



Journal *Hybrid*, n° 1

“Ephemeral Heritages”

INTERVIEW

For an Esthetics of the Ephemeral

Interview with Christine Buci-Glucksmann

Christine Buci-Glucksmann

Emanuele Quinz

Christine Buci-Glucksmann is a French philosopher. Former student of the École Normale Supérieure, she co-founded the Collège international de philosophie where she was director. She is also Professor emerita of Esthetics at Paris 8 University (“Esthetics and Plastic Art”), where she led the research seminar “Esthetics and anti-esthetics in contemporary arts.” She is the author of important works published by Galilée editions such as *La Raison baroque* (1984), *La Folie du voir* ([1986] 2002), *Tragique de l’ombre* (1990), *L’Enjeu du beau* (1992), *L’Œil cartographique de l’art* (1996), *L’Esthétique du temps au Japon* (2001), *La Folie du voir* (2002), *Esthétique de l’éphémère* (2003), *Au-delà de la mélancolie* (2005), *Philosophie de l’ornement* (2008), *Les Voix de l’Orient* (2014).

Art historian and independent curator, **Emanuele Quinz** is associate professor at Paris 8 University and professor at the ENSAD-Lab (École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs). Doctor in Esthetics, his research explores convergences between contemporary artistic practices: from plastic arts to fashion and design, from music to dance. He edited or co-edited several books among which: *Du corps à l’avatar* (Paris, Anomos, 2000), *La scena digitale* (with Armando Menicacci, Venice, Marsilio, 2001), *Digital Performance* (Paris, Anomos, 2002), *Interfaces* (Orléans, Hyx, 2003), and *MilleSuoni, Deleuze, Guattari e la musica elettronica* (with Roberto Paci Dalò, Naples, Cronopio, 2006), *Strange Design* (with Jehanne Dautrey, It, 2014).

Translation: Sarah Heft.

Abstract: in this interview, Christine Buci-Glucksmann comes back to the creation process of her book *Esthétique de l’éphémère*, published in 2003. Through encounters, literary company and journeys both exotic and evocative, the author observes that an expanded and stratified temporality arises, which emphasizes the transition from a culture of object to a culture of flows. This new culture, closely linked to information technologies diffusion, also involves new production and circulation modes for artworks, and questions their “survival” in heritage.

Keywords: cultural heritage, ephemeral, esthetics, image.

Full text (PDF file)

Emanuele Quinz. *Esthétique de l'éphémère* was published in 2003¹. How was this book born? How do you define the esthetics of the ephemeral?

Christine Buci-Glucksmann. First came an experience that transformed me: my stay in Japan, at the Villa Kujoyama in Kyoto, where I was visiting professor at the University of Tokyo. I realized that Japan was already experiencing a culture of flux. This culture involved a temporal approach that differs from that of the West —*i.e.* an approach that considers impermanency, and thus ephemerality, as positive. Hence my interest for all of this structure of the ephemeral of and within the city's flow (I'm thinking of Toyo Ito), and little by little, against the tide of a certain attachment to the past, it seemed necessary to me to view the ephemeral as a new method of thrusting oneself into the present and the future. This is because the ephemeral is not a moment in time, the instant according to Aristotle, or the mere "presenteeism" of a time with no future. Instead, it is the passage of time, its modulation and delicate resonance. This is why the ephemeral grasps the present as an opportune moment —the Greek "*kairos*" or the Baroque "occasion"—marked by the "spirit of wave," as it is said in Japan. At once musical, visual and architectural, the ephemeral is thus multiple, defining the nature of humans as such. But prior to being an artistic reality, it is a mode of living affecting human relations, now grappling with the culture of flux and networks, and all of this globalized instability and inequality. I wrote this book with this as my starting point, in an attempt to understand the new regime of images.

Emanuele Quinz. While in Japanese culture, the ephemeral holds a central position, deeply engraved in tradition, what is the case within our tradition? In your books, you sketch out lines that redraw history, not only of art or the arts, but an overarching archeology, a conceptual genealogy. These lines appear to be buried but in following you, we rediscover them, ultimately realizing that they are essential, and prominent, despite everything. What could be the history of the ephemeral in western culture?

