

Book Review

Rebecca DeRoo, *The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art: The Politics of Artistic Display in France after 1968*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, hardback £45.00, pp. xii+271, illus. 80

Just as the Louvre was forged on the anvil of the French Revolution, so too the Pompidou Center was hammered out in the wake of France's May 1968 protests. The turmoil of late-eighteenth-century France not only supplanted the *ancien régime* with popular sovereignty, it also converted the old order's wealth into a national patrimony that - through the vessel of the Louvre - made it a compelling symbol of national resolve, civic ownership, and public access. While the May '68 protestors were not quite so ambitious as their predecessors, they did target the most visible of the nation's social and cultural resources for seizure and transfiguration. The convulsions of each struggle erupted from a volatile mix of popular anger and utopian vision, day-to-day humiliations stoked into action by stirring ideas that interpreted causes and heralded solutions. But unlike the wealth and resources targeted in 1789, those of May 1968 were now institutionalized as corporations, government agencies, public schools, universities, and of course museums. Instead of the crown's palaces, there were university buildings, factories, and a museum (the Musée National d'Art Moderne) to occupy; and while the '68 protestors sought to transform society, it was by reforming existing institutions to complete the unfinished work of the first revolution.

Rebecca DeRoo's *Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art* gives this underappreciated but seminal passage in the recent history of museums the prominence it deserves. For here is a broad-based social revolution that successfully challenged the ideals and relevance of museums, 'successfully' in the sense that museum officials of the time accepted the protestors' critiques and strove to reform their institutions. The period of DeRoo's study thus commences with the first stirrings of the 1968 demonstrations and concludes with the French nation's responses, including the creation of the Centre Pompidou in 1977, and subsequent exhibitions in the 1980s and 1990s. Her approach is interdisciplinary, combining the analytical tools of social and intellectual history; and she draws on economic and political as well as cultural evidence to set the terms and contexts of her study. A particular strength of DeRoo's investigation is its joining of the problems of the street with contemporary French scholarship. Her examinations of seminal works by Henri Lefebvre and Pierre Bourdieu in relation to the discourse of May '68 and contemporary museum critiques lend to each scholar's work a degree of immediacy and even poignancy that is lost when read outside their historical contexts. DeRoo enriches her analysis by anchoring what, otherwise, would be a discourse detached from the actualities of display and interpretation with close readings of the work of two of the generation's leading artists, Christian Boltanski and Annette Messager. Various strategies of institutional critique were employed by both artists, Boltanski calling on the poetics of museum display, Messager drawing on the conventions of textbook instruction and advertising culture. By considering curators' deployment of both artists' works simultaneously to show faith with, and to address the perceived needs of, common middle-class museum visitors, DeRoo reveals the complexity and limits of the museum exhibition as a tool of constructive social change.

The book is divided into six chapters. First is 'Museums as Political Centers,' an introduction of the book's main themes provided through brief studies of exhibitions of Boltanski's and Messager's works where curators either misread or elided the works' meanings to assimilate them into broader discourses on popular relevance and universal meaning—even

though, in both instances, such was not really the artists' intent. The second chapter, 'Dismantling Art Institutions: The 1968 Explosion of Social Awareness,' summarizes the conditions leading to May '68 and its immediate aftermath before focusing on issues specifically relevant to cultural institutions including art education, museum practices, and government investment in contemporary art. Third is 'Christian Boltanski's Personal Memorabilia: Remaking Museums in the Wake of 1968,' an examination of the artist's work with particular attention to his collections of family photographs and personal artifacts he fashioned—all mundane, deliberately effaced materials he subsequently presented in museum-like vitrines, wall displays, and even a shipping crate. Chapter four is 'Annette Messenger's Images of the Everyday: The Feminist Recasting of '68,' a study of the artist's work, which addresses the acculturation of women to roles as wives, housekeepers, mothers, and consumers of 'beauty' aides, and is presented through recycled and altered materials drawn from school books, domestic science texts, magazine advertisements, and cinema stills. The fifth chapter, 'Institutionalizing '68: The Pompidou Center,' tells the story of the Center's formulation and construction in a middle-class Parisian neighborhood—ostensibly in response to '68 critiques of cultural institutions' elitism—and the Center's public programming with particular attention to the Musée National d'Art Moderne (one of four cultural institutions housed in it). Chapter six, 'America and Europe Post-Pompidou: Sustaining the Political Mission of the Museum,' concludes the book by returning to exhibits of Boltanski's and Messenger's work cited in the first chapter. But they are revisited here by comparing their varied interpretations in European and American venues, particularly curatorial misreadings of the works, in order to illuminate post-1960s museum-reform efforts and deeper problems of cultural representation adumbrated in those reforms.

Threading through the book are the intertwining institutional critiques proffered by artists and scholars alike which find fullest expression in the work of Lefebvre, particularly in *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, first published in 1968, and Bourdieu, specifically his *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public*, first published in 1964. Lefebvre was a philosopher and social theorist whose ideas, influenced by Marx's materialist history, parallel those of the *Annales* school of social history (epitomized by Fernand Braudel and summed up in his *The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible*, first published in 1979). Lefebvre argued that it was in the day-to-day experiences of ordinary workers, coping with the yawning gap between bare economic survival and glittering social ideals, that the raw matter for understanding and correcting society's failures could be found. For anyone interested in material culture, Lefebvre's ideas call to mind the quotidian residue of daily life *per se*, especially those things where one's humanity is most vividly expressed: letters, photographs, notebooks, and beyond them, the less-personal consumables with which identity is so often devised in a commodity culture—clothing, makeup, and so forth. These are just the kinds of materials Boltanski and Messenger drew upon to examine the formation of their own identities and the institutions through which concepts of the ideal 'artist' (Boltanski via museums) or 'woman' (Messenger via domestic-science texts and magazine ads) are constituted. Bourdieu, an empirical sociologist and social theorist, found that—contrary to the assumptions of opinion leaders like André Malraux—the cultural content of art museums is far from universally accessible. Rather, museum displays and labeling serve in fact to reinforce distinctions already present in societies stratified by class, education, and family-influenced cultural literacy. Assuming this problem stems from the elitist nature and origins of museums' fine art collections, well-meaning curators seized upon the very ordinariness of Boltanski's family photographs and personal objects, and Messenger's notebook pages and constructions, to build bridges to middle-class audiences. The curators believed visitors would find in the artists' works familiar images and sentiments that would, *ipso facto*, validate and ennoble the visitors' own lives—the artists' works would meet visitors where they 'are' regardless of whether or not visitors had received prior cultural training. Instead, however, Boltanski's work just as often challenges museums' reliability as purveyors of truth or could be read as mocking the sensibilities of middle-class audiences; and Messenger is far more interested in advancing a feminist critique of institutional bias in all corners of society, including the middle class.

Although DeRoo's study focuses primarily on French art and its institutions, her methodology and findings are broadly applicable to museum studies throughout Europe and North America. Her integration of contemporary social theory with current events is an

especially useful reminder of the lessons to be gained from looking beyond museum-practice literature to the broader conditions that shape cultural institutions and the ideas of leading scholars articulating the social expectations institutions hope to address. Students of museum practice and theory, as well as those investigating the history of museums, will find DeRoo's book to be both a model of rigorous scholarship and an indispensable source on a seminal moment in twentieth-century museum history.

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