

“Contemporary art is the uglification of the world!” An Interview with Annie Le Brun¹

FigaroVox: Your book² opens with these words: “If there is a characteristic of this new century, it is indeed the disposable.” According to you, the world is in the process of becoming ugly underneath the weight of a culture of waste.

Annie Le Brun: It has been five or six years since I began to note how and why the world is becoming ugly, while others were preoccupied with culture and aesthetics like never before. It is incontestable that something has changed since 2000, when I published *Du trop de réalité*,³ in which I analyzed how an excess of commodities, images and information was reconditioning our lives. In fact, we have passed from “two much reality” to too much waste, that is to say, to a world whose own functioning leads to its downfall. no longer able to regulate or control the harmful effects [*nuisances*] that it produces in all domains, whether it is climate imbalance, economic deregulation or the human disasters that result from it . . . All the more so because, in addition to the forms of uglification [*enlaidissement*] that were identified, there have now been added an intensive aestheticization that serves to deceive us about the lives we are living so as to make us accept, by way of denial, the commodification of everything as the only conceivable response to a catastrophic situation.

Q: According to you, contemporary art imprints [*marque*] an anesthesia of sensitivity. Why?

A: Ever since the collusion between so-called contemporary art and finance that began in the 1990s, there has been a gradual investment in the mission to make us witness⁴ the spectacle of the transformation of art into merchandise and merchandise into art, in other words, the violence of money working to eliminate

¹ “Annie Le Brun : «L'art contemporain, c'est l'enlaidissement du monde !». Interview conducted by Paul Sugy, published by *FigaroVox*, on 30 June 2018: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/culture/2018/06/30/31006-20180630ARTFIG00066-annie-le-brun-l-art-contemporain-c-est-l-enlaidissement-du-monde.php>. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! 13 January 2018. All footnotes by the translator.

² *Ce qui n'a pas de prix: Beauté, laideur et politique* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2018).

³ Translated into English as *The Reality Overload: The Modern's World Assault on the Imaginal Realm* (Simon & Shuster, 2008).

⁴ The word used here, *assister*, can also mean “assist in.”

the night of the incalculable. Playing sensation against sensitivity, the gigantism of the works presented isn't by chance. It is a matter of a reconfiguration of perception, in the course of which the shock [*sidération*] that results favors the disappearance of all critical reflection, that is to say, the instauration of a new mode of servitude through mimetic insensitivity. Isn't it astonishing that Charles Saatchi, the architect of Margaret Thatcher's victory⁵ and the inventor of the famous slogan "There's no alternative,"⁶ has become one of the greatest promoters of so-called contemporary art?

Q: We both remember the polemic of last autumn, when the exposition of "Domestikator"⁷ shocked a lot of people. Has contemporary art locked itself into ever-intensifying cycle [*surenchère*] of provocation? And why?

A: Provocation, no doubt, but without anything subversive about it. On the contrary. It is a matter of affirming again and always an omnipotence, similar to that of the "victors." Even better – we are supposed to get accustomed to it and with a brutality that is perfectly in sync with that of a system that is ready to annihilate everything that could hinder its development. In this sense, the brutality of contemporary art has a pedagogical value, whose cynicism consists of physically convincing us that there is no other reality than that of a market-oriented totalitarianism that claims there is no alternative.

Q: On the other hand, the beautiful and the ugly aren't always easy to define.

A: It would be ridiculous to claim to have defined beauty. Diderot wasn't mistaken by making the following clear at the beginning of his entry in the *Encyclopédie*: "How is it that almost all men agree that there is a such as thing as beauty, that there are so many among them who feel strongly about where it is, and that so few know what it is?"⁸ Yet Victor Hugo, evoking beauty as "the infinite contained in

⁵ Charles Saatchi (born 1943) is a prominent advertising executive who, among other things, directed the campaign that helped elect Margaret Thatcher (Conservative Party) in 1979. He is also the owner and director of the Saatchi Gallery.

⁶ English in original.

