

French Theory and American Art:  
An Introduction

Anaël Lejeune  
Olivier Mignon  
Raphaël Pirenne

This book studies the reception of French Theory in the field of American visual arts.<sup>1</sup> “French Theory” refers roughly to the structuralist and post-structuralist thought that developed in France from the 1960s to the 1980s. It gathers authors—to name the most popular ones—like Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Hélène Cixous, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Félix Guattari, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Jean-François Lyotard. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the wealth of works stemming from the human sciences and philosophy encountered in American culture was the subject of several studies conducted for the most part after a series of sometimes virulent critiques against the influence of these authors in the intellectual world, fuelled in particular by the infamous “Sokal affair.”<sup>2</sup> Still, French Theory’s impact on the visual arts is rarely considered as a general phenomenon.

While many works written about artistic creation in the United States have been informed by (post-)structuralism for a long time,<sup>3</sup> the interest in its influence on artists themselves, though widespread and deeply rooted, is quite recent. In his publication on the history of French Theory, François Cusset, drawing from Sylvère Lotringer’s testimony, devotes a brief chapter to this phenomenon, trying to situate its emergence in the mid-1970s, the period in which this corpus became an institution in academic teaching and research.<sup>4</sup> Most of the cases put forward come from certain artistic tendencies that are easily qualified as postmodernist—Appropriationism, Neo-Geo, or Neo-Expressionism—deploying, as a theoretical caution, various concepts elaborated by a number of philosophers (Baudrillard, Deleuze, Derrida, or Guattari). These concepts, whose apparent concision seems to make them easily applicable in practice, and whose sometimes rather unorthodox style—deliberately

1 This project first took the shape of a conference held at WIELS, Contemporary Art Centre (Brussels), May 11–14, 2011.

2 Suffice it to recall works, among others, such as Leme Van der Poel and Sophie Bertho, eds., *Travelling Theory: France and the United States* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1999); Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen, eds., *French Theory in America* (London: Routledge, 2001); François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008)—published originally in French in 2003.

3 See for instance the important anthology edited by Brian Wallis, *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: NMCA, 1989); and Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Washington: Bay Press, 1983).

4 See François Cusset, “The Reasons of Art and the Lunacy of Theory,” *infra* 80–93.

inflected with Nietzschean subversive tone—were able to legitimize forms of borrowing that were, if not offhand or impertinent, at least quite flexible. However, even a quick survey of the postwar American art scene provides evidence of an earlier influence, beginning as early as the 1960s.

Initially, this project stemmed from the desire to correct this first portrait, stressing the precociousness of the connection between French theoretical writings and American artists. This requires a distancing from the generally accepted chronology related to the effective emergence of the identity of a typically French corpus in the American cultural and academic fields. This book is therefore a response to a historical issue, immediately joined by a second one. This precociousness, initially posited as a hypothesis, may indeed be related to the nature of the field considered as a “receptacle” for this French Theory. Despite a great number of artists intent on turning artistic activity into a means for reflection and knowledge, one must remain attentive to the fact that artists are not expected to provide evidence in order to support their propositions. They need not respect the principle of non-contradiction, nor are they answerable to any requirement in terms of results. As Lotringer wrote, while artists are accountable for their works, they are not obliged to answer for the integrity of the concepts they happen to draw from.<sup>5</sup> This freedom, or even a certain deliberate irresponsibility necessarily implied by artistic creation toward rigor and the function of truth, may partly explain the artists’ very early interest in and support of this theoretical literature. From this perspective, the issue of the relation between artistic creation and theoretical thought, of singular, inventive uses and creative misunderstandings of theory, constitutes the other major question of the present volume.

These opening considerations lead us to a final remark, a precaution that is not only rhetorical, but also properly methodological with regards to our subject: French thought does not refer to the same thing as French Theory. The latter term is indeed profoundly misleading, bordering on the paradoxical. Addressing the question of French Theory in America not only suggests we know what “French Theory” stood for in France, it also implies an inner coherence which post-structuralism taught us to be suspicious about, even if it concerned a single text.

5 Sylvère Lotringer, “Doing Theory,” in *French Theory in America*, eds. Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen (New York: Routledge, 2001), 150–51.

