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Is Modernity our Antiquity ?

« The destructive impulse in Baudelaire is never interested in the abolition of what it bears upon. »

Walter Benjamin, *Passages*.

When invited to contribute to our conference, I was struck by the resonance of its theme with the first of three questions around which the German curators of the Documenta 12 in Kassel organized their exhibition in 2007. This question was : *is Modernity our Antiquity ?*

By suggesting such a framework of reflection to dozens of journals around the world, the curators¹ tried to offer a common ground for a worldwide interrogation on Modernity. But they also acted in a very European way, as I will shortly try to demonstrate. For in comparing the contemporary status of Modernity to the one obtained by Antiquity in the European past, they indeed emphasized the role that Antiquity played in the foundation of what we still call Modernity, or else Modern times². The exact moment, however, when Antiquity began to shape Modernity was undecided, paving the way for multiple answers to the question posed, and multiple meanings for the concepts in discussion. I would like today to address some of the issues raised by this question, as it embodies a good

¹ Roger Buergel and Ruth Noack, with the help of Christoph Schöllhammer, who was in charge of the editorial project. See *Documenta Magazine n° 1, 2007. Modernity ?*, Taschen, Cologne, 2007.

² Interestingly, the way this set of questions was publicly disseminated - an open call for papers - recalls the kind of competitions organized during the 17th and 18th century by European Academies, for dissertations around a set theme or question, with a winning prize.

number of the contradictions we associate today with Modernity.

1. 1. For what do we ask when we ask: *is Modernity our Antiquity* ? Do we think of the *Temps modernes* which started in Europe with the High Renaissance and Classicism, when, prompted by new scientific discoveries, Europeans started to compare themselves, often quite favorably, to Greek and Roman Antiquity ? Are we more strictly bound to the concept of Modernity first brought into regular use in the French language by Baudelaire, around the mid-XIXth century³ ? Or to its Romantic roots in the attempt to come to terms with the French Revolution, and with the advent of the Industrial Age ? Do we mean Modernism, a concept closely associated with the arts and design, and developed in the first half of the XXth-century ?

As we see, Modern times, Modernity and Modernism, even though all built upon the adjective *modern*, carry multiple meanings and problems. But they do possess something in common : *a repetitive structure which underlies any use of the category of the modern.*

1. 2. Within this structure, being modern implies entering a relationship of rivalry with the past - whether in one's favor or not. Indeed, the reference to Antiquity started, in the late Middle Ages, with a distinct inferiority complex towards Greek and Roman Classicism, and an attempt to revive and if possible equal this lost moment. This endeavour is best summarized in the term *Renaissance*, with its implications of

³ Balzac, Chateaubriand and Théophile Gautier all used the word *modernité*, but it is Baudelaire who definitely puts it on the map with his 1863 essay entitled *The Painter of Modern Life*. On the history of the word in French literature, see the remarks of Claude Pichois in Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, II, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, Paris, 1976, p. 1418-1420.

being *born again*. In this worldview, one could achieve at best a complete, fulfilling revival of something *which had already happened once*, and whose perfection could not be surpassed.

It is as a foil against this cap imposed upon the possibilities of the present that the category of *Modern* was invented. *Modern* indicates that which is « very recent, contemporary, new⁴ », as opposed to the ancient. But the ambiguity of the term is emphasized by the fact that the term *ancients* quickly came to mean a *partisan or follower of the ancients*⁵. Accordingly, *Modern* are those who care above all for the present, independently of any reference to - and often reverence for - the past. *Ancient* are those who feel bound by the necessity to re-produce something which once existed, so as to redeem now and again the values it was once associated with.