⁷ "Domestikator" was an architectural sculpture created by Atelier Van Lieshout in 2015; it depicts two buildings interlocking in a manner that suggests they are having sexual intercourse. In October 2017, the President of the Louvre, Jean-Luc Martinez, objected to its inclusion in an outdoor exhibition at the Tuileries Garden. The sculpture was removed and installed at the Centre Georges Pompidou instead.

⁸ Denis Diderot, "Recherches philosophiques sur l'origine et la nature du beau," in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (compiled and published between 1751-1772).

an outline,”⁹ tells us what it’s all about and leaves one to think that ugliness is everything that prevents the appearance of the infinite without speaking of the draft of air that goes along with it. But isn’t this preventive measure exactly what the current commodification of the world is working on, by substituting the multitude of its products for the opening up of any perspective that lies outside of it? And it is precisely to that point that the war I’m speaking of leads and that targets each one of us, without us knowing it. It is an implacable war against everything from which one can’t extract value, and so it’s the totality of our perceptible [*sensible*] lives that are threatened by it. Because I could just as easily speak of a war against silence, a war against kindness, a war against sleep, a war against boredom or a war against dreaming. . . . This is, no doubt, why capitalist commodification has bet upon contemporary art, which has all the symbolic means to simultaneously engage the object, the body and space. And yet it would be too easy to conclude from this that it is merely a war against representation, when representation is only one of the aspects of a protean battle whose range and complexity paradoxically extends to the dissimulation of life itself in all of its domains – art, health, education. . . . It is all the same war against that which has no price.

Q: You write that “No work of contemporary art is presented without an accompanying discourse.” Does this mean that art is less and less accessible?

A: In principle, not at all. The problem is the fact that the denomination of contemporary art involves a formidable hijacking [*détournement*] of the artistic adventure of the 20th century, which, keeping everything in proportion, contributed to an unprecedented opening up of the horizon. The theoretical apparatus that today accompanies every work of art, which is often a cut-rate version of what was invented almost a century ago, essentially aims at short-circuiting all possible meaning, in the name of the “indeterminable,” something that comes straight from the philosophies of deconstruction,¹⁰ so as to ultimately make us believe in the absence of any alternative, in the impossibility of any revolt.

Q: Doesn’t this incorporation of discourse into the work itself render any critique of the work impossible?

⁹ Victor Hugo, “Le Tas des pierres,” a poem from 1901. The whole line is “La beauté n’est pas autre chose que l’infini contenu dans un contour.”

¹⁰ Ms. Le Brun develops this point in another interview she gave in 2018: ‘Language remains a weapon that anyone can reclaim’: French Theory, Sade and Surrealism”: <http://www.notbored.org/language.pdf>.

A: No, [but] it is essentially cynical, because it involves a whole ensemble of protocols, behaviors and postures that authorize an domineering attitude [*une attitude de surplomb*] that allows people to advance something and its opposite [at the same time], with the sole aim that nothing should change. This is the official art of globalization; this is why, with reference to “socialist realism,” I have spoken of “globalist realism,” which has the superior merit of not seeming to serve a particular ideology with its specific themes and slogans, but which acts at a deep level to inaugurate a system of servitude that is voluntary, but also involuntary, if not unconscious.

Q: You show that contemporary art is ultra-financialized. Is an expensive work necessarily less beautiful? That there is an art market, that’s nothing new. . . .

A: If I linger on so-called contemporary art in this discussion about what ties beauty, ugliness and politics together, it is because I have recognized in it a metaphor for, but also a concealed factor in, a new and particularly worrisome mutation. The perspective of enthralled perception [*De perception captive en perceptive*], such as that to which contemporary works accustom us, puts into place a present without presence that could well be the paradigm for the genetically modified reality that capitalism wants to make us accept.

Q: Is there nothing in contemporary art to be saved? Are there artists that you continue to appreciate?

A: Unfortunately, this is not an aesthetic problem. In this regard, when the question is to find out how to oppose the catastrophic course that things are taking, there is nothing [in contemporary art] to be saved. We must remember what Arthur Cravan said in 1912:¹¹ “We will soon see only artists in the streets, and we will have all the difficulty in the world discovering among them a single human being.”

¹¹ Cf. *Maintenant : revue littéraire* #4.