

All About Yve: An Interview with Yve-Alain Bois

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McNamara, Andrew E. and Butler, Rex (1995) All About Yve: An Interview with Yve-Alain Bois . *Eyeline* Autumn (27):16-21.

RB: You're an art historian who openly, even provocatively, declares himself to be a formalist and who still makes value judgements—who says that this is good and this is bad—which is very important to your writing. How does your work stand in relation to cultural studies in art, postcolonialism and the issues of gender which tend to eliminate questions of judgement?

Y-AB: As far as being a formalist, I have learnt not to shy away from this accusation. One of things that cultural studies, gender studies, postcolonial studies etc.—the realm of the “studies”—sought to achieve was to open up a discourse that appeared to be fairly closed. Yet it actually levelled out—in the name of difference—the questions that ought to be asked of the work of art. The questions the “studies” ask are always the same.

This is where I defer. I do not speak about “differences”, but always ask myself, when in front of any art object: what is its *specificity*? When people ask why I wrote about a particular work, the answer is usually because I wanted to understand why I like it. I am interested in something, I want to understand why; that is why I write about it.

RB: Your analyses provide very rigorous accounts of works both in terms of their historical context and in terms of an intricate formal understanding of the work. The question that people may put to formalism is that it is insightful about the work but what can one learn from the study of specific artworks and to what else can we apply this knowledge?

Y-AB: My training was in literary criticism which I studied under Roland Barthes. And that's what he was doing: he was looking intently at the work of art—or of writing. He thought you learnt more by looking at something in detail rather than looking at a huge amount of things.

When I was a student—around the years 1970-72—the first question after any public lecture, would be ‘what is the use of what we have just heard for the world revolution?’ This was always the first question! I was amused by the embarrassment of the lecturer faced with this daunting question. Foucault liberated me of my guilt as far as that question is concerned. He was asked exactly the same question, burst into laughter and replied, ‘Absolutely nothing!’

Today the first question is usually a gender question which has also become quite perfunctory. But what if you are not terribly interested in that issue? Are you to be cast aside? Does everyone have to be interested in the same thing about everything? My rebellion is against such completely conclusive ratification. Barthes spoke of the fascist nature of language; not in terms of what it censures, but in terms of what it obliges us to say. I often feel that the current social obligation of criticism partakes of the same structure.

AM: You're not ruling out those questions though. You said that those same questions had the potential to open up a very conservative field (art history). Do you think those questions have a place then?

Y-AB: Yes, I'm not opposed to the consideration of those questions. What I'm opposed to is iconological readings of works of art. The confusion between referent and meaning displeases me. So as a strategic move, I always considered the referential status of a work of art in the last instance, not the *first*. I think that this is exactly what structuralism has taught me: that the referential meaning is the least interesting part of the signification of a work of art ...the least telling!

AM: In *Painting as Model* you state that you were very pleased for it to be published as an *October* book. I was wondering what your position is in relation to the *October* journal because many of its contributors could be considered contextualist art historians?

Y-AB: Well it depends which *October* people. We are not united. I'm very close in many ways to Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh...

AM: Buchloh is a noted contextualist.

Y-AB: He is more complex than one would think. He's actually a very good formalist critic—when he wants to be. As far as *October* is concerned, it is a journal of different voices.

AM: Yet as you say, a lot of art historians one might call “contextualist”—whether they emphasize the historical, psychoanalytic, socio-political or theoretical—are also good formalists. So you wonder about the way these sharp distinctions are drawn within art history. Still, they are constantly erected and even seem necessary for most art historians.

Y-AB: I don't have the slightest problem with contextualism as an intellectual enterprise. I learn from it, I find it very interesting. My mode of inquiry is to try and understand how the work of art functions—sometimes the context is essential for this understanding.

AM: So it's not all blackmail then?

Y-AB: If I'm not told I *must* do something—it is not blackmail. Then it is a different issue. But quite often I'm told that I should do something when I don't like it or I'm not good at it. Why should everyone do the same thing?

