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« Realities of illusion »

Review 1

Catherine Grenier, *La Manipulation des images dans l'art contemporain*, Paris, Éditions du Regard, 2014.

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La Manipulation des images dans l'art contemporain

Catherine Grenier

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Full text (PDF file)

Following *La Revanche des émotions* (2008) and *La Fin des musées* (2013), Catherine Grenier published an essay entitled *La Manipulation des images dans l'art contemporain* in 2014. A custodian, art historian and curator of numerous and prestigious exhibitions, the author of this reasonably-sized book (192 p.) puts her expertise to the service of a dual aim: to make an assessment of *genuine* contemporary art (from the 1990s to the present) and bring out the specificity and coherence of an artistic era characterized by an amazing eclecticism. Deep knowledge of a large body of works (the absence of an index is regrettable) allows for the recognition of a common factor, which at once looks like something repressed has returned, namely a shared interest in the *image*. Invalidated in conceptual art, the image assertively proliferates in the new artistic landscape. This clear conclusion goes against Michael Fried's theses, on the ground of their obsolescence. In the 1960s, those theses would regard theatricality and fine arts works as antinomic. Excluded from contemporary art for the sake of truth (of matter or form) and authenticity (of the event and everything performative), image-based fiction reappears, so that from now on "playing is no longer cheating." After the iconoclasm of the 1970s, image—in all of its forms—is ascribed with a new status, whose strength lies in its vulnerability and frailty, rather than its effort to show what is real or true, as the author sharply notes. The artists from the last decades have

been aware of the nebulous proliferation of images, resulting from the rise of advertising, communication and technologies in modern societies. For all that, they set about getting involved in the field of language as early as the 1980s. With full knowledge of the situation, the same people—or their successors—who used to reject artistic images for the sake of modernism, began to produce them. Artistic images do not stand out from the commercial, social and political flow of other images by imposing their own aesthetics, but rather by insinuating themselves in between the forms and reality and by playing on the ambiguity and allusive value of images, whose status is unsure, role contested and potential overused. Evidence of a nostalgic stance, if not utterly romantic, yet disillusioned, this resistance of the image characterizes the present state of art. However, the jamming of the visual world leads artists to *manipulate* images rather than create them from scratch, according to production strategies, which are not mutually exclusive by the way, whose paradigm inspired Catherine Grenier the five-part structure of her essay:

1) In a symbolic way, the “remake” is the first production mode to be evidenced. Video art lends itself very well to this exercise (with artists such as Douglas Gordon, Stan Douglas, Pierre Huyghe or Mark Lewis). Popular culture, and especially the culture of cinema, has become a field of investigation in which the most daring do not hesitate to fully venture (Steve McQueen thus turning into a director). The *remake* draws on the iconic power of image and does justice to the “cult images” that conceptual artists used to disdainfully reject.

2) “Re-enactment and restaging.” These two words are quite in vogue nowadays. They are used to indicate the (re)staging or reconstitution of historical and/or artistic events that have left no or few visual marks. Artists complacently use them and do not hesitate to transgress the “redo” taboo, thus taking the view opposite to the sacralization of the unique event, of performance as an experience with no object or commercial value. As the productions often consist of costume shows, art openly flirts with both television docudrama and amateur shows. The interest of artistic performance is determined by its efficiency, it largely lies in its empathetic dimension.

3) “True and false witness.” This taste for reconstitution and the genre of the documentary questions the notions of true and false, yet without dramatizing any issue (the issue of “revisionism” is hardly raised). The frantic consumption of archives results in a form of aesthetics, in which the status of the documents gathered, be they authentic or not, remains deliberately indistinct. Every historical, social and artistic field is potentially open (again) for viewing, since every past event is likely to be turned into a new element.

4) “Dramatization of the image.” Today’s art world is so comfortable with the spectacular dimension of its production that it recovers the whole theatrical system, not only through installations similar to sets, but also through every penetrable (at least mentally) form of image, designed as a device to be operated so as to produce fiction. Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley develop spaces in which the spectator can venture like a theme park visitor. Specters haunt the images of Yan Pei-Ming, Peter Doig, Marlene Dumas, Andro Wekua... On the opposite, the ghostly effigies, puppets and mannequins *rush* in the works of Maurizio Cattelan, Ron Mueck, Charles Ray and Annette Messager... While interactive staging seems to drive contemporary art in opposite directions (occultism on the one side and carnival on the other), both

still allude to the appearance/disappearance of bodies and objects and make more or less fictional situations exist within a concrete space, according to active methods enthralling the spectator.

5) Entitled “Mythologization of the image,” the fifth chapter serves as a conclusion. It shows that the image characterizing the contemporary production of art is in constant “genesis.” All the more “haunted” as it is rudimentary, the image constitutes a false promise. Nowadays, many artists are (re)turning to minimal art forms, reenacting the codes of *Arte povera*, for instance. However, the images created by these neo-minimalists do not have the status or the ambition of their predecessors, as demonstrated by their poetic titles which aim to *enchant* them and convey more than they show. A telltale sign of this mythologizing and mystifying trend, artists such as Peter Doig and Steven Shearer presently revisit the post-romantic period (Nabi, Symbolism). As well, artists who come from countries that have not experienced the modernist revolution (China, for instance) “cannibalize” both their own culture (socialist realism and traditional forms) and Western standards.

In today’s context, Catherine Grenier’s book is of particular interest to anyone without ideological prejudices and interested in the *spectacular* aspect of the contemporary artistic phenomenon. Determined by their close relationship with the image, fine arts now flirt with models taken from the realms of theater and cinema, although it is impossible to predict what will become of this new trend in the future. The privileged place of images in the current production delineates the contours of an era falling within what is still called “contemporary art” in the 21st century. One cannot blame the book for its all-encompassing aim (with expressions such as “what *all* of the works we have mentioned show...”). With the making of the history of the present comes the risk of one being blind and missing what Deleuze would call “escape lines.” The overall coherence achieved by the book is still related to a *period* in contemporary art. It introduces complexity in an un- or ill-defined field. The demonstration is made credible through the ever-astute use of worldwide knowledge, the described phenomena coinciding with the boom in artistic globalization. The book raises an issue though, which is that of the huge number of artists mentioned, with whom the everyday reader might not be acquainted. As paradoxical as it may seem, while the essay strives to gain recognition for the salience of images, the limited use of illustrations (a few dozen small ones) does not allow for the assessment of the case studies given as examples. Of course, the point is not to blame the author for this. However, only an extensive use of Internet search engines will provide the reader—and turn him/her into a manipulator of images—with the additional information required to understand the vast overview provided by Catherine Grenier.