Another feature uniting the Modern Age, Modernity and Modernism is the restricted historical meaning given to the concept of Antiquity. Antiquity was actually construed as the six centuries that separate the birth of Athenian Classicism and the collapse of the Roman Classical Age, to the detriment of any other existing culture, considered either too early, too late or too remote to belong to the picture. In the case of Modernity and Modernism, Antiquity may even encompass the « modern ancients » who, more recently, pointedly tried to reproduce Antique values and shapes, in contrast with « purely modern » forms of thought. But its core concept remains solidly located, geographically within the Northern Mediterranean area, and chronologically, within the period just mentioned. Antiquity, therefore, consists of a limited set of cultures entertaining a privileged relationship with

⁴ Interestingly, the word comes from Late Latin. It was thus coined at a time when the classical past was beginning to be perceived as irretrievably lost.

⁵ This happens in the late XVIIth and XVIIIth century, with the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*. See for instance Charles Perrault's *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes* (1688-1696).

whatever present it needs to be linked to. This privileged relationship calls for a renewed symbiosis with it - a symbiosis always threatened by the passing of time and the impossibility of identical repetition ; or it calls, on the opposite, for a resolute, « barbarian » break with the authority of the past.

1. 3. Applying this structural model to our relationship to Modernity sounds very much like a paradox. How could Modernity possibly take the very place long occupied by Antiquity ? And even allowing for that novel kind of equation, then what *x* will become the structural equivalent of Modernity in the original equation ? Post-modernity ? Postmodernism ? The very way these expressions were forged demonstrates their continued allegiance to what they supposedly distance themselves from. Modernity here provides all the positive content, while the prefix *post-* mostly indicates our dissatisfaction with previous ways of defining the Modern.

At the same time, the very possibility of posing this question *does* imply the existence of a divide - if nothing else a chronological divide. Indeed, the concepts of Post-modernism or Postmodernity, questionable as they are, do acknowledge the problematic relationship that we entertain today with a Modernity no longer identified with progress, with the inevitability of certain forms of life, political organization or art and design.

From that point of view, the question asked by the Documenta curators sounds more and more like a suggestion : we *may* have become *rivals* with Modernity, just as the Moderns once became rivals with the Ancients, in order to define themselves as Moderns. Is Modernity then something we need to duplicate or revitalize, just as the Modern Age attempted to duplicate or revitalize Antiquity ? And is Modernity today

just as dead as Antiquity, that it needs to be brought back to life ?

To investigate these questions, I would like to go back to Baudelaire's historical positioning of Modernity.

II

2. 1. In his essay *The Painter of Modern Life*, Baudelaire defines beauty as the composition of « an eternal, invariable element, whose quantity is excessively difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element, which will be, if you like, by turns or all together, the era, its fashion, its morals, its passions⁶. » In this definition, « modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable⁷. » But, even though located in the most transient aspects of contemporary life, **modernity**, far from being confined to this domain, **becomes part of a dynamic relationship between present circumstances and eternity**. It is the unique element, within these transient aspects, which links itself to history, i. e. cannot be replicated. To present this element is the task of the painter, who will « [extract] from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope, to distil the eternal from the transitory ». Modernity, then, consists in whatever element, pertaining to the current flowing of life, is deemed « worthy of becoming antiquity ».

2. 2. **Hence for Modernity, Antiquity is a becoming, not a given fact**. It is not just *pastness*, but what specifically gives *dignity* to *modernity*, and the result of a methodical

⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), « I. », translated by P. E. Charvet, Viking, p. ?

⁷ *Ibid.*, « IV. Modernity », p.

extraction process. **The artist will thus explore Antiquity for its procedures**, as opposed to trying to replicate its « decorative » baggage : costumes, body attitudes, i. e. all the trappings of Academic Art. For in doing so he (or she) would renounce *the present as such*.

Indeed, circumstance alone makes the singularity of each present. Consequently singularity belongs to history, i. e. to a train formed by circumstances as such⁸. Because of the transient, fugitive nature of these circumstances, this train would resist its capture, but for the extraction process performed by artists, and their giving a stable, sustained form to the fugitive materials they extract.

In this process, where do Modernity and Antiquity stand ? As noted by Walter Benjamin, **Modernity is essentially a form of energy, geared towards capturing the present as such**⁹. But this energy is simultaneously geared towards « *immediately appropriating Antiquity* », i. e. towards converting the fugitive present into retrievable traces¹⁰.