AM: In your studies of Russian Constructivism you always discuss the political elements. You even explain quite well how the formal elements relate to political intentions. Why in the case of Russian Constructivism can you include such considerations? Because the artists *intend* political outcomes?

Y-AB: The artist's intention should not necessarily be a criterion, but in the case of the Russian Constructivists it certainly urges you to examine their work in ideological-political terms. They had very specific ideas about the political function of their work; these ideas evolved extremely rapidly, by the way, and were not monolithic (the relationship that Rodchenko envisioned between his modular sculptures of 1921 and the political realm was quite different, for example, from that of the productivist program he launched a few months later). But all these Russian artists had in common a conviction that their work had a role to play in the struggle for the Revolution, and they thought about it, through many fights between them, better than anybody else in this century. They provide us with an extremely rich corpus, full of contradictions, which would lose a lot of its strength if it was to be “de-politicized”. In a way this is exactly what happened in America, notably through MOMA, where for many years Gabo and Pevsner were the only artists representing Constructivism. MOMA still uses this “de-politicization” as its main strategy: the recent exhibitions of Popova and

Heartfield, which were scandalous distortions, are perfect cases in point. Popova's work in the theatre, in typography or in industrial production was almost entirely absent and she was mainly presented as a late Cubist painter. As for Heartfield, a great fuss was made to display the originals of his photomontages—much smaller than the printed versions for which those collages were intended—but no explanation was given about the job they were doing: which images they were transforming; what was the context of the inscriptions, etc.

Now, a socio-political analysis is always possible, but in the cases of artists that did not themselves articulate such issues, I am not sure that the results are so promising. Social art history is, I think, a very difficult genre that often suffers from a lack of attention to the specificity of the works at stake. One can always make a political analysis of Matisse's work, for example, but besides saying that he was a bourgeois artist, and so forth, or that he partook in the “return to order” during the Nice period, this is not going to carry you very far.

There are, of course, many other possibilities between those two extremes (the alleged Bolshevism of the Russian Constructivists and Matisse's declared apoliticism). Mondrian is a good example—about whom I have just written for an exhibition I co-curated.^[1] For him, the idea of the social utopia was very important but it had been repeated so many times that people never related it to the ways his paintings are made. There is a relationship which is not a direct one and is a very complex one. And that was one of the things I tried to study by looking first at the ways his paintings are made.

AM: Can one discuss these relations without disregarding the formal structures and without conflating meaning and reference, a work and its referent, etc., just as one can in the case of Russian Constructivism?

Y-AB: Without positing a transparent relation between the artwork and reality? Yes, of course. What I'm criticizing in a lot of cultural studies is the lack of mediation. It's a model that says ‘go from here to there’! It doesn't work like that for any of us, why should it be sufficient for an artwork? We don't start doing something bizarre because of what we have just read in the newspaper. No, there are mediations. Things are filtered in a very strange way. An artist is never a polygraph test.

RB: The other question would be: is it possible for art to have any social impact today?

Y-AB: Social impact? I would say no—even for socially-engaged artists. You have very little impact whatever you do. If you want to have a social impact then you become a social worker. Then you do have a social impact. But is it possible to have a *socially active art*? Yes!

RB: Do you think that there is a way finally of reconciling your kind of intricate formal analysis with cultural or contextual studies? Do you think your work is the precursor to doing that sort of work properly or don't you think there is any way of bringing these approaches together?

Y-AB: I think that if you want to write something about works of art then you better see the ways they have been made and the way they function *in themselves first*. On that point I remain unabashedly formalist in the sense of the Russian Formalists, in the sense of Foucault. When they were under fire, the Russian Formalists persisted in arguing that you cannot understand the way a work articulates anything else before you understand the way it is made. Not the way it is made in terms of, for example, which pen is used for the scribbles but in terms of the structures at work. That's why I think a lot of the “studies” are poor. It is because they analyze works in a very blind way.

AM: Is there formalist criticism that you find tedious?

