Genealogy of the Grid

Hubert Damisch

Editors: Your theoretical investigations focus on philosophical questions rather than art historical ones. These philosophical questions should highlight the characteristic properties of contemporary art. How could these characteristic properties be described?

Damisch: I present myself as both a philosopher and an art historian. For I believe that there is no way of dealing with the history of art, unless we pay some attention to theory and indulge into philosophizing about art and history. I oppose a purely historical approach because thinking about art raises issues that cannot be resolved and even formulated using only historical tools. Take for instance the question of how we could still be interested in the art of the past, if art is strictly dependent on its context of origin. Of course, the past is part of the present, part of our own context: but it is not enough to say so in order for us to understand what Marx called "the eternal charm of Greek art". How can a work of art of the past still be active and produce an effect, today? This is a genuine historical question, a genuine question in history. But history provides no satisfying answer to it.

In the past, art had to deal with issues which were of interest outside the artistic field. My interest in the history and theory of perspective derives from the fact that Perspectiva artificialis, the 'perspective of painters', is a typical example of both a historical object and a theoretical one: it appeared at a specific time, in a specific context; it developed through centuries and had a strong scientific and philosophical impact and descendence. Still now, we constantly refer to it as some sort of a model or paradigm when dealing with philosophical issues: recall the way in which Michel Foucault made use of Velasquez's Las Meninas as a frontispiece to Les mots et les choses (The Order of Things). Historically speaking, perspective played a definite role in the development of modern thought. Starting with geometry: for two or three centuries, it seemed that it was the painters who were in charge of geometry, until, in the seventeenth century, geometry made a new start, partly based on, or deriving form the work of the 'perspectivists'. Perspective is a typical 'theoretical object': you cannot approach it from a strictly historical point of view. But it played its role in the making of history, and not only in the history of art, or the history of thought. Today, it still plays an important role as a technical tool in computer graphics.

Is there anything equivalent of such an accomplishment in modern and contemporary art? There may be, but it is difficult to discern. Had you asked people in the fifteenth century what would be of interest for the next centuries in the practice of art, they may well have ignored perspective. I believe that the way in which mod-
ern art actually deals with color is equally important. It corresponds to a new start
that goes far beyond the mere idea of art, the mere idea of 'beauty'. The work of
Matisse and Mondrian provided a new ground for future developments of thought
about color. Something may grow out of this, such as a geometry of color, in the
same way as projective geometry grew out of the theory and practice of perspective.

Such developments already took place in the nineteenth century, when for
the first time color was considered something that could be dealt with in scientific
terms, implying a new idea of science: a science not only of mere quantities, but of
qualities. But a new idea of art as well. According to Hegel, art had lost its 'neces-
sity', and it was up to Duchamp to reduce it to a mere name. A time may come when
instead of playing with the idea of 'art' and 'non-art', we will deal with less nominal-
istic, more substantial views and matters.

Editors: To what extent is your philosophical orientation related to that of a
philosopher such as Nelson Goodman, who maintains that art communicates a spe-
cific form of knowledge? Such knowledge would enable one to acquire a completely
new perspective on how reality has been organized. (cf. your view on perspective
and symbolic order).

Damisch: Art is not only a matter of 'communication'. It 'does things' with forms,
lines, colors, sounds. It produces effects which go far beyond 'cognition'. I have a
problem with Goodman's work because I have been trained in a totally different
context. I started studying with Merleau-Ponty and being interested in Husserl, in
phenomenology. I must say that Merleau-Ponty's teachings were essential to me.
But I always opposed the idea of having to go back to the roots of perception in
order to attain to some sort of a primary relationship with the world, an idea that is
well expressed in Merleau-Ponty's beautiful essay on Cézanne, "Cézanne's doubt".

When I started reading Wittgenstein, I liked his line of questioning, which in
some way interferes with phenomenology, even if Wittgenstein constantly rebuked
it. I am mostly interested in the formulation of questions, not in answers. There are
two Wittgensteinian questions which constantly appeal to me. First, what do we see
when considering a work of art? When looking at a drawing, we can say that we
have to deal with lines, tones, or a portrait. But what do we actually see? In
L'Imaginaire, Sartre maintains that in order to see an image in a picture, one has to
forget the medium. The problem with a work of art is that we have to deal with
imagining and perceiving, both at the same time. What do we see? A set of lines? A
portrait? A man? What does it mean, to see a man on a piece of paper or cloth?

The second question is: how can a concept become part of what we see? Three
tears ago, I curated an exhibition for the Louvre on 'le trait', the trace. How
does a concept like 'trace' (le 'trait') become part of what we see? For me, this is a
very important question for this is exactly what I mean when I refer to the relation
between history and theory: how can theory become part of history? Why is it that

there is no way to deal with history other than through theory?

Wittgenstein's answer to the question of how a concept itself becomes part of
what we see is that it occurs not before reasoning, but afterwards, dans l'après-
coup. And this was enlightening to me. We must not get rid of language or of an
analytical approach. On the contrary, we should go through it in order to find and to
gain access to another level beyond the discursive one. In the same way, psycho-
analysis uses language, speech, a discursive relationship, in order to allow the
unconsciousness to go its way through it. Language does not regress to the uncon-
scious, it provides access to it. The same applies to perception: perception has first
to expose itself through description in order for us to come to terms with it.

Editors: In the introductory text to your exhibition Moves, you refer to "the question
which art alone today seems to be able to reflect upon: namely, how to test the
power of forms to rely upon the same given, the same configurations, the same
devices and the same processes that once characterized divinatory thinking and
foundation rituals." To what does the divinatory in this passage refer?

