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

Hubert Renard, Leszek Brogowski

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), 2015, Spring (37), pp.9-14. hal-02065439

HAL Id: hal-02065439
https://univ-rennes2.hal.science/hal-02065439
Submitted on 26 Mar 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.
What the Artist’s Book Makes Us Rethink About Esthetic Theory
Hubert Renard interviews Leszek Brogowski

HUBERT RENARD: Les Editions Incertain Sens (Uncertain Sense Publishing) was born in the year 2000 with the Inventory of Destructions by Eric Watier; the Cabinet du livre d'artistes (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 books has just published its first opus, 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 fulfills 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 uncomprehendingly 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 is 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 activity which you call ‘an archive and exhibition center’. I’d rather speak here of library resources which make up the Cabinet du livre d’artiste, and rather as archives than as an art collection. Anyway, the magazine Sans niveau ni mètre is a kind of manifesto which was written and went along, issue by issue, which expresses for both Aurélie Noury and myself a theoretical position and our choice of values. In fact, the way art operates in a network where the main means of circulation is printed matter (from the tract to the book, taking in brochures and postcards on the way) makes it clear that the artist, the publisher, the researcher, the viewer, and so on, through all modes 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 the inventory of Destructions 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.R. But doesn’t the work of a publisher or the person in charge of a documentary resource imply choices and certainly, in consequence, value judgments; whereas researchers have to maintain a position as a kind of disinterested observer? How do les Editions Incertain Sens and the Cabinet du livre d’artiste go about making these choices?

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 rather 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
humanities and social sciences, the position of the researcher is necessarily a laboratory. I also like the idea of a construction site: a random plot of land where workmen carry out work, full of equipment, a place where the method under construction is a question of the times or a generation. And the fact that I have had to put up with the system of the spectacle 3, perfectly in the book, which is why many artists began making them.

L.B. Well, one is never wholly innocent. But when I spoke of their ‘reputation’, I wasn’t suggesting they were a part of the ‘star system’. For me, the argument was the constancy and interest of their artistic output, which is undoubtedly different from the specialized press, not too much market, can no longer ignore them. Inside that ‘category’ we still managed to put out the most ‘beautiful’ book ever made; argumentstellen by de vries, which nobody wanted to publish for almost forty years, and which I count among the most radical and most philosophical of books; NOW

Möeglin-Delcroix, who’s a good friend of mine, but who has grown around for les Éditions Incertain Sens and which I count among the most radical and most philosophical of books; NOW

Les Éditions Incertain Sens, which has grown around for almost forty years, and which I count among the most radical and most philosophical of books; NOW
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, profiteering, professionalized, industrialized, and monetized. In one of my definitions of the artist’s book, there’s a specific question of de-territorializing the practice of art in book culture which remains... for me at least for the moment, a part of the price of a book (a radical anti-free-market policy), with borrowing from libraries (a practice which questions the relationship between private and public presence), with the presence of the artist at least potentially, 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 traditional formal temporary museums, galleries, the Hotel Droout... Personally, the choice of the book is also the possibility to work without only being concerned with the aesthetic (classifying artists according to their success, exhibitions according to the ‘numbers’ of art culture)... that the library, like any other material object, also has its form, which isn’t important without it

I think that the de-estheticization of art (in a term I borrow from H. Rosenberg) is the most striking phenomenon, of tendency, of the last half century. What do you think?

H.R. I’ve never read Rosenberg and I don’t know exactly what he means by ‘de-estheticization’. The works I currently see in the museums and galleries are clearly different (classifying artists according to their success, exhibitions according to the ‘numbers’ of art culture) that I can only imagine a de-estheticization with a huge sigh of relief! If, by that, you mean an approach to art not through the lens of beauty, of 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 power to discuss, to decode, to make the world real, then it is in that ‘tendency’ that I think that the most interesting conceptual art doesn’t exempt from esthetics, quite the reverse. Archives, literary, artistic books are in a context which permits spontaneous adjacencies, a sort of tacit collaboration between spectators (re)acting collectively. The digital annihilates this possibility. But at the same time, the internet opens the field to other experimentation which interests me, too, which takes us away from questions about the book.