Y-AB: It depends upon what you call formalism. What came out of Greenberg was extremely boring—except for Michael Fried, also Rosalind Krauss but she quit this genre very early on. Everything else is hideous. You know the old tradition that stems from Clive Bell or even Wölfflin: here you have a round part, here a little circle and a dot; your eye goes from here to here, etc. This is grotesque! This is design art history. I can't stand it. Greenberg, however, was never that bad. Yet, he loved (and reviewed positively) Erle Loran's ridiculous book, *Cezanne's Composition* (1943), with the diagrams full of arrows that were later appropriated by Roy Lichtenstein. To find this out was a surprise offered by John O'Brian's four volume publication of Greenberg's writings, and I thought it was pretty damaging.

RB: Post-minimalist art is often trying to destroy the possibility of one discriminating between good and bad—as with Warhol, let's say. Is it begging the question to install judgement again?

Y-AB: I don't know that it is really true that there is this universal disavowal of the notion of judgement. There are very good Warhols and there are very bad Warhols. Even Warhol would agree, I think—though perhaps not publicly.

RB: What would you do with the famous issue of the readymade? Someone like Thierry de Duve is trying to think how you could judge them. This is a strange thing to ask of that work, but de Duve is arguing that the readymades fit into a history of aesthetic judgement.

Y-AB: Thierry tries to explain how he finds the readymade beautiful and thus attempts to fit Duchamp's readymade into a Kantian aesthetic, which I find very weird. He knows very well that it is completely contradictory to Duchamp's desire or strategy. I think he tries to universalize Duchamp's activity in Kantian terms but I am not interested in that aspect of Thierry's work.

RB: De Duve's point might be that the readymades open up the medium of painting to the field of art—they allow the factoring in of the institutional situation, not just the medium, of a work. Now the readymade is unaesthetic—it doesn't allow you to make judgements. There aren't good or bad readymades. They're all the same idea.

Y-AB: You could imagine a bad Duchamp readymade ...if he kept on making readymades. Duchamp, however, was very careful and he knew how difficult it was. There is an interview at the end of his life in which he speaks about the difficulty of choosing an object that is not going to be appreciated for its form and which is not going to become “beautiful”. Duchamp was anxious that people would find the readymades beautiful, which is why I'm surprised that Thierry should so easily allow himself to find the urinal beautiful.

RB: What do you think you would be able to say about Duchamp's urinal (*Fountain*, 1917)?

Y-AB: Duchamp's urinal was an extremely important experiment—almost on the economic level. Basically Duchamp demonstrated that the art object is a kind of pure merchandise, or pure fetish.

RB: Do you think that it poses a challenge to formalist ways of understanding art?

Y-AB: Sure. My interpretation of modernism, though, has a lot to do with the myth of the death of art, or the death of painting, or whatever. And Duchamp's readymade was one of the ways to attempt to finish off painting—which is very difficult. Another was Rodchenko's triptych (1921).

AM: That's an interesting point because one of the ways Duchamp's enterprise is characterized is by the notion of negation. There is a whole mode or strategy within modernism—which includes the Russian Constructivists—of negation.

Y-AB: Well, I don't share the tragic notion of negation of an Arthur Danto when confronted with a row of Warhol's Brillo boxes.^{ii[2]} There are two kinds of negation. The modernist mode of negation was: you don't know how to justify what you are doing, so you eliminate what you cannot justify. This led to many different strategies. The readymade was one of them but it also includes all strategies of non-compositionality which are a standard of modernism—the grid, the index, the field image (like Jasper Johns's *Flag*), chance, the monochrome. All these hyper-modernist strategies have to do with justification, motivation, the eradication of arbitrariness, etc., and this is what we call modernism.

Now the eradication of arbitrariness always implies negation and therefore it implies “death”. If you finally eradicate everything that is arbitrary, then you have killed everything. Fortunately, you can never do it.

AM: In your essay ‘Painting: The Task of Mourning’, you refer to Baudelaire championing the idea of innovation and you suggest that he has a blindspot when it comes to seeing that innovation is also the necessity, or shared characteristic, of the commodity. This is Benjamin's criticism of Baudelaire. Perhaps negation is one way of *not* providing a regular sequence of stylistic developments, of seeking to avoid a parallel to the logic of commodification?

