4-2013

Eleanor Heartney: Art as a Vehicle

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We are pleased to have with us Eleanor Heartney, independent art critic and scholar, contributing editor to Art in America, recipient of the Colleque Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather Award for distinction in art criticism in 1992. She has been widely and extensively published on contemporary art, and has lectured in major universities and museums such as the Whitney Museum, the Parsons School of Design, the Chicago Art Institute, the University of Massachusetts, abroad at Korean University, and much more.

ELEANOR HEARTNEY

ART AS A VEHICLE

Interview by LEDA CEMPELLIN
Associate Professor of Art History at
South Dakota State University

Let's start by asking you to take us back to the early stages of your career until you get to New York.

I grew up in Des Moines, which is a small but progressive city in Iowa, with an excellent art center. I took a lot of art classes, and I even considered at one point becoming an artist. Because I was also into philosophy, literature, and other disciplines, I got a Master's in art history from the University of Chicago, thinking that maybe this was a good preparation for museum work. I never thought about being a critic until I moved to Minneapolis. I lived there for a couple of years, and that's where I got involved in writing about art, by looking into the regional contemporary art scene. I was also in contact with the New Art Examiner, a publication based in Chicago I did quite a bit of writing about art. I realized that just wasn't enough to live on, and also I wanted to know more. In 1983, some friends were moving to New York; I decided to go, too, because I had a place to stay, and then I gradually worked my way into the New York art world. It is exactly thirty years now.

Would you like to expand on your editorial role in Art in America, and how your art criticism benefits from that?

I am involved with magazines like Art in America in the US and Art Press in France. It is writing for those publications that keep me on the edge of what's happening. I think there is a difference between being an art critic versus an art historian, because you really have to stay aware of what's going on and try things before there is consensus about them.

Let's think at your book Art & Today: in your perspective, what is the main function of art nowadays? What is your thought process on art criticism, how do you make all these thematic connections that are in the book?

You are right, I tend to think thematically. What interests me about art is that it is a way of understanding larger issues in the world. For me, a lot of times it starts from something outside in the world, and artists respond to the world. If it an issue that is important in our culture and has been dealt with by writers, political thinkers, musicians, there should be artists working on it as well, and often from a very interesting viewpoint. Because contemporary art is so diverse now and has so many different threads and narratives, I organize my thinking around some of the larger ideas that are important in the world, and how artists have a way to help us understanding that idea.

One of the themes you are approaching in a future project deals with relationship between art and religion: what is the thread of your reflection?

My favorite project is the one I feel least appreciated, a book that I wrote about Catholicism and contemporary art titled Post-Modern Hierarchies. It was published about ten years ago by a little publisher, Mid March Arts Press. Besides Amazon, the book does not have a wide circulation, but it had a bit of cult following, because it is a topic of great interest to people.

The book project came out of my observations during the cultural wars of the early Nineties, when most of the cases that were getting into trouble politically in the United States came from Catholic backgrounds. For many years through the Modern and the Postmodern periods, there has been this assumption that religion and art have nothing to do with each other, that artists if anything are anti-religious. It is much more complicated relationship and that's what the book is about. Catholicism are much more interested in issues of the body and sexuality and they express them in ways that tend to be seen as transgressive. That's why people like Mapplethorpe, Serra, Finley, Coover got into trouble. It is a topic I am coming back to. My next project is on book on art and the apocalyptic imagination, which is about the larger notion of the world coming to an end. Artists such as Keith Haring, Matthew Ritchie, and Roget Brown, to make just a few examples.

How has art criticism changed these last years, and what do you suggest to young people who want to approach the profession of art critic?

I came to realize that you are an art critic by writing about art. An important aspect of the current crisis in art criticism is that with the proliferation of different formats, from blogs to online magazines, it is becoming less and less likely to get paid for your writing. The old-fashioned magazines still do that, but the new ones don't, and this creates a real problem for young people. You can't think about writing as a way to make a living, but one aspect of the larger picture. Start your own magazine or exhibition space or public program. Right now the system is in disarray, with so much art, so many voices, so many places where people are commenting on art. For young people, it's an opportunity to recreate the system, because the system is now in flux.

Just because that's the way it was always done, it does not mean it will be done that way in the future, so you have to think about it in different ways.