The ambiguous role played by Antiquity and Modernity thus follows from the dual nature of their concepts. On one hand *Antiquity refers to a set of traditional procedures, and Modernity to an energy geared towards extracting the originality of the present*. On the other hand, *Antiquity is also a dead historical moment, defined by a set of forms and attitudes which cannot be repeated - and should not be*

⁸ See for instance : « *Such and such a nose, mouth, forehead, will be standard for a given interval of time, the length of which I shall not claim to determine here, but which may certainly be a matter of calculation.* », IV, p.

⁹ « *The pleasure we derive from the representation of the present is due, not only to the beauty it can be clothed in, but also to its essential quality of being the present.* » I, p.

¹⁰ See Walter Benjamin, *Passages* : « *It is very important that the Modern in Baudelaire appears not only as the mark of an era, but also as an energy thanks to which this era immediately appropriates Antiquity for itself.* » , p. 253-54 in the french translation.

revived : a pile of dead, ruined singular forms from a peculiar set of past circumstances. Modernity, conversely, will be characterized by the specific intensity of its involvement with present circumstances, i. e. by a peculiar speed or rhythm, which it does not share with any other historical period. This rhythm makes it original in an absolute sense, as demonstrated by photography, the most typical invention of Modernity, because it « immediately » converts *current* into *past* circumstances.

Indeed, **photography offers a sort of material synthesis for the seemingly contradictory energies which constitute Modernity : its intense involvement with the present and circumstance, on one hand ; its willful appropriation of Antiquity, on the other.** For not only do many of photography's subjects belong to the fugitive and the transient. Its technical apparatus declares its ambition to record fleeting circumstances, and make them into future antiquity.

2. 3. The triumphal march of photography, and later of all forms of media, graphic or acoustic, aimed at *recording circumstances*, has entailed an exponential increase in the *availability* of these circumstances. In turn, this availability has given new emphasis to their handling as such, and to its unique potential for capturing *epiphanies*¹¹. But in the very act of *recording* what passes and will not come back, circumstances become dead, inert traces. They acquire the consistence of Antiquity, **now projected not as a traditional set of procedures, but as a massive, evergrowing pile or heap of ruins.**

Modernity's most fruitful definition may then very well consist in its unprecedented effort to record every possible circumstance, and to record it as « immediately » as possible.

¹¹ On the concept of *epiphany*, see James Joyce.

Modernity is the Age that would at once transform everything that happens into *manageable ruins*.

If the *tabula rasa* sought by Modernist vanguard movements was once rightly construed as a willful effort to forget, deny or cancel the authority of the past, the larger reality of Modernity then, seen from our vantage point, appears more and more as a monstrous project of *total recall*, to quote the title of a famous Hollywood sci-fi movie¹². *Everything should be converted to ruins, as swiftly as possible, so as to be stored for future remembrance*¹³. **What I will call the photographic transaction thus best embodies Modernity as such.**

Accordingly, we may provisionally give a positive - and very factual - answer to our original question. **Because of the nearly instant conversion of circumstances into ruins achieved by the modern media, the materials of Modernity have indeed substituted older materials as the stuff of Culture, i. e. as potential materials for the operations of collective remembrance. Modernity IS our Antiquity.**

But the problem does not end with this acknowledgment. If we agree with the idea that Modernity produces « instant ruins » in order to better remember *later*, then we are faced with a new problem. ***What to do NOW with this growing pile of recorded materials, whether in terms of use or in terms of mere material maintenance ?***

And here another meaning of Modernity comes up : that of Modernity as another traditional set of values and procedures, aimed at dealing with the situation brought about by the photographic transaction ; a set of values - named Modernism - whose elaboration replaced the « antique » set, founded on

¹² *Total Recall* (1990), directed by Paul Verhoeven.

¹³ The recording of circumstances triumphs over Imitation and selective Abstraction, the two leading concepts which organized the Fine Arts from the XVIth to the XVIIIth century, i. e. during Modern times (as opposed to Modernity).