Y-AB: Yes, I think I would agree with that. I think that this was the move of Rodchenko for example.

AM: I raise the point about negation because it refers to issues concerning the understanding of twentieth-century art and its ramifications for the present

situation. For example you were quoted in the press as saying there were four artists in the twentieth-century: Picasso, Matisse, Mondrian and Pollock.

Y-AB: [laughs] That was really something for the newspapers...They beg you for “soundbites” (and this one is particularly banal!)

AM: Quite, though the point is that you could easily assert this virtually archetypal Greenbergian lineage—which is formalist and evolutionary—but how do you accommodate other strategies, including Russian Constructivism and the readymade, which may resist such criteria? which are perhaps more conceptual, even disparate and may not primarily seek essential criteria? These are strategies which certain formalist readings of twentieth-century art have frowned upon and ignored.

Y-AB: Yes, yes, sure...

RB: You'd be running into the same problem as Michael Fried by picking a line and finding that this line is not actually agreeing with the art being made. It's as though you have this model and you just cannot like contemporary art because it does not fit. The difficulty—I'm not saying the *mistake* but the difficulty—of what you're doing is that you are really having to miss out on a lot of contemporary work because it is deemed to be very bad or very simplistic...

Y-AB: Yes, indeed. I have found a lot of contemporary artwork simplistic.

My relation to theory, however, is very different than what you seem to presume. I appeal to, or invent, it, if necessary, when I have questions to ask of something that puzzles me. But I don't want to have a model and then feel sorry for myself because my model doesn't hold up in front of a work. It's not the way I function—I'm much too lazy for that.

RB: In your ‘Painting: The Task of Mourning’ essay, you take up art that is trying to make its own status as simulation its subject-matter. Your essay was quite dismissive of that line.

Y-AB: I know that this line was very serious in Australia.

RB: Certainly. The other issue that the essay raises is that the whole status of art has changed since reproduction. This is another thing that could be said to

disqualify formal analysis in that it is quoted and you cannot actually look at a work of art as an object because it's already its own reproduction. All the works in that exhibition were like that. You didn't engage in formal analysis of those works because somehow it all seemed second degree. You can say all sorts of interesting things about Warhol's work formally but somehow it all seems besides the point in some way.

Y-AB: Yes, but even a reproduction has a form. That's one of the arguments in a recent book by Rosalind Krauss on Cindy Sherman. All the by now totally clichéd feminist analysis of the work never looked at the form. And the form is that of the photograph which is important to understanding how it is made—for example, the way Sherman used the tradition of the cinema shot as a signifier.

RB: What do you make of artists, such as Koons or Kruger, who take the status of art as a commodity today and reflect upon it? Is that a worthwhile topic?

Y-AB: Every work I have seen in this genre in America—the cute commodity art—was a kind of take on Duchamp and less courageous than him. It was also instantly absorbed by the market. You know Jeff Koons, Steinbach—all these artists—I think that Duchamp did it already and better ...and more efficiently. So why repeat it—I don't see the point.

RB: The 'Mourning' essay seemed vaguely pessimistic about the future of art...

Y-AB: No, no, no! As long as people have pleasure in doing art, good things can happen. If it only becomes cynical lament, all regret, then there is not much potential.

RB: You are probably not only a formalist but also a modernist in the sense that you want to see that a new, great work of art must somehow come out of the past. Now most people would agree that even postmodern art is basically modernist insofar as it continues a lineage.

Now the interesting issue is that you want to accept the readymade lineage (Duchamp, Warhol, Minimalism) as well as the formalist lineage (Matisse, Picasso, etc.) Do you think those two lineages are completely viable as future artistic possibilities? Is 'Painting: The Task of Mourning' mourning the end of certain modernist possibilities?