Christine Buci-Glucksmann. As far as I am concerned, the esthetics of the ephemeral is at the intersection of a number of lines of work. I am interested in time in art, from Baroque to historical and contemporary Vanitas. In their symbols — bubbles, glass, water, flowers— the 17th-century Vanitas artists provide a veritable mirror of passing time, a time of

¹ Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Esthétique de l'éphémère*, Paris, Galilée, 2003. Cf. also Ead., *Une femme philosophe. Dialogue avec F. Soulages*, Les Rencontres de la MEP, Paris Klincksieck.

metamorphosis and death, still religious in its aura and references (“Vanity of vanities; all is vanity”).

What is striking in Baroque and Vanitas art alike is that the entire western history of the ephemeral seems to be dominated by melancholy, with this *melancholic ephemeral* found in *Hamlet*, the Baudelairian spleen and the works of Fernando Pessoa and Walter Benjamin.

Two theories in particular have influenced me. Firstly, Japanese philosophy and its concept of the ephemeral, *mujô*, which implies apprehension of the interval, a positive void — thus, a *cosmic ephemeral*. One example: temples are rebuilt every twenty years in identical fashion. More widely, there is a true culture of the ephemeral in Japan, which I refer to as *fluid mannerism*. This combines norm, form and manner in all areas, from food to fashion.

This mannerism is at the intersection of all of my previous research on Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin —especially what Benjamin called “the a-present”²: a constellation of time, in which we find a forgotten past in grasping the stratified now of the present. This reveals that time is always woven, and to say it in Proustian fashion, is indeed a fabric. This weaving of time in its variation is what I have discovered in the new regime of ephemeral images.

Emanuele Quinz. The esthetics of the ephemeral is tightly connected with this regime of images, which you define as flux-image. This regime is somewhat in line with the image regimes identified by Deleuze in *L'Image-Mouvement* and in *L'Image-Temps*³. Your approach simultaneously extends Deleuze’s own and goes beyond the borders of cinematographic territory, demonstrating how this new regime of images has become widespread in artistic practices as well as the cultural horizon, moving into daily life. What are the specific characteristics of this new regime of images?

Christine Buci-Glucksmann. In images, Gilles Deleuze saw a process rather than a being or an essence. Time-image is thus twofold, because the whole of the present records the past in a Bergsonian continuum. Deleuze is interested in the virtual—but a virtual that presupposes a memory *continuum*, rather than a technological virtual. With the concept of flux-image, I sought to theorize a third historical moment, a new “regime of images” to use his terms, which crosses with artistic practices and experiences—an image that may be without a model, allowing for the creation of the real rather than simply a simulation or illusion.

2 Cf. Walter Benjamin, “Thèses sur l’histoire” [1940], *Écrits français*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991. Cf. also Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *La Raison baroque. De Baudelaire à Benjamin*. Paris, Galilée, 1984 and Ead., *L’Esthétique du temps au Japon. Du zen au virtuel*, Paris, Galilée, 2000.

3 Gilles Deleuze, *L’Image-mouvement. Cinéma 1*, Paris, Minuit, 1983 and Id., *L’Image-temps. Cinéma 2*, Paris, Minuit, 1985.

This is why a whole generation, especially the younger generation, is fascinated by these flux-images, through video games and social networks —an ultra-quick moment linked to the acceleration of lifestyles. Flux-images imply images of images, immediate communication (*i.e.* images from war witnesses), the creation of images with no outside referent, while there is also an intercultural aspect connected with the globalization of images. Flux-images are fluid and ephemeral because the process definitively prevails over the being. As a result, there is no more ontology of images, and the whole of metaphysics, developed around the category of *mimesis*, is no longer relevant in examining the regime of flux-images. On the contrary, new concepts must be produced, going beyond *mimesis*, beyond perspective and even beyond the whole avant-gardist break with images —for art of a globalized and unevenly developed age, generating artifices and artifacts that serve as models for art and architecture alike, creating what Appadurai refers to as the “new work of the imagination” in *Modernity at Large*.⁴

Emanuele Quinz. I am also thinking of relation-images as defined by Jean-Louis Boissier, as a new status for images⁵: images becoming interface, which we can act upon, manipulate and transform —an interactive image that vectorizes a relationship. In the case of both flux-image and relation-image, the new status is characterized more by the fact of bringing about a specific experience than by any sort of formal transformation.

