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THE PARADIGM OF CONTEMPORARY ART – A REVIEW

Nathalie Heinich, Le paradigme de l'art contemporain. Structures d'une révolution artistique, Paris, Editions Gallimard, coll. «Bibliothèque des Sciences Humaines», 2014, 373 p., ISBN : 978-2-07-013923-1.

In the 21st century, the difference between modern and contemporary art continues to be obscure to the general public. The concepts are used indiscriminately, with 'modern' usually defining anything produced since abstraction came along – which in its turn is a source of frustration for professionals who identify their field of work within contemporary art and distinguish it clearly from modern art. Why does this mismatch persist? The professionals, for their part, continue to debate about whether contemporary is just a new development after modern art, as in postmodern, or an essentially different kind of art practice, and when exactly modern turned into contemporary. The French sociologist Nathalie Heinich has answers to these questions.

Her book is a magnum opus to prove that contemporary art is a new paradigm and constitutes a revolution. Artistic revolution is an overused idea for changes occurring in

art, and the concept of paradigm shift is lightly thrown into discussion about anything new for its dramatic effect but they are rarely analysed with rigour. This is not Heinich's approach: she sets out to dissect the issue methodically. In the first chapter she shows how the concept of paradigm from Thomas Kuhn's classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) is useful for explaining the dilemmas around modern and contemporary art. Paradigm shift here is not simply a metaphor for something new but a theory to explain a deep change in understanding what art is. This change and its consequences are then described in detail throughout the following 300 pages.

A paradigm determines the way we understand the structure of a certain part of reality, in this case art. Heinich identifies three art paradigms: classical, modern and contemporary, each representing a rupture from the previous one and each founded on a dif-

ferent understanding of what art is. "A paradigm, in other words, is the general structure of acknowledged concepts at a certain time regarding a domain of human activity: not so much as a common model – because the notion of model implies that it is followed consciously – but a cognitive platform that is shared by all." (p. 43)¹ Paradigm shift is hence an epistemological revolution, a shift from one system to another. It is not a mere difference of opinion or a choice between styles; the disagreement is not about how to solve a problem but about how to even present one.

Contemporary art presents a new paradigm as it creates "an ontological disruption of the borders of what generally used to be considered art" (p. 49).² In an art world dominated by the modern (and to an extent classical) paradigm, contemporary art always runs the risk of being denied the status of art, because it is incompatible with the assump-

tions, standards and values of (modern) art. The expression “this is not art” is a rejection resulting from expectations formed according to modern or classic criteria.

The professionals working with contemporary art are aware, at least intuitively, that it is a different world and obeys different laws, but what it exactly consists of nobody can tell. Heinich offers a systematic description of these features; the book’s list of contents is in a way an index of evidence that art can be made of any material and anything can become art; art does not have to be permanent or material at all; it can be shown anywhere, not only in places that are built for it; time, space and context are part of the work, not its background; the line between an artwork and documentation is ambiguous; it cannot be reproduced in 2D still images; the status of painting has declined; art does not have to be made by the artist and often is produced by multiple actors; a lot is left for the viewers to do in completing the work, both through interpretation and through participation; intermediaries and institutions play a crucial role in its production and existence; and that a contemporary work relies on narration and discourse built around it.

In none of these respects does contemporary art comply with modern (or classical) concept of art. The second half of the book deals with the consequences of these changes for exhibiting, buying, collecting, storing, conserving and trans-

porting this art. The evidence of the shift is laid out as an almost overwhelming number of examples, incidents and anecdotes. Everyone working with contemporary art will know many of these anecdotes or themselves have similar stories to tell. Meticulously assembled and described, and by their sheer number, they testify to a profound change in art practice and theory. Furthermore, anecdotes are used by Heinich as an analytical tool: they point to moments of transgression; an anecdote is a story worth narrating, that is, about something out of the ordinary (p. 19).

