

DISCREPANT CRITICISM. INTERVIEWS ON ART AND CURRENT
THOUGHT (2000-2011)

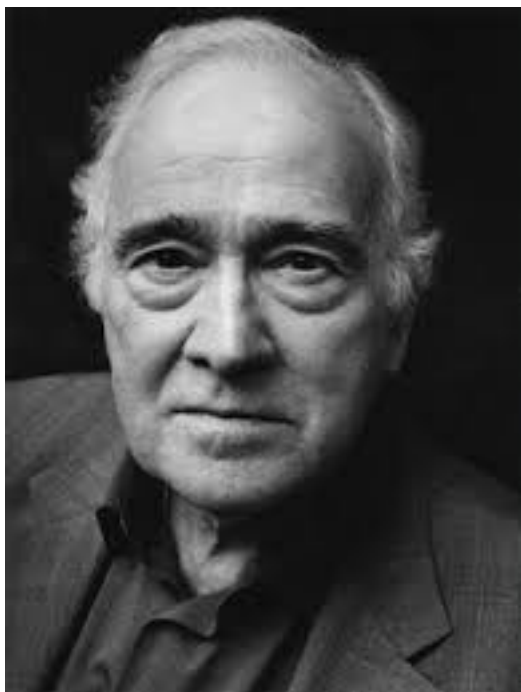
**INTERVIEWS with Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh,
Douglas Crimp, Thomas Crow, Arthur Danto, James
Elkins, Hal Foster, Serge Guilbaut, Rosalind Krauss,
Donald Kuspit, Lucy Lippard, Griselda Pollock**

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¹ Spanish versión: Anna Maria Guasch, *La crítica discrepante. Entrevistas sobre arte y pensamiento actual (2000-2011)*, Madrid, Ensayos de Arte Cátedra, 2012. ISBN:: 978-84-376-3066-3.

DONALD KUSPIT²

(2000)

Donald Kuspit, an Art History and Philosophy professor at the State University of New York in Stony Brook, assiduous collaborator of numerous specialised art magazines such as *Artforum*, *Sculpture*, *New Art Examiner* and *Art Criticism*, and editor of the American Art Criticism collection from Cambridge University Press, has recently published two very interesting and somewhat polemic books entitled *The Dialectical of Decadence* and *The Rebirth of Painting in the Late Twentieth Century*. These are books that can be inscribed within a vindication of the artistic, visual and subjective experience of the creative act beyond theoretic oppression and of those who defend a new sociology of art linked to the ideological, deconstructive or “hard line”. Kuspit was awarded the Degree of Doctor Honoris Causa by the Davidson College (1993), the San Francisco Institute of Art (1996) and the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign, 1998). Some of his most relevant publications include: *The New Subjectivism* (1988), *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist* (1993), *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art* (1994) and *Idiosyncratic Identities: Artists at the End of the Avant-Garde* (1996)³.

Recovering a belligerent tone that seemed annihilated in the recent consensus situations, in the preface to his book *The Rebirth of Painting in the Late Twentieth Century* (2000), Donald Kuspit not only throws an energetic statement in favour of painting and against those who claim its death, but, placing himself closer to Baudelaire than, for example Apollinaire (a critic who, according to Kuspit, renounced interpretation to become the spokesman of his friends the cubist

² Interview published as “Donald Kuspit o la reivindicación subyugadora de la pintura”, *Kalías. Revista de Arte*, IVAM, Institut Valencià d’Art Modern, Año XII, n°s 23-24, 2000, pp. 144-147. The interview is an extended version of the interview published in the journal *La Vanguardia*, August 18, 2000.

³ In 2004, Donald Kuspit published the essay *The End of Art* (Cambridge University Press)

painters), he proposes a new way of critically approaching an artwork. This new model defends the search of meanings and entails a certain ethics since “ painting, just as Baudelaire declared, is nothing more than the construction of an ethics and ultimately of a metaphysics”.

AMG: A statement of principles like this one entails a clear stance among your art critic colleagues. Is this so?

DK: Yes, indeed. I believe that the North American critique scene, which is the one I know the most, is dominated on the one hand by what I call “pop journalists”, critics who quickly focus on what is immediately seen, who lack art history knowledge, who do not have a proper theoretical framework, but on the other hand and contrarily, there is an over-theorised critical discourse that defends the idea of art as an ideological and social construction. This entails the loss of imagination and fantasy. Imagine, for example, that standing in front of a Van Gogh painting I were to say to you: there is no need to look at the object, the theory elaboration is enough. What do you think would happen? Well, among many other things, we would be denying the evocative quality of the object as well as the possibility of obtaining a global experience from the same.