Christine Buci-Glucksmann. Indeed, flux-images imply a highly specific experience, and Japan allowed me to have this experience on a large scale. My path crossed Jean-Louis Boissier’s at Paris 8 University, with a shared inquiry into the regime of images, and particularly, the concept of interactive images. Interactivity is at the heart of relationships and lifestyles, and is thus more than simply intra-artistic. But it is necessary to see how the theoretical components of their analysis may be found in the esthetics of these images. It is not merely a question of a parading through images, zapping through flows or being immersed. It is necessary to find a configuration, a space or even a hybrid polysensorial appeal (*i.e.* visual/sound) in the images contributing to their esthetic value.

Emanuele Quinz. With the emergence of this notion of experience in contemporary creation, might we be moving beyond images, withdrawing toward perception or even proprioception, toward individual feeling? Are artists working to produce images, or even, using the force or impact of images, curate experiences for viewers? What matters is being immersed

4 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

5 Cf. Jean-Louis Boissier, *La Relation comme forme. L’interactivité en art*, Dijon, Les Presses du réel, 2008, new expanded edition.

in the flow of images, in a drifting state, or being involved in the relationship depicted by the image. This thus seems to be more of an esthetics of effects —which, as you state, is also an esthetics of affects. Might the objective, or even the means of art once again be *aisthesis* —for which you recall the etymology *sensorium*— as a theater of effects and of affects?

Christine Buci-Glucksmann. Yes. Digital language is essentially based on a code, and the new processes of creation are tightly linked with the concept of code. An artwork using digital technologies presupposes an idea, in a nearly Duchampian sense —a diagram, a model. Drawing from this model, the program reinvents the idea, using a code and algorithms, allowing for perceptible newness to emerge. This process brings about a whole series of effects and affects connecting art and science in an extremely new way, akin to a new Renaissance.

This encompasses both a new process of knowledge and a new practice, allowing for the creation of “abstracts” rather than abstractions —abstract models. It entails a whole hybrid esthetics, with models that may be borrowed from biology and brain sciences, altering the relationship between art and science and art and nature. But image-making is also “globalized,” challenging borders and certain geographical separations, for example, between the east and the west, with all of its Orientalist notions. A vast intersection of practices is now shattering old metaphysical dualisms and institutional logic. It is in this sense that I have been able to speak of a technological Baroque, to the extent that Baroque art is transgressive, an initial way of considering the ephemeral but from a still-religious position.

Emanuele Quinz. You address this Baroque esthetic in *La Folie du voir*⁶. Meanwhile, Eugenio Battisti speaks of *Antirinascimento*⁷, and describes Mannerism and subsequently the Baroque as cracks appearing in the humanist model. When you speak of the emergence of a globalized universe, is this yet another crack, casting doubt on the humanist model? Today, at a time when the debate on postcolonial perspectives is igniting art, we can see just how persistent this model still is. While the gaze has shifted to other stories and other civilizations, the point of view cannot be undone, still fixated on western culture despite everything.

Christine Buci-Glucksmann. I believe that we are in a period of transition. The esthetics of the virtual is an esthetics of metamorphosis and artifice. And as long as there is creation of artifacts, there is surely cultural and even intercultural passage.

6 Christine Buci-Glucksmann, (2002). *La Folie du voir. Une esthétique du virtuel*, Paris, Galilée, 2002, new expanded edition (English translation: *The Madness of Vision. On Baroque Aesthetics*, translated by Dorothy Z. Baker, Ohio University Press, 2013).

7 Eugenio Battisti, *L'antirinascimento*, Milano, Garzanti, 1970.

This much is clear, especially today, given our expanded knowledge of arts from non-western countries and the perception that quite often, they are in a state of real-virtual hybridization, a new experience of the imaginary and the ephemeral —perspectives that are growing extremely important for creation in general. It is furthermore necessary to highlight that the works of Appadurai and Homi K. Bhabha on postcolonial theory and the need to reconsider the relationship between colonization and globality come to us from “interstitial” cultures, between India and the West. It is thus necessary to explore all of these “interstices,” to rethink forms of otherness and “wounded cosmopolitanisms,” to use Julia Kristeva’s term. Traditional humanism must then be expanded and reformulated.

