to artist’s books, but in a wider sense, how does les Editions Incertains act, or not, in the organization of exchange of information and the collaborative process?

L.R. Hmm… that’s a natural question to ask at this juncture, but I have just written an article on the subject which you have not yet seen, as it will appear in the upcoming JAB37. In it, I develop the idea of the network from its origins in the 1960s and 70s, leaning on the anthropological work of Maurice Godelier to criticize the occidental fascination with potlatch and underline the reciprocity and accessibility of the gift in exchanges of printed matter through the network.

H.R. I’ll be reading that with great interest. I’d like to get back to the idea of the book as a means of exhibition (the little museum). Do you think the artist’s book has the same status as a literary book, for example (or a cookery book, that could work just as well)? An literary (or culinary) text can be printed in any kind of book; it remains the same, more or less, while an artist’s project takes shape in a book, then suddenly, the object itself forms an important part of the work. Do you think that the wish to free oneself from the fetishism of the unique and original objet d’art as in a museum is mainly utopian? (Artist’s books multiply in many copies, but they never quite leave behind their materiality.) I tell the book argumentstellen by herman de vries, which you publish, absolutely the same if I photocopy it page by page, maybe adding a few black dots from a bad photocopier? This is the same question raised by the reprints of historical books, or those simply out of print: should we reprint them, do we have some obligation to preserve them? Because the project for this book, published in 2003, dated from 1968. We wanted to use run-of-the-mill paper and a cover in plain cardboard, a material in widespread use in the late 60s. But, in the intervening more than 35 years, paper-making technologies had completely changed, and you can only find ‘imitations’ of that ‘ordinary paper’ and ‘plain cardboard’ in a 1960s style, which are very ‘pretty’. Which is a roundabout way of replying to one of your questions: we have no choice but to comply with ‘contemporary techniques’.

L.R. I like questions which make my life difficult. And here, I have no ready-made answer. But I remember about 15 years ago, when I was working with artists who used texts by Ludwig Wittgenstein to create their works, I wrote to herman de vries who, in 1974, had published the argumentstellen papers. And because that book was out-of-print, he made me a photocopy. I was delighted – proud, even – and I had no trouble working on that basis for my work, reading his book to speak about it in an article [published in Revue d’esthétique 844 in 2003] was nothing more or less than the esthetic experience I had while reading it! The status of the book was therefore the same as a cookery book, even as a photocopy. But these anecdotes lead me deeper. In my library, I have a copy of argumentstellen which was given to me (in an exchange) by Anne Kerlison, a friend, which she had used as a sketchbook. Actually, the book is printed on lovely paper, pretty thick, and she didn’t let herself be distracted by the little dots which are printed one per page. It’s like a Rembrandt used as an ironing table. It can be done. Why did we choose this ‘lovely’ paper? Because the project for this book, published in 2003, dated from 1968. We wanted to use run-of-the-mill paper and a cover in plain cardboard, a material in widespread use in the late 60s. But, in the intervening more than 35 years, paper-making technologies had completely changed, and you can only find ‘imitations’ of that ‘ordinary paper’ and ‘plain cardboard’ in a 1960s style, which are very ‘pretty’. Which is a roundabout way of replying to one of your questions: we have no choice but to comply with ‘contemporary techniques’.

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3. In the sense of ‘a false and superficial system of values’ as described by Guy Debord in his book La Société du spectacle. For the rest of this article, the words ‘spectacle’ and ‘spectacular’ refer to such deliberate and dishonest ‘surface seeming’ of things.
4. A hard-fought cultural specificity of Europe, whose government passed a law to prohibit ‘dumping’ or massive underselling of books by legally fixing their sale prices, thus somewhat restricting the economic power of larger, often non-specialized, stores and somewhat supporting smaller publishers and independent booksellers.
5. The famous art auction house in Paris, the equivalent of a Christie’s or Sotheby’s.

L.R. I think, honestly, it’s actually a bit more complicated than that. An artist’s book isn’t a museum in miniature, it’s not a new artistic form… what’s radical about it is the fact that it calls into question art in all of its complexity. That’s its subversive character: to upset the established order to look more closely at the underlying principles (of art). That’s one way of defining revolution.

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H.R. So, it’s a museum in miniature, but built with the utmost care? Or is it more complicated than that?

L.R. I think, honestly, it’s actually a bit more complicated than that. An artist’s book isn’t a museum in miniature, it’s not a new artistic form… what’s radical about it is the fact that it calls into question art in all of its complexity. That’s its subversive character: to upset the established order to look more closely at the underlying principles (of art). That’s one way of defining revolution.