Damisch: My fascination with grids, chessboards and all forms of delimitating and
articulating, or mapping a space, is in some way archeological. Foucault, as well as
Georges Dumézil, were interested in the archeology of ideology. I am interested in
graphic archeology, and in forms that nearly every culture or every civilization
made use of in very different ways. The grid provides a pattern which is quasi uni-
versal, while at the same time allowing for different uses. For instance the way in
which Chinese play chess is totally different from the Western one: they don't play
on the squares, but along the lines that divide them, displacing the pieces from one
intersection to another. Which means a totally different approach to the idea of
limit, of frontier: you can install the pieces on the edge of the chessboard, which is
incalculable to Westerners, at least to Europeans.

We have to deal with differences, and at the same time with common forms.
As Wittgenstein used to say, form is only a possibility for structure. A grid, a chess-
board, is not a structure, but the possibility of it. I am in search of a genealogy of
the grid. A genealogy that starts with the procedures of divination: the way the
ancient peoples and among them the Greeks played with pebbles and cards, and
how they distributed them in a given space turned into a more or less regular
scheme that led to the use of grid patterns. But what is divination about? Divination
amounts to a first approach, a first approximation to history. When someone had to
make an important decision, he would consult the oracle. Divination meant dealing
with the future in terms of form and structure.

The first museums, the museums of the past, were about the future as well.
In its early days, the museum was meant to provide contemporary artists with mod-
els. The museum was not past- but future-oriented. As far as future is concerned,
history means nothing much to us, reduced as it is right now, to a tale told in the
past tense. How is a young artist to decide about what he shall do in the present context? I would have liked to show in my exhibition a beautiful piece by Bruce Nauman, in which he plays with a set of stones in a quasi-divinatory way, as if he needed to regress to an archaic way of dealing with history. A typical example of the same procedure is to be find in Jasper Johns' early work, in which, according to Leo Steinberg, he used to play with numbers and letters as with pebbles.

When I oppose the reigning practice of history - reigning among artists as well as historians - I do not oppose history as such, but a certain notion of it. What I expressed in the catalogue is that art may well be the last and only place where one can deal with the issue of history, with history as an issue. Politics is out of the question. Economy is reduced to the rules of the market. In art, at least, there remains the question of "What is to be done?", "Que faire?", as Lenin used to say. What is to be done, right now? This is what history is about. But 'history', the word does not have the same sense when applied to science, art, religion, philosophy, economy, or politics.

Editors: An avant-garde artist such as Mondrian relates his project to a future realization of a spiritual and universal harmony. Does such a moral imperative still have an impact in our time?

Damisch: Mondrian was a typical modernist in that sense. But I certainly do not want to present myself as a 'postmodernist'. I dislike the idea of 'post' in general. The use of the prefix is typical for a period when people are only looking at the past, retrospectively. Mondrian was a utopian - utopia was part of his very practice. He has been accused of being a theosophist. But theosophy was a way for him to get introduced to a kind of philosophy, mainly Hegelian. The same was the case with Malevich. After all, one needed some ideological support in order to deal with one black square on a white background ... Mondrian is certainly much more interesting for what he has done in plastic terms than for his ideology, but we cannot simply ignore it, for it was part of his enterprise. We have become so cynical, or desperate, in the present state of affairs, that we do not even dare to confess a nostalgia for utopia. But this does not mean the end of history.

Editors: In your exhibition Moves, you compare the practice of art with the strategic landscape of a chessboard. The concept of moves refers to movement. Do these concepts of moves and movement imply 'development', and if so, to what extent does the 'art historical paradigm' act regulatively?

Damisch: The idea of the chessboard, and the use of it as a pattern in the exhibition, had to do, I repeat, with the concern with history. On a chessboard, one can play different types of games, not only chess. The chessboard existed in India for 3,000 years...
years, long before the same Indians invented the game of chess in the eighth century A.D. It was known in Europe, early in the Middle Ages, when the board was first introduced in the West. It took a certain time before Europeans were taught the rules of chess by the Arabs, but the game soon provided a model for the functioning of society and history. And, first of all, as a model of war: a battle had to take place in a strictly defined space, both adversaries aiming at killing or capturing the opposing king. What does that mean? It means that in order to acquire a sense of history, one has to refer to a delimited space, in which history is to take place. This already corresponded to the ritual of foundation in Antiquity: the founding of a new colony first implied the tracing of a regular grid.

I hold the image of the chessboard as emblematic of the nostalgia for utopia I just mentioned: the utopia of a delimited space in which the game of history would take place and make sense. A space one could be in control of, a game one would know how to play.

Editors: Due to the omnipresent 'postmodern impasse', any kind of renewal within the artistic domain seems to have become impossible. The philosopher Arthur Danto considers a 'Hegelian increase' of the 'intellectual quality' of art as a possible outcome. How do you evaluate Danto's position and how do you view the 'future' of art?

Damisch: The question relates to the fact that projecting into the future is part of history. I appreciate Danto's attempt to reset the issue of the future of art. It is true that Hegel makes no explicit statement about the so-called "end of art": but even if art would go on "perfecting itself", it has lost its "necessity". Toying with the "end of art" is typical of the present state of affairs in which we are no longer in touch with history in the active sense. There is no art without history, no history without art. But it does not mean that history should be turned into art, nor art into history: we are too well aware of the price we had to pay for the aesthetization of politics as well as for the politicization of aesthetics.