H.R. Let’s get back to books, then. Since you set up les Éditions Incertains Sens catalog?, has your attitude to the artist’s book developed a little ?

L.B. At a rule, I don’t like regrets. You make the decisions you can... in a context which can, of course, change, which can cast past choices in a different light, and change our minds after the fact. It’s a construction site, as we said. But we should still clearly state the way we use the definition of an artist’s book as Aurélie and I see it. We don’t have a ‘thermometer’ which allows us to define a book: to decide whether it is one or not; anyway, we wouldn’t need one. Our definition covers a creative field of art which interests us because it happens within the field of values in which we believe, even if we are reaching for a Utopia. These values are linked to the culture of the book: we’re so lucky to be able to practice and think about art within this field of values that allow us to renew the place of art and our attitude toward art. That’s what’s precious. But anything which gets onto our list must above all surprise or enchant us, rather than, as others might say, correspond to any standard, above all to any ‘model from the 1960s’, as people sometimes said to me in all levity: should we bring ourselves in line with the standards of 2014 and standards of 2004, 1984, 1954, 1924? As for upcoming titles, glance through JAB37.

H.R. All this talk of standards or models clearly shows the ambiguity I look to avoid about the artist’s book: that it’s not (only) a question of form. In fact, I suggest we take advantage of these outdoor meetings and define standards for the artist’s book for the next twenty years? That way, we could imagine a ‘Little Museum of L’art du livre d’artiste is a library. Do you remember that paper by Jean Grive sobre about salon?’

L.B. ‘a little museum’, for sure, but that has to be kept until the end. To see better who you are, you have to step out of the context where you blend into the background. The artist’s book is art, but in the environment of the book. You can see its contours better. Changing the background, making art according to the customs of book culture, allows you to formulate a number of refreshing questions to get closer to what is really important in art practice, and which comes through despite the changed context, once we detach its practice from the institutions which support it and profit from it. Here are a few examples: why should a work of art be materially unique when it can be multiple, like a literary work? Why should an artist sign his add, when authors neither hand sign nor number their books? Why should the originality of a plastic work be judged by its non-reproducibility, while a literary work is judged by its intellectual and artistic values? And so forth... Is the essential thing in art its exhibition in a famous museum, or the exorbitant price it fetches, or something else, and if so, what? Listen, just today (August 8, 2013) I read two articles in le Monde: “Art hit by delusions of grandeur” and “The global art market shows unexampled health.” Do you and I suffer from the same syndrome? In the latter article, they speak of the ‘museum industry’, and there, I agree, the artist’s book is a ‘little museum’, as you say. It’s a museum which guarantees an artist independence relative to big institutions; these institutions have indeed changed during the past few decades, but by compounding their aims just like the cultural industry. Whereas the artist’s book, without ever reaching the number of visitors of a MoMA, is set more in a popular tradition, as you say: unassuming, maybe clandestine (Laurent Marissal, Antoine Moreau...), which is the best guarantee of independence and autonomy of authorship.