AMG: Then, what role do you think the artist and his work play in our society? **DK:** For me, the artist is, above all, a human being who enables us to penetrate his deepest personal experience through his art. Naturally, the artist forms part of a social environment, but most importantly, every piece of his work is like a declaration of intentions of his human condition, feelings, passions and dreams which further go beyond any formalist reading of the work.

AMG: It has been affirmed in several occasions that you continued on with Clement Greenberg’s ideas, but that “beyond any formalist reading of the work” does not seem to confirm that asseveration.

DK: Well, I was very close to Greenberg and, long before his death, I published an extensive study on his contribution to art criticism (*Clement Greenberg, Art Critic*, 1979). However, I have always thought that his conception of art and his method were too reductive, too attached to the visual and superficially approached the work of art. For me, what is truly important is the symbolic aspect of the artistic work, not so much from a Panofskyian point of view, but rather following the line of Ernst Cassirer. It’s like speaking only of flatness and monochromy in regard to

Malevich's painting "White on white", when in fact, Malevich is an artist dealing with metaphysical elements directing us towards the concept of life and the sublime.

AMG: How can this claim for the symbolic be related with your energetic defence of painting in relation to photography?

DK: I simply believe that after so much photographic inflation, it is once again time for painting since it restores tactility as a communication vehicle. In other words, painting has allowed tactility to become the authentic communication vehicle between mind, feelings and ideas. And from tactility to the symbolic, or, for example, to the erotic as an expression of the symbolic, there is only one step. This occurs with the great painters like Rembrandt and Matisse, but paradoxically not with Picasso, who, from my point of view, is by excellence a painter of violence and destruction and therefore an anti-erotic painter.

AMG: Can we speak of a pictorial rebirth inasmuch as the tactile quality of painting has been recovered?

DK: I think that painting experienced several deaths and rebirths during the second half of the 20th Century. In this way, after ambiguous painters such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg and pseudo-painters like Andy Warhol, the early 1980s saw a rebirth of painting with artists like Anselm Kiefer or Georg Baselitz, whose knowledge came not only from verbal information but also from a sensorial appreciation.

If we traced a history of modernism based on tactility starting with the first Monet, we would see that tact can barely be translated into words and it is here when poetry is reached. Behind tactility hides the entire body and the entire ego. In this regard, and as expressed by French post-Lacanian psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu, we could speak of painting in terms of skin, of stain, as something different from all social identity, as a sort of pre-theoretic proposal.

AMG: You have divided your book *The Rebirth* in two thematic units, which, by the way, are very non-academic and tend to create polemics. It seems as though you were implementing a critical model deeply rooted in Baudelaire's thought: the political, passionate and partial critique. The first part seems to be dominated by your affinities or sympathies. Is that true?

DK: In effect, the first part of the book talks about different painters with whom I feel identified on some level and whom I believe have dealt with the ethical aspect of art: Willem De Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Jiri Georg Dokoupil, László Fehér, Vicente Desiderio. There is no relation among the painters themselves, just an evaluation of the same based on interpretation and, above all, on the search for meanings.

AMG: On the contrary, the second part of the book expresses your phobias and animosities.

DK : Yes, in this part I expose a series of different complaints. Things which, as a theorist, a thinker and a citizen of the art world, make me unhappy and produce a certain feeling of dissatisfaction, of cultural discomfort.

AMG: Could we speak of a certain “culture of complaint” projected in artists like Keith Haring, Cindy Sherman, Nan Goldin and David Wojnarowicz

DK: My complaints do not allude to the artists, to particular individualities; nor they designate quality judgements. They refer more to specific attitudes, to what is represented by the artists, what they symbolise. In general, I'd say that each one of my “animosities” is justified by a triple point of view: the psychological, the phenomenological and the sociological.

AMG: Going back to the artists with whom you sympathise and with whom you feel most identified, what leads you to perceive them as late century art models?

DK: Well, for me, the “good painter” paradigm is that which goes beyond its own irony and beyond the alienation of the avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes. Vicente Desierio, Amenoff, Odd Nardrum, László Fehér, Wlodek Ksiazek, are all names of artists who probably are not present in the Kassel Documenta or the Whitney Museum biennale in New York, but who feel free to follow their subjectivity, their human experiences and spontaneity, without renouncing the impulse to transcend. The main common quality among these artists is that they possess what I denominated as a sense of self in my book the *Idiosyncratic Identity*.