Y-AB: One of the big problems I have—and I'm not the only one, it has even become a cliché to say it—is that I don't quite believe that postmodernism exists. Even artists like Koons whom I characterized in this earlier essay as 'manic mourners', were still within the episteme of a kind of self-reflexivity. They thought they were very sophisticated. In fact, they were very crude because irony is a rather crude tool. And it doesn't go very far. Irony is something that gets lost very quickly in history because it is context-specific. So in different contexts, people don't get it!

Despite all the claims, I have not seen anything that would lead me to believe that a major epistemological break has been achieved.

AM: If one looks at the writing of Greenberg around the late 1960s/early 1970s, he was obviously worried by shifts in the artworld. I guess his argument against what one might call post-formalist trends is that his version of formalism gives one evolutionary, immanent criteria by which to judge an artwork. So that you judge it in terms of what preceded it, so modernism is not a matter of a break, it's not negation...

Y-AB: Sure, he's very continuous. He had an historicist line—he said he only described and never prescribed—but gradually his line became more and more continuous. I recall a statement that always scandalized me in which he says it is only today that one can judge art of the Renaissance, only today can we like Raphael or Leonardo for good reasons. I think this is ridiculous. Greenberg is always trying to erase any ruptures.

AM: The difficulty of this model of formalism is that so much twentieth-century art doesn't fit its criteria of evaluation. Dada, the readymade, most of Russian Constructivism, Conceptual Art, nearly all contemporary art since Minimalism—these are strategies of “negation” only in the sense that they cannot be judged according to formalist, evolutionary criteria. They tend to cut off that possibility of evaluation.

RB: May I come in here and say that it seems to me you make very singular judgements. You say that so-and-so is a very good artist but you don't really know why yet. Now a modernist would say I can judge vis-à-vis Manet and the medium of painting.

AM: So what is the basis of your evaluative claims as a formalist and a modernist?

Y-AB: Usually I don't know and I try to find out.

RB: But against what?

Y-AB: Well, a certain amount of freshness and inventiveness. If you see a work of art that is just repeating an idea, you think what a bore! Knowing when a work of art is challenging is, of course, what you are judging it against.

My tools are very, very traditional and they are those of any art critic. Basically, you have seen more art than most people. That's a first step but it's not the most important. It's a trigger. Then you try to understand why you like something that strikes you. The question is why. That's the interesting point because the answer is different each time.

AM: What about work which tried to defy the imperatives of innovation and development? Can simulation and repetition form the basis of good work?

Y-AB: Repetition certainly can be innovative. This was Warhol's challenge or John Cage's at one point. [laughs] Now it has become a bit repetitive itself!

AM: How do you ascertain when repetition has become repetitive?

Y-AB: Yeah, that's complex.

RB: So on what basis can one say, for example, that Cindy Sherman is a great artist?

Y-AB: I respect her work for a lot of reasons. Fame destroys an artist very quickly today—more quickly than before. If artists are to become famous then it all happens faster. It's a pattern of fame related to the necessity of the market. Up until, say, the 1970s, artists had to plough through and they built up a kind of resistance to the market. Artists today have not had the time to build up any resistance when they become famous. They are swallowed instantly and they die as artists. Cindy Sherman, on the other hand, has been on the “best seller” list for over ten years now and she is still producing incredibly strong work.

RB: As a formalist, Greenberg openly declares criteria for evaluation. Don't you feel that you need some overall tendency to start making your judgements? Your analyses are excellent but people might want to ask why are you selecting these people?

Y-AB: I have much greater confidence in the singularity of a problem or of an art object than Greenberg. I believe that there are such things as “events” and that things emerge, which are singular, out of a larger context. This is not to say that these are transcendent or that they break away easily in any way. I do think that, out of a field of possibilities, things emerge and even violently burst out. To try understanding the singularity of such an emergence, once it has struck me, once it has caught me (more often than not, unawares) is what excites me.

AM: Do you, as the art historian, play some role in uncovering the specificity of the work or does it speak for itself? How would you explain, on the one hand, this singularity of a work and, on the other hand, the role the art historian or critic plays in articulating—even declaring—what this specificity is?

