

AALST, BELGIUM

RADICAL AUTONOMY

Interview with Arno van Roosmalen by Rahma Khazam



BENOÎT MAIRE. *Le réel est l'impasse de la formalisation, la formalisation est le lieu de passe en force du réel*, 2010. Collection Fondation Kadist, Paris.

RAHMA KHAZAM: *As curator of the exhibition “Radical Autonomy” at the Network Center for Contemporary Art, you contest the prominence of relational aesthetics and socially engaged practices by insisting on the need for art to be autonomous. Could you explain in what sense you are using this term?*

Arno van Roosmalen: I am certainly not promoting the isolation of art — on the contrary, I think it should always relate to society. I mean that

art has to be free from utilitarian or ideological constraints. Nowadays it is constantly being solicited for economic or social purposes. Only its position of autonomy can prevent it from becoming a marketing or educational tool and allow it to contribute to society, which it does by expanding our awareness of reality.

RK: *The artists in the show range from Navid Nuur to Joëlle Tuerlinckx and Ryan Gander. How do*

their very different works relate to the notion of autonomy?

AvR: They have in common that they open up our perceptual frame, inciting us not to take what we see for granted. Ane Mette Hol, for instance, tests our ability to differentiate between an original and a reproduction with her astonishingly life-like remakes of day-to-day objects. In the installations of Gert Robijns and Simon Dybbroe Møller, heterogeneous objects are arranged in spatial compositions — like a combination of words that cannot generate a preconceived meaning and are not part of a common semantic system. These pieces are open systems that generate a new, potentially useful micro-semantics. Unconstrained perception can yield a different perspective on our environment and ourselves.

RK: *This show seems to reflect the resurgence of interest in autonomy and modernism, as exemplified by the writings of Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, or the exhibition “Modernologies” (MACBA, 2009), which examined the ways in which contemporary artists respond to modernism and modernity.*

AvR: “Radical Autonomy” certainly doesn’t stand on its own.

While it references certain modernist strategies, I regard it more as a manifestation of a certain awareness that is shared by many contemporary artists. I see it as being in line with recent exhibitions such as “Chasing Napoleon” (Palais de Tokyo, 2009) or “Absence is the Highest Form of Presence” (Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, 2009), which share an interest in (re)presentation, absence and the complexity of perception.

RK: *In any case, autonomy is not a new concept. On the contrary, its resurgence seems to confirm that contemporary art has reached an impasse in that it is continually recycling existing ideas.*

AvR: “Radical Autonomy” was never meant to be about revival, retro- or neo- approaches. Nor have I ever considered it from the perspective of coining a new concept with which to address the big questions raised by modernism. That would be a rather ambitious gesture, wouldn’t it? I regard it as a reminder of the importance and potential of art that starts from an autonomous position. This is implicit in all good art, but in these times it is necessary to make it explicit.