Emanuele Quinz. These cultures did not need the Baroque. It has always been inhabited by secrecy, by a subversive force countering a normative model, represented by the humanist and rationalist model.

Christine Buci-Glucksmann. The “locations of culture” are multiple, which Japan and then China furthermore taught me. But despite these differences, new technologies are globalized, even though the process is unequal. The Baroque, meanwhile, conquered Latin America. Admittedly, it was a culture of Italian or Sevillian origin —European, at any rate— that repeatedly mixed with Indian cultures.

I think that this transformation via artifice and artifact is twofold. On the one hand, it establishes a new relationship with nature. Processes that were natural and organic become thinkable and reproducible via new technologies, and serve as models for artistic and architectural creation. On the other hand, another post-cultural process is taking hold, modifying social issues and allowing cultures to dialogue, while at the very same time, we are conversely witnessing identity-based, and even warlike withdrawal. It is thus extremely important to build a “philosophy of relations” in Edouard Glissant’s sense⁸, a philosophy of otherness and a poetics within this all-embracing vision, to avoid falling into the mere commodification of art.

Emanuele Quinz. Let’s return to what you refer to as the culture of flux. In the 1960s, with the impact of cybernetics — connected to the emergence of new notions of technology, turned into information technology— we moved from a culture of objects to a culture of systems, as described by Jack Burnham⁹. This culture was rooted in a new, anti-metaphysical, materialist ontology: in a game of concentric circles, cybernetics attempted to establish a model for an operational system that would simultaneously oversee the operational framework of

8 Edouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la relation*, Paris, Gallimard, 2009.

9 Jack Burnham, “System Esthetic,” *Artforum* 7, no. 1 (September 1968). Republished in Richard Kostelanetz (dir.), *Esthetics Contemporary*, Buffalo Prometheus Books, 1989, p.147.

intelligence, of society and of machines —not to mention artworks. According to your analysis, we are now in the midst of a new phase, moving from computerization to virtualization, from a culture of systems to a culture of flux. How does this new phase differ from the systematic thought of cybernetics?

Christine Buci-Glucksmann. The systematic model first entered into crisis in the sciences, which introduced concepts such as chaos and the unpredictable —elements for which, paradoxically, the lack of control becomes the very subject of inquiry. This model produced an entire kinetic and pre-electronic art, from Vasarely to Le Parc —a creative approach recently seen once again in the extremely rich *Dynamo* exhibit¹⁰. This art was located at the border between systems and flux, and the term virtual was already present, as it was exploring movements and a reflection-light in all materials. It was a precursor art, but we are now experiencing a historic new phase characterized by the digital revolution —notably with the emergence of a new phase in the scientific analysis of processes. In biology, for example, the analysis of cellular and intracellular models has produced new paradigms, and all of these new scientific and technological developments allow for the creation of new forms. The most recent example relates to the development of 3D, not merely as a process for producing onscreen images, but for producing objects in the real world, which may be printed using new systems of rapid prototyping: program turned sculpture, architecture. There is also research exploring the possibility of building houses using 3D printers.

Speaking of a technological Baroque, which is thus linked to this culture of flux, also allows us to revisit the past —that of ornamentation, which has come back, as well as that of architecture. I have just written an article on Rudy Ricciotti. At the MuCEM in Marseille, we can see that the latticework shell of black concrete surrounds what modernism was —glass spaces. Ricciotti furthermore identifies with mannerism, its narrativity and acceptance of peril.

We are thus in this state of vacillation between the invention of the future and a renewed gaze on the past.

Emanuele Quinz. Mannerism relegitimizes the decorative approach, which was pushed aside in art in favor of a conceptual approach.