Y-AB: Of course the art historian or critic plays a role in “uncovering” the specificity of the work. He or she uncovers it, precisely, and to uncover it, he or she has to articulate it, as you say—nothing speaks for itself, just like that. Most of the time the idea that “art speaks for itself” comes across as a kind of reactionary, anti-intellectual statement against criticism or art history (this is my only grudge against the traditional form of connoisseurship, which I value highly for all sorts of reasons: often connoisseurs are very dismissive of art history and criticism, but their own discursive skills are quite limited, as if they had declared “forfeit” when faced with the task of explaining why a certain work is more important than others). This is not to say that linguistic-discursive means alone can articulate what is specific about a work. Artists often provide extremely precise analyses of works of other artists, past or contemporaneous, in their own works. On the other hand, a mere effusive appreciation or a quick rejection, which are the usual responses that come from a connoisseur, do not answer the questions (why?, how?, etc) which interest me (as well as most other people). The silence of the connoisseur presupposes the uncommunicability of judgment; my work, both as a critic and as a historian, presupposes the contrary.

Now, when I speak of “the ” specificity of the work of art, I would not want you to think that it is immutable, that it is a kind of transhistorical attribute. Each new reading, each new interpretation of any work of art reshuffles the cards,

discovers new aspects that previously had been left unnoticed. Greenberg, for example, never made much about the fact that Pollock's drippings were made on the floor, while it became an essential feature of his art—and a point of departure for a Bob Morris. The fact is, however, that it is in going back to the material stuff of Pollock's work itself, and in by-passing what had become the standard reading of his work, that Morris was able to interpret it anew. We all have our blindspots: Greenberg could not make much of Pollock's horizontality because his grid of analysis was Cubism, but that does not mean he was wrong in every way (he articulated the notion of “all-over”, for example, and what is most remarkable is that he articulated it through his own gradually diminishing resistance to the practice itself. He did not like the all-overness of Pollock's drip paintings at first, but he understood that this was because he did not have the right tools to read them, and thus he adjusted his tools).

Well, since I'm speaking of Pollock, I'll give you an example of how I work. I stumbled on *Convergence*, a 1952 Pollock, while preparing for the Mondrian show, and this painting fascinated me for its “kitsch” quality: there is a fairly dry black mesh directly applied on the canvas, but above it big splashes of primary colours and of white are poured in and they mix together. In his classical drips, Pollock did not let the paint bleed; while here the red becomes pink, the blue and the yellow even create some mushy green, etc. At the time, I was reading Rosalind Krauss's extraordinary reading of Pollock in her last book, *The Optical Unconscious*, which takes on Morris's insistence on horizontality and offers us the first totally non-Greenbergian assessment of Pollock (not counting the immense heap of Jungian rubbish, of course). The only thing she seems to agree with Greenberg about is the failure of late Pollock. I called her to say that *Convergence* was not a failure and that Pollock was trying something totally different. She had not seen the work for a while. Though she was not convinced by my argument, we both agreed that other works of the same period should be submitted to the “test”. Well, I've just seen *Blue Poles* and now I am absolutely convinced of what I saw in *Convergence*: with his bleeding of industrial orange into silver paint, Pollock is sticking his tongue out at Greenberg's opticality. So my next move now will be to see as many late Pollocks as I can. I'm pretty confident that my intuition will be confirmed, and then I'll write about it.

Yve-Alain Bois is Joseph Pulitzer Jr., Professor of Modern Art at Harvard University, USA. He spoke at the Matisse conference in Brisbane which was held

in conjunction with the Matisse exhibition, Queensland Art Gallery, March-May 1995

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^{i[1]} *Piet Mondrian: 1872-1944*, Gemeentemuseum, The Hague (18 Dec.-30 April 1995); National Gallery of Art, Washington (11 June 1995-4 Sept., 1995); Museum of Modern Art, New York (1 Oct. 1995-23 Jan. 1996). The exhibition was curated by Joop Joosten, Hans Jansen, John Elderfield and Yve-Alain Bois, with Angelica Rudenstine as head curator.

^{ii[2]} Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*; see also 'Andy Warhol: Brillo Box', *Artforum*, September 1993, p. 129.