These two premises are indeed highly tenuous to begin with. As a number of recent works has attempted to show, the building of a corpus made coherent through this label is largely an effect of its American reception in the 1970s and 1980s. This *détour* allowed the clear perception of a number of adjacent or common issues and methods between these continental authors, centering for example on the influence of structural anthropology, the destabilization of the subject, the debate around Marxism and the May 1968 riots, the emancipation from Hegel and Husserl, a critical reading of Heidegger and Freud, the rediscovery of Nietzsche, and so on. Yet, this label should not overshadow the heterogeneity or even the incompatibility of the approaches assembled here, nor should it cover up the displacements, transformations, and other unavoidable misunderstandings caused by the American cultural and intellectual context in which French thought was received. As Étienne Balibar and John Rajchman recently put it in their introduction to the collection *French Philosophy Since 1945*, the transfer of this corpus to English is not only an issue of linguistics, but also one of intellectual translation.<sup>6</sup> “Were I not so frequently associated with this adventure of deconstruction,” Derrida once playfully remarked, “I would risk, with a smile, the following hypothesis: America is deconstruction.”<sup>7</sup> This is the reason why it is less suitable to speak about exchange than about the transfer and transformations of a thought in contact with another culture. Thus, in what follows, we will reserve the strict use of the expression “French Theory” to designate the concept as it appeared in the United States, with all the transformations, simplifications and deformations regarding French ideas and debates borne by this complex process of assimilation. The expression “French thought” therefore refers to the entire field of thought, irreducible to a unique category.

#### Four Moments

Four moments over a period of more than three decades helped to establish the first landmarks of French thought’s trajectory

6 Étienne Balibar and John Rajchman, eds., introduction to *French Philosophy Since 1945: Problems, Concepts, Inventions* (New York: New Press, 2011), xvii.

7 Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 18.

in the United States in relation to the art world. First, an initial interest in existential phenomenology developed in the early 1960s. This was followed by a somewhat disorderly translation fever that allowed the diffusion of a number of canonical structuralist and post-structuralist texts at the end of the decade and throughout the following one. A third moment signaled the accession of French thought to a form of institutionalization in the mid-1970s. Finally, a phase of withdrawal set in, characterized by the protagonists' awareness of a mutual lack of understanding, and by a wave of sometimes severe criticism denouncing the corruption of the humanities and even of American values by continental thought at the turn of the 1990s.

### 1962: Beyond Phenomenology and Existentialism

Recently invited to report back on the circumstances of his brief passage at the Philosophy Department of Northwestern University Chicago in 1963, artist Mel Bochner evoked the episode that set the university at the pinnacle of the study and translation of continental philosophy in the United States.<sup>8</sup> The initiative came from John Wild, then a philosophy professor at Harvard. During the 1950s he started studying and teaching European phenomenology and existentialism—Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in particular. Increasingly dissatisfied by the dominant analytical approach in philosophy at Harvard, Wild moved to Northwestern in 1961, where he found a more favorable research environment. He founded the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy the following year. A further sign of the times was the publication in 1962 of the first English translation of Merleau-Ponty's seminal *Phénoménologie de la perception*, a text that would influence the American artistic field deeply.<sup>9</sup>

Robert Morris, who studied philosophy and psychology at Reed College in the mid-1950s, was among the first to profit from the French phenomenologist, whom he discovered at the time of the first English translations. Coming from an Abstract Expressionist pictorial tradition, as well as from the world of

8 See "Mel Bochner in Conversation with James Meyer," in *Mel Bochner: Language 1966–2006*, ed. Johanna Burton (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2007), 133.

9 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962).

dance and performance, it would have been difficult for Morris not to be receptive to this philosophy which, founding the act of thought on the act of perception, challenged the old dichotomy between the thing and the consciousness that captured it ("In-itself" and "For-itself," to quote Sartre), a consciousness now encased in a body that guarded it from any self-forgetfulness or abstraction. On the one hand, phenomenology redefined the subject against the backdrop of its embodiment, fating it to an inextricable intertwining—an interaction—with its environment. On the other hand, phenomenology asserted that any sensorial action—expressly the act of vision, which is one of the most articulated sense in Merleau-Ponty's thought—could not do away with the body out of which it arose. Phenomenology cast itself as the description intent on recapturing in discourse the true meaning of worldly experience; it is in this sense that phenomenology was received by the art world.<sup>10</sup> At the time, these insights had an obvious though discordant resonance with the then prevailing modernist aesthetics on artistic creation, based on assumptions about the autonomy of the art object and pure opticality. Phenomenology therefore allowed artists willing to distance themselves from the modernist model to pursue the same formalist path foregrounding the specificity of the artwork, while at the same time highlighting more numerous and complex possibilities for analysis.<sup>11</sup> Morris used it to show how the artwork, and more precisely sculpture, could not be considered independently of the effective conditions under which it was presented to the spectator, conditions that are at

10 Furthermore, one must stress that it is Merleau-Ponty's philosophical writings that have almost exclusively attracted the artists' attention, and not the properly aesthetic texts, though they were made available in quick succession. Besides the interest of the artists in the issues pertaining to perception and the body, an interest that may have determined this selection, there is no doubt that the philosopher's aesthetic considerations, dedicated to a certain traditional form of painting, were taken by the artists as deeply out of step with their own concerns. See "Cézanne's Doubt" (1948), in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 9–25; "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" (1952), in *Signs* (1960), trans. Richard McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 39–83; "Eye and Mind" (1961), in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159–90.