Imitation, which had long dominated European artistic and intellectual production.

Now that this « new » set of values has in turn been subjected to the photographic transaction ; now that, recent as it may be, it also appears to us as a ruin, does it still generate potential sets of values ? Has it become « our Antiquity », or is it just another monumental field to be mined for fragments ? And if Modernism now functions as a ruin, a dead pile of circumstances, what principles should organize this mining activity ?

III

3. 1. I would like to argue that, in the process just described, Modernism (i. e. Modernity as a bearer of original values) has lost the kind of *territorial exclusivity* once attached to the relationship of Modernity to Antiquity. **Historicity has by now spread everywhere, and the entire historical past provides potential materials for the photographic transaction.** Hence the *rivalry-with-the-present*, once the exclusive domain of Modernity and Antiquity, now potentially extends to any moment and place in history, singled out according to the reigning power of fashion, i. e. of the present in its most fleeting dimension. As a consequence, **Antiquity and Modernity are now but two local segments or provinces in the vast and widely unmapped Empire of the past.**

The Viennese art historian Alois Riegl first described this situation at the beginning of the XXth century. A new attitude towards the past is at work in modern societies, which forgoes history for the benefit of a generic aesthetical

pleasure taken in the present existence of past items. This attitude relies on an *Age-value* entirely different from the *Historical* or *Artistic values* which previously governed the relationship of the present with the past. *Historical* and *Artistic values* implied both maintaining the integrity of the object under consideration, and gaining a knowledge of its circumstances. *Age-value*, on the opposite, works with fragmentary traces and comes into play without requiring any historical knowledge¹⁴. *Age-value* thus implements a *de-hierarchization* of the past which allows for potential revivals, without any preset limits, and on the basis of an immediate aesthetic *rapport* with its residues. Because of this, *Age-value* is characterized by the arbitrariness of the moments that the present chooses to revive. As a matter of fact, choosing *this* period rather than *that* one, as a foil or mirror, now becomes for each particular present a major element of definition, as attested by historical fashions, and by the structural relationship of said fashions to nostalgia and revivals¹⁵.

3. 2. The triumph of *Age-value* thus entails two simultaneous phenomena. **One is the growing aesthetic availability of the entire past, captured in its material traces** : the perception that something, shapeless as it may be, is the trace of something else, is enough to make us relate to it, and attempt to save it for future uses. **The**

¹⁴ See Riegl : « It is probably fair to say that ruins appear more picturesque the more advanced their state of decay: as decay progresses, age-value becomes less extensive, that is to say, evoked less and less by fewer and fewer remains, but is therefore all the more intensive in its impact on the beholder... Age-value manifests itself immediately through visual perception and appeals directly to our emotions. » in Alois Riegl, *The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin* [1903], in *Oppositions* 25 (Fall 1982), p. 21-51, p. 32-33.

¹⁵ The recycling of *recent* periods by fashion testifies to the pregnancy of this new structural relationship to the past.

second phenomenon consists in the open series of relations that each present sets up with certain specific moments of the past. These « privileged » relations do not function, as historical science once did, on the premise of coinciding with a past moment. They are now *provisional elements of definition* for a present which has ceased to aspire to eternity, and accepts the fact that its original preferences will, in all likelihood, soon be outmoded.

In this new state of affairs, Modernity and Antiquity do not disappear. Both are as legitimately available to us, *just as any other set of ruins from the past - either far away or recent.* What is gone, though, is the exclusive character once attached to their relationship - at least in Europe, and in what we still tend to eurocentrically call the Western World.

Is Modernity our Antiquity ? It may now be possible to give a definite answer to this question. **No, it isn't** - at least in any meaningful sense of the word - and this, whether or not we are actually interested in the historical periods they embody. But this negative answer, far from being disappointing, bodes well for the fortunes of a wider, hopefully less prejudiced, field of cultural inquiry. It is full of promises and suggestions for unprecedented hybrids, in criticism as well as in creation. Let's explore them.
