

Introduction

Thierry Dufrêne & Peter J. Schneemann

“My art history has always been reactive. Its enemies have been the various ways in which visual imagining of the world has been robbed of its true humanity”, wrote Timothy J. Clark in *The Sight of Death*. In this book, dedicated to Poussin, the art historian claimed that in the former part of his career, “the argument was with certain modes of formalism, and the main effort in [his] writing went into making the painting fully part of a world of transactions, interests, disputes, beliefs, ‘politics’”¹. But, later in his career, he came to the belief that the enemy was “the parody notion we have come to live with of its [art’s] *belonging to the world*”, being a practice “at any tawdry ideology’s service”².

In this issue of the *CIHA Journal*, the reader will find diverse forms of engagement by artists and art historians on several matters and issues, with conflicting interests and solutions. Acting as an art historian (writing art history, teaching it, collaborating to make it more inclusive, more complex) is always an engagement. From the simple conversations between peers, between students and teachers, to the international research program and network, engagement is at stake.

When you open *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms* by Edward Lucie-Smith³, you read “engagé — See ART ENGAGE”, but when you refer to ‘art

1 Timothy J. Clark, *The Sight of Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 122.

2 Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 122.

3 Edward Lucie-Smith, *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 75.

engagé' after Art Autre (Fr. 'Other Art'), Art Brut (Fr. 'raw art') and Art Deco, you jump to 'Art for Art's Sake' ('L'Art pour l'Art'). It seems there is no place for engagement! Lucie-Smith simply forgot the term. If you rely on John A. Walker's *Glossary of Art, Architecture and Design since 1945* (1973), 'L'Art engage' means L'Art dirigé and is clearly linked to post-war years.⁴ Nothing close to "Engagement" can be found in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff's *Critical Terms for Art History* (1996–2003), despite the fact that Gender / Identity / Gaze / Beauty / Ugliness / Value are all accounted for. Reading the texts gathered in this first issue of the *CIHA Journal* on the topic of engagement, it seems clear that the aim for art historians today is the responsible interconnection that art has always promised.

When we launched this issue on the theme of engagement, we had only one request: that contributors offer an expression, a word, which would be the basis for reflection — a "conversation piece", to borrow the excellent expression used by Dan Karlholm. Though we suggested some of the terms, the majority were sent to us by the contributors (sometimes neologisms, or expressions diverted from their usual meaning). This is why our introduction has all the freedom of discovery: it is a reaction to proposals that have modified or enriched our point of departure. We could highlight two 'themes' in this issue: speaking out (and the tension between speaking out and then doing something... or nothing) and collectivity — the tension therein between the individual and the collective (something important to art history, despite all the protestations and all the work to deconstruct this myth). In the framework of the emergency (which we all know very well), we could also focus on 'attitude' — an openness, a willingness to engage with difficult questions that cannot be, finally, answered.

The articles are of two main types. The first type analyzes the artists' commitment; the second, the commitment of the art historians themselves, in relation to the artists and to their own writing practice. In some articles, however, the two types meet: when our contributors have reflected on the art of

⁴ John A. Walker, *Glossary of Art, Architecture and Design since 1945* (London: Bingley, 1973), 34.

collectives. Here, the art historian is just one speaker among many. We decided to divide the texts into two parts for the convenience of reading. The first part includes contributions that focus on action-oriented terminology, that examine and question its modalities. The second part includes texts that respond to an urgency, that are constructed in resonance with an injunction to react, “as if willed elsewhere”⁵.

The proposed texts testify to a committed perspective that unites a critical attitude and the passage to action. This does not mean that the critical attitude, preceding the act, loses its importance. Questioning the place of the history of art in the exclusively human sciences, besides anthropology, our contributors want to resituate the history of art within the sciences in general, to approach questions related to the *Longue Durée* (long term). Many of the proposals examine transdisciplinary work — artistic and scholarly collaboration — or are themselves the result of such artistic research. Engagement is considered within, and through, diverse spatial scales, and our contributors resist the commonplace urge to make an exclusive, final pronouncement. This is the case, for example, among Inuit artists and art historians, who take into account the specificity of speaking out in and for their community and how this speaking out also addresses the planet.

The artist’s work — the art historian’s work — often constitutes a reaction to an emergency, to a violence, to a controversy, to a situation considered unbearable or unsatisfactory. To answer it appears to some as an absolute ethical requirement — and one notes the revaluation of the Kantian point of view: the notion of an “ecological imperative”.