H.R. These comments about breaking records or the ‘numbers’ of art (classifying artists according to their success, exhibitions according to the number of visitors, works according to their weight, or their price…) give me the impression of being a gardener on his little plot of ‘grandeur’ but ‘delusions’: to only look at the numbers at the risk of free art. A book is tricky to exhibit, difficult to reproduce and hardly ‘spectacular’: it’s naturally reticent to the usages of modern art. On the other hand, when you exhibit and collect an artist’s book as an object of worth, you remove its artistic potential: artist’s book are indeed changed over the past few decades, but by congealing their mediocrity. An artist’s book isn’t doomed to have a readership of just a few who own copies (length, print run, number of documents in the library’s collection, the price, etc.) can have a decisive importance, even a critical value. The ‘nature’ of books evolves through history; I’d say so far as to say the critical value of a book as regards institutions and the market. We’ve discussed several possible uses in line with market forces...Thanks for the question about Incertain Sens, that will allow me to ‘render unto Caeas...’ les Éditions Incertains Sens was suggested by Florence Ray, a student of mine in the 1990’s, which I took with her permission. The title of an inter-university seminar ‘Paper In Action’ comes from a text by Stefan Theremson (with the kind permission of Jasia Reichardt who is in charge of his archives). Sans niveau ni meter is by Romo Di Rosa who gave the name to our first piece of furniture in the Cabinet du livre d’artiste and who gave his permission to use it as the title of our journal.

H.R. Coming back to the artist’s book, we often hear talk about ideas of networks and exchanges. Of course there is a library distribution...
In the 1960s, the idea of the network from its origins in the 1960s and 70s, leaning on the anthropological work of Maurice Godelier to criticize the technological fields, where so much global homogenization in this period, he made me a photocopy. I was delighted – proud, even – and I photocopy it page by page, maybe adding a few black dots from a bad print. This is the same question raised by the reprinting of historical books, or those simply out of print: should we reprint them absolutely identically (which can be complicated) or re-issue them using contemporary techniques?

I, L.R. 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 1973, had published the argumenstelile 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 question which is raised by the reprints of historical books, or those simply out of print: should we reprint them absolutely identical (which can be complicated) or re-issue them using contemporary techniques?

There are of course good books, and those not so good… and this 'pretty'. Which is a roundabout way of replying to one of your questions: we have no choice but to comply with 'contemporary techniques'. That's what happens as a rule in many other technological fields, where so much global homogenization in this period, it's different from a simple blank notebook, because in the book – be it an artist’s book – the thoughts are 'slipped in' between the pages. Are there of course good books, and those not so good… and this status apart as an object is even recognized in the context of the unembodied capitalism of our day, as in the majority of European countries the price of a book is set by its publisher and it is exempt from the free market. Perhaps the most important question which you asked, and also the most difficult, remains: (to borrow the phrase from Anne-Marie Margolin-Delcroix) does the ‘being a work’ of the artist’s book, set it apart from other books? Personally, I hope not, that’s more of a question of values: I expect a good book, whatever it is, and I take just as much care of it as I do of artist’s books, which I do enjoy. And I do like publishers who, with their own books, take as much care as if they were ‘works of art’. Here lies one of the interests of the artist’s book, I think, in relation to esthetic theory: they change one’s relationship with the esthetic, which ceases to have an absolute value and a central interest. As publishers of artist’s books, we do nothing more than any other self-respecting publisher; that is, we pay the closest attention that the editorial conception, typographical solutions, technological choices and material aspects, and so forth, of the book (as much as they are under the control of the publisher) best serve the project of the artist who is their author. That’s also the theme on which I hope to examine in a forthcoming article.

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.

1. A complex pun on both the original anarchist maxim ‘Ni Dieu, ni Maître’ (‘Neither God nor Master’) and the homophones – in French – for ‘standards’, spirit-level and tape-measure, and an ironic comment on the hyperfused construction of the first display table in the ‘Gallant’ Trésor.
2. Jacques le Goff and Pierre Nora
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 this deliberate and dishonest ‘surfacing’ of things.
4. A hard-fought cultural specificity of Europe, whose governance passed a law to prohibit ‘dumping’ or massive underfilling of books by legally fixing their sale prices, thus somewhat restricting the economic power of large, often non-specialized, stores and somewhat supporting smaller publishers and independent booksellers.
5. The reputable art auction house in Paris, the equivalent of a Christie’s or Sotheby’s.
6. JAB37
7. Annual collective art exhibitions in Paris started at the end of the 19th century.