The borders of paradigms become visible when a dialogue comes to a dead-end and the parties fail to understand each other, or in practice, when art professionals and institutions struggle to work in the world which is built on premises of modern and classical art. Heinich’s method already in her earlier publications (*L’art contemporain exposé aux rejets* 1997, *Le triple jeu de l’art contemporain* 1998, *Face à l’art contemporain* 2003) has been to dig down to the incidents in which things go wrong and create controversy. The point is not to dwell on problems as such but to use them as a magnifying glass to explicate the change: a clash is a sign of the encounter of two incompatible systems. The most obvious symptoms are moments of outrage and hostility against contemporary art projects – and the writer does not lack examples, particularly

from the 1990s, characterised in France as ‘crises of contemporary art’ (p. 330). Subtler signs are incidents of professional activity, such as when the financial worth or the legal status of the work is questioned due to unconventional features: a contemporary work does not meet the criteria of a work of art in the eyes of customs officers or legal experts and is treated not as art but as a commodity and for example priced and taxed accordingly.

Central to the book are chapters that analyse the consequences of the paradigm change for the art world at large and its relations with other fields of life. As art no longer resides in the art object, narration – or discourse – around it becomes essential: objects and events that cannot be distinguished from the surrounding world would not otherwise be art. Heinich notes a general intellectualisation of art, upheld by artists, curators, academics, essayists and critics, whose roles, in addition, merge. In addition to verbal mediation, art needs institutional support more than before: the role of institutions, curators, collectors and other professional intermediaries is essential in legitimising contemporary art as art. It equally relies on the public’s active interpretation and even participation. These features come together in what the writer calls ‘allographisation’ (pp. 106–7). The concept ‘allographic’ stands in opposition to autographic, a work relying on the artist’s signature. A contemporary artwork,



initiated and imagined by the artist, exists only in its various actualisations executed by a multitude of people, professionals and non-professionals alike.

The role of the artist changes accordingly. Art is no longer about the artist's self-expression (as with the modern paradigm) but about something, a topic. Instead of artworks they make projects and the job of an artist resembles that of a film director, entrepreneur, coach or facilitator. A whole new production system has emerged with its new professions (e.g. independent curators), skills (specialised production houses) and new exhibition models (thematic exhibitions, biennales, fairs). The notion of authorship is consequently one of the issues to be dealt with, along with more practical questions about pricing, insurance, documentation, storage...

The book is written in a clear and dispassionate tone, devoid of value judgement or interpretation. Accumulation of facts and incidences combined with intelligent analysis is a refreshing break from passionate, engaged and often partisan art discourse. Heinich mostly does not comment on art historical writing about contemporary art but in a short passage she makes some critical remarks about the relentless quest for interpreting the signification of an artwork and equating this with its value (pp. 185–7).

Unlike art historians busy with our chronologies and

periodization, the sociologist does not try to fix a point in time when contemporary art starts or to list movements or artists that belong to this or that paradigm. For example, according to Heinich, Duchamp made works that belong to the modern paradigm and others that are clearly part of the contemporary (p. 34). What counts is the attitude and approach to art. The book, however, is not ahistorical either; Heinich goes through the milestones of contemporary art as part of her investigation although she is more interested in the second generation of contemporary artists in the 21st century (pp. 85–9), characterised, among other things, by a straightforward attitude to the art market. The concept of paradigm also makes it possible to dispense with aesthetic criteria as defining contemporary art and to take into account instead the input of law, economics, social values, institutional structures, means of production and dissemination and other factors which in the art historical account are usually defined as context or background but in the contemporary paradigm are an essential part of the art itself.

I can envisage two alternative readerships for the book: one of uninitiated but interested general public, the other of well versed professionals. For the first group, the book offers a lucid introduction to the specificities of contemporary art; it would make an excellent course book for students of contemporary art – at least

if it existed in English. For experts, it puts the often hermetic art discussion in a sociological framework and provides a synthesis of the business, a welcome outsider view on the field and plenty of food for not only thought but also debate.

Endnotes

1. Un paradigme, en d'autres termes, c'est une structuration générale des conceptions admises à un moment donné du temps à propos d'un domaine de l'activité humaine : non tant un modèle commun – car la notion de modèle sous-entend qu'on le suive consciemment – qu'un socle cognitif partagé par tous.
2. ...rupture ontologique des frontières de ce qui était communément considéré comme de l'art.