Christine Buci-Glucksmann. And yet, looking at the turn of the century, in Vienna, England or France with the Nabis, the first Bonnard, and above all, Matisse, who said that “all art is decorative,” we realize that the decorative style was a questioning of the orthodoxy of painting, in its formats, in its relation to color and perspective. The decorative style and its Japanese-influenced two-dimensionality brought about a true

¹⁰ *Dynamo. A century of light and motion in art. 1913-2013*, curated by S. Lemoine and M. Poirier, Paris, Grand Palais, 2013.

revolution in painting. In a recent work, *Philosophie de l'ornement : D'Orient en Occident*¹¹, I analyze the major debate of the era: was ornamentation a crime, as Loos wished and as was produced by a certain modernity, or was it a Style as upheld by Art Nouveau, Aloïs Riegl, Gustav Klimt and the whole of the Viennese Secession? The debate is still current, although the page has been turned with “post-modernity” and digital cultural reinventing the question of ornamentation.

It is finally necessary to understand that the decorative style is back, in art, design and architecture, with models created virtually, latticework shells, networks, spirals and braiding, and that this decorative style also wields subversive power as compared with decades of modernism and post-Duchampian conceptual art. In art schools we hear, “that is decorative, it isn’t art.” Today, the future lies in the intersection of art, design, fashion and architecture, although each discipline preserves its specificity, and it is no longer possible to think in terms of separations and exclusions. This intersection is created by an esthetics of the virtual, be it naturalized or entirely invented by new technologies.

Emanuele Quinz. I have come to the last question. Do you find that all of these concepts of flows and ephemerality contradict the extremely strong trend toward heritage? We are now witnessing a trend in museums toward the reactivation of historic ephemeral art —relational, performative and conceptual practices from the 1960s and 70s— with re-enactment philosophy. In this trend, a drive toward preservation and archiving is apparent, in order to lay out everything considered as experience —which may seem paradoxical in the digital era, the era of flux. Is preservation a duty for institutions? Are there alternatives to this heritagization?

Christine Buci-Glucksmann. We are witnessing a veritable paradox. Given the wealth of our heritage, the tendency to update and place value on heritage alone is one possibility. But I am seeing signs of change. Firstly, I don’t believe that the creation of virtual-based works is independent of a true culture of heritage. We don’t invent from nothing. Artistic and cultural education is necessary in order to create relational and virtual artworks. This implies the weaving of time, rather than its erasure; technological culture is connected to a vaster culture.

I furthermore believe that there are institutional attempts to bring heritage face to face with contemporary artists or virtual museum forms able to open up heritage to individuals lacking access to it. Heritage thus becomes contemporaneous with the culture of the world. Virtual museum experiences are possible in a number of countries. And this transforms the idea of heritage, which also defines itself as a databank for the creation of new

11 Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Philosophie de l'ornement. D'Orient en Occident*, Paris, Galilée, 2008.

“imaginary museums”. The question is, what is to be done with these data? How can they be used? How can they be made accessible?

Emanuele Quinz. You cited the example of the *Dynamo* exhibit, and in speaking with Mathieu Poirier, associate curator, he explained to me the problems connected to the conservation and public display of kinetic works: these works were created to be handled, participative, even ephemeral, but today, they are weakened by time and the risk of major damage if they continue to be publicly displayed. The decision was made to document the interaction using video, leaving the object, the work as a trace. The question of heritage thus prevailed over esthetic issues. As a result, the experience is by proxy.

Christine Buci-Glucksmann. There are true issues today in seeking to create paths —paths which may not be reduced to a mere ontology of works. Rather, a *topology of works* must be created: multiple, enunciated passages of time, allowing for a simultaneous consideration of the past, the sociocultural dimension and esthetic issues. Temporal authorities may be placed into dialogue. In all of this research that I have undertaken, ultimately relating to time, it seems to me that what matters most are the interactions between present and absent, what appears and what disappears, all of these new enunciations that destabilize established hierarchies. I believe that today, the challenge for heritage is indeed the destabilization of established hierarchies, rather than their dogmatization.

This is because all esthetics include an ethics, and in our world —subject to all sorts of catastrophe, in which disorder is the reality of systems— the only universality lies in the singularities, both individual and collective, which resist all forms of barbarism. Beauty furthermore often emerges from the flaws of disaster, rather than from classical harmony alone.

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