Engagement is first and foremost a way of speaking out. Not only a way of saying “yes” or “no”, what one wants or doesn’t want, but a reflection on the historical and social conditions of speaking and the way in which one exercises it. Thus, F. Duchemin-Pelletier explores what speaking means in different communities and what it means to speak about a community that is not one’s

⁵ Richard Tuttle, *Wire Pieces* (Bordeaux: CAPC, 1986), 20.

own. How can different modes of expression and knowledge be considered equivalent in quality and relevance when they do not have the same frames of reference?

Several texts in the issue mention an engagement within collectives: TETI group, Hyperimage Group, a Swiss National Science Foundation Sinergia project, REPSA. This commitment is accompanied by a reflection on the relationship between individual and collective responsibility. How can one say “I” in the middle of a group and, crucially, also *with* this group? How can we redefine the place and the rhythms of each individual in a community of thought and action? How can we preserve the critical independence, the “wander lines” of the individuals and the pragmatism of the action in common (Hyperimages)? This community to come, always unstable and in need of co-definition, will necessarily come from negotiation, which appears more and more essential as regards art in the public space: the inhabitants, the users, determine the meaning of public artwork (Mantoan).

Some contributors underline the importance of committed projects that give a voice to those who do not have it or have struggled to obtain it. If such projects are defined against, or counter, this or that thing, counter-archives (recall the “subaltern”, archivists as Activists, the 2019 “Liberate the Image” manifesto, analyzed by Schweizer), counter-violence, counter-monuments, it is because they aim to overthrow a saturated and plethoric art history, weighed down by dominant discourses, with the levers of new documentation, interested in what was not recorded and judged worthy of memorialization and transmission (a history of the margins of which Enrique de Malacca, the world-traveler, slave of Magellan, quoted by two articles, is an emblem). The analyzed projects have been chosen, according to the authors themselves, because they do not aim at replacing one violence by another (Hildebrandt), one capitalism of memory by another (Schweizer), but, on the contrary, because, by their very openness and the mutability — voluntarily uncontrollable — of their process, they assert themselves as means-without-end, common instruments of emancipation.

The question of strategies and formats of engagement which are discussed in this volume is one of the most interesting aspects of this issue. If the presentation of works within the spaces which preserve them, and in the first place the museums, requires a critical vigilance (Dufrêne), the overflow of the museographic and historiographic discourse in the very places that require engagement (Krieger) is accompanied by a redistribution of the map of the artistic activities marked by both a voluntary fragmentation and by the relocalization of the stakes (Gee).

The art historian finds a new legitimacy to apprehend the questions which concern what Fernand Braudel called the *Longue Durée* by extending their expertise beyond the limits of their specialization and, especially, by experimenting with the competences of the artists — who have explored many formats and modes of expressing their commitment, including the manifesto (Schneemann), as well as with those of scientists from other fields. The art historian is thus led to analyze the impact of the *Longue Durée* on our modes of acting and creating: the notion of “Baroque” which, like the term “Renaissance”, actively tries to destabilize, if not overcome, the established forms of an epoch, a “permanent revolution” (Flanagan); or that of “nostalgia”, surfacing from eras which, such as the colonial period, are like the unconscious that artists bring to light for better and for worse (Radwan).

The relation to the world is at the same time cause and consequence of the activity of the artist and of art historians. This is why there is a fertile tension between the commitment towards others and the world (logic or ethics of the care, of the contract), and the liberation which results, for creative thought, in the disengagement of the self from the world-object, as seen in Chinese *shufa* or abstraction (LaoZhu). Or, going in the opposite direction, a liberation of the artistic and discursive contemporary: learning from the engagement of artists, learning from our resistances, learning from language itself by subjecting it to experimentation (Karlholm). Isn't this what a new symbolic power is all about? To better qualify it, we could borrow the word proposed by Gabriel N. Gee, “transportement”; the old French term translates a double process of displacement, in both physical and emotional space: to be carried away. To engage is to be carried

away: to leave one's comfort zone.

Other words have been suggested in this issue of the *CIHA Journal*: ecological imperative, destitution of violence, nonviolence, *piliriqatigiinniq* (working in a collaborative way for the common good), catharsis, conversation, open access, occupation, communality, panic, multivocalities, re-diversification, *Wai* ("being of non-being"), *Kapwa* (recognition of shared identity) and experimentation, among others too numerous to count. The reader, we are sure, will add their own.

❖ Bibliography

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