11 "Stylistically different," as Robert Morris writes, "minimalism nevertheless carried forward intact much of the abstract expressionist program. Abstraction was the cardinal rule, and it continued the attachment to a teleological program of reduced conventions as it strove toward metaphysical purity while moving from painting's empiricist-optical stance to what might be termed a kind of phenomenological formalism. Here, the body measured the work as much as the eye. The more haptic engagements with gravity, process, the constructed, and literal space replaced the purely optical." Robert Morris, "Words and Images in Modernism and Postmodernism," *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1989): 343–44. On the same subject, see also Stephen Melville, "Phenomenology and the Limits of Hermeneutics," in *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspective*, eds. Marc A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 143–54.

once perceptual and contextual—or subjective and institutional, as the following generation of artists would say.

Yet, the implications of Merleau-Ponty as well as Sartre's existentialist phenomenology are not exempt from tensions with the general trend in the American avant-garde artistic practice of the 1960s. At first sight, existentialist phenomenology did seem to preserve American culture's profound attachment to the subject's freedom and autonomy by granting it the privilege of meaning—as the origin of truth is to be found in the lived experience, according to Merleau-Ponty—and ensuring full self-determination—the individual now taking on the attributes of a fallen god, according to Sartre.<sup>12</sup> Still, the rhetoric of essence, presence, and origin did not seem to be in tune with the artists intent on doing away with both modernism's existentialism and with the myth of the creative genius as revived by Abstract Expressionism. Morris himself pointed in retrospect to the incompatibility between this idealist and humanist remnant of phenomenology and the issues at stake in his performances and Minimalist sculptures (here referred to as Morris's personae or alter egos, Bobby Bob and Major Minimax, respectively):

Remember Bobby Bob and Major Minimax punching it out, round after round, and laughing all the time? Now, really, Ignatz, did we ever see either of them standing knee deep in Merleau-Ponty? Would they have been caught dead Voguing around in the stink of Presence, or tossing anything into that rotting sack of Humanism?<sup>13</sup>

However, this view must be nuanced as well. While in many respects phenomenology could no longer satisfy artists who successively started to deconstruct the notions of medium, artist, spectator, and institutional space, one must also consider how Merleau-Ponty and Sartre's thoughts were already anticipating some of the themes that are now inseparable from the structuralist and post-structuralist endeavor. Just to cite one example, one should not forget that Merleau-Ponty—one of the first to discuss Saussure's linguistics on a philosophical

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism" (1956), in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 287–311.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Morris, "Robert Morris Replies to Roger Denson (Or Is That a Mouse in My Paragon?)," in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 296.

plane—had already started to challenge the sovereignty of the subject through his uncovering of the linguistic and bodily foundations of human thought. As such, he helped to forge the tools that would be used by a whole new generation of intellectuals to do away with phenomenology itself, many of whom were his own students and friends: Foucault, Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, and so on.<sup>14</sup> One must add that for Merleau-Ponty and Sartre alike, the gaze names the uncanny space of the subject's self-presence: for Merleau-Ponty, the gaze instantaneously teaches the perceiving subject the perspective of the Other. The latter renders visible what remains blind for the perceiving subject, thus exposing his or her own body as it is presented to this altering point of view.<sup>15</sup> For Sartre, the self-capture operated by the subject can only happen through the gaze of the other (the "being-for-others") which reifies it. The subject's interiority is here again defined through a form of alienating externalization.<sup>16</sup> This fundamental intersubjectivity inherent in the gaze is something an artist like Dan Graham did not fail to notice.<sup>17</sup>

#### 1967: The Death of the Author and Other Myths

"Not long ago we used to ask: What is existentialism? Now we ask: What is structuralism? These questions are of keen interest, provided they are timely and have some bearing on work actually in progress. *This is 1967*," wrote Deleuze at the beginning of his essay "How Do We Recognize Structuralism?"<sup>18</sup> Published in 1972, even though Deleuze was retro-projecting himself into 1967 as if to better underline the decisive character of that year, the text has no polemical tone. And yet, the change of direction outlined from the start did signal the passing, the jump, or even the epistemological break—as theorized by Foucault—that occurred between two configurations of thought: existentialism and structuralism. From 1967 to 1972 it took only a few years to soften the tone and round the angles of a

<sup>14</sup> He also referred very early on to Lévi-Strauss's efforts to rethink the relations between nature and mind. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (1960), trans. Richard McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, vi–vii.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956).

<sup>17</sup> See Larisa Dryansky, "Sartrean Phenomenology and Post-Minimalism: On Some Works by Mel Bochner and Dan Graham," *infra* 138–63.

<sup>18</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "How Do We Recognize Structuralism?," in *Desert Islands and Others Texts 1953–1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Mike Taormina (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 170.