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# **Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art**

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# Актуальные проблемы теории и истории искусства

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For art historians, historians, students and art lovers.

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## THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE ROCHESTER SCHOOL IN THE FIELD OF THE CRITICAL ART HISTORY

From the 1970s onwards art history as the scientific discipline was passing through a very important phase of revising its own methods and tools. From the point of view of the spectator at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, changes of the traditional art history seem very distant, but at the same time very familiar because of their consequences which we are all witnessing today.

For many authors dealing with the problem of changing traditional art history approaches based on the achievements of great art historians of the past and rooted in Hegelian teleological concept of history, art history as a discipline in the last 30 years is in the post-epistemological phase<sup>1</sup>. The attempt to question all traditional values that constructed the very core of the discipline such as the existence of universal aesthetic values or stronghold of historical researches, led art history to this kind of state. Once it entered this room of questioning its own nature as a discipline, it couldn't avoid big and important changes of all those tools that it has been offering during the long period. The product of this auto-reflexive impact on the old/traditional art history was the group of new and fresh for the time when they came into light approaches as social art history, feminist intervention, psychoanalytical interpretations, structural, post-structural, deconstructive readings of art products and the use of semiotics. In the literature, all these intentions are gathered under three umbrella terms – *the new art history*, *the radical art history* and *the critical art history*, depending of the environment where they were rethought.

In this work we are using the term *critical art history* for all new interpretation strategies coming to the traditional art historian methodological apparatus from the 70s to the end of the 20th century, supporting the position of some contemporary authors that this term best suits the group of very different methodological strategies such as those mentioned above<sup>2</sup>.

The main reason for the belief that this is the best term lies in the ability to recognize the same tension which gathers all those different interpretative models to one group confronting the old/traditional art history manners. That tension is a product of the consciousness that art history, as the discipline rooted in its traditional values, was insensitive to the important social changes taking place in modern societies during the 20th century. Instead of that, art history was moved from the system of social reality to the immaculate state of unreal space far from it in which it closed its own nature for the impact from the outer world. Its oculus mechanism well trained only for marking the “great pieces of art” – guardians of universal values capable of telling the story about enormous power of western culture, knowingly failed to catch the other art phenomena produced in the reality of complicated social struggles taking place in modern society. Fallen in deep sleep of its own exclusivity, traditional art history wasn't in the mood to see the art products as the clear social facts and to admit the vindication of that aspect of art's nature.

On the other hand, the “other” art history – *critical art history* is led by the attempt to see the works of art as parts of real social systems. Regarding the problem of examining the very nature of art, it was moving further from the traditional core of its own discipline constructing new tools by applying new interpretative models borrowed from other humanistic disciplines to the ground of traditional methodologies.

*The critical art history* is the term covering many diverse methodological approaches different from those used by the traditional art historians. They were created as the product of employing Marxist interpretation of history, psychoanalysis, feminist criticism, semiotic and structural analysis. The first impact on the traditional art history during the 70s was the use of social or Marxist art history. During the 80s the interventions of social art history were passing their mature phase marking the path for differentiations of some other methods. In the 90s we were facing the affirmation of deconstructive and post-structural critical interventions that were employing the knowledge from other humanistic disciplines as philosophy, sociology, literature theory, linguistics, cultural studies, etc. The most important characteristic of critical art history is contextual approach to art. The main difference among traditional and critical art history is their different approach to the subject they both are dealing with. While traditional art history looks at the work of art especially as the part of art world that has its own laws and principles of existence, the critical art history tries to look at the work of art as a part of a wider social system in which it is produced. Because of that, instead of analyzing only the very nature of art as art (iconographic, formalistic, stylistic analysis), critical art history is dealing with the problems of posing the work of art into its social context and interaction of works of art and contexts in which they were produced.

Also, its main aim is analyzing the ways of representation, producing the meanings, problems of reception of the work of arts etc. Finally, we can say once again something well known in the literature today, that critical art history was created as the reaction to the alienation of art history as the humanistic discipline from the real world. This reaction was inspired by important history events during the 60s and 70s such as radical social protests<sup>3</sup>. The effect of this was employing the idea of context as a complicated cultural, social, political system and the important factor for the production of art works and their interpretation.

Readings of the context differ from one group of theoreticians to another. Some of them see context as the social, cultural, ideological atmosphere influencing the creating of the work of art. In that kind of interpretation the art work is presented as the fact against the context of its production. The interpretation is focused on the recognition, notification of the marks of contextual inputs in the art products. One is guided by the belief that art is the medium of social, cultural, ideological, political systems, so the main task of contextual analysis is to point to the traces of those systems in art. This kind of interpretation is strongly elaborated through the work of T. J. Clark, a very influential author in the field of social art history – one of the interpretative strategies of the new art history<sup>4</sup>. The idea of context as some kind of a compact system that is interfered by the construction of art works and their meaning is present in the interpretations of many authors that were acting in the field of making critical art history during the 70s and the 80s. The different view of the context came to that scene in the 9th decade as the consequence of employing a combination of semiotic, post-structural and deconstructive model to the social art history that was widely spread in the earlier period.

Inspired by the very radical semiotic readings of the context and works of art by Norman Bryson during the late 80s, few American authors initiated very serious debate about the context, working out the adaptation of semiotics to the interpretation of art. Keith Moxey, Ann Michael Holly, W. T. J. Michael belong to the group of those authors who were active at the University of Rochester during the 90s and therefore the group got the colloquial name „Rochester School“<sup>45</sup>. But this term can't be regarded as some kind of synonym for the strict methodological model offered by those authors. Instead of that we can understand it as the marker for the location of fluctation of their very similar ideas about the nature of art.

As they adopted the semiotic interpretation of history as linguistic process they produced very different models of the context. Believing in the semiotic notion that language is a changeable phenomenon, they described the context as unstable system of signs and the artwork as a sign open to different interpretations and depending on different receptions of different spectators, beholders, interpreters coming from different historical moments. Their interpretative strategies were constructed as the combination of achievements of semiotics, deconstruction, poststructuralism on one side and social art history on the other.

The very elaboration of this process can be followed through the work of Keith Moxey, a very prolific writer. Keith Moxey is an American art historian, theoretician and professor at the Department of Art History at Barnard College, Columbia University in New York. He was visiting professor at many American and European universities. His main teaching interests are historiography, philosophy of history, art theory, German and Flemish art of the 15th and 16th centuries. He wrote many books dealing with the recent problems in art theory, methodology of art history and, what is the most important, he was active participant in the elaboration of a new discipline that came into the scientific scene during the 90s the studies of the visual culture or visual studies. Together with Michael Ann Holly, he was co-director of three important Summer Institutes at the University of Rochester (1989, 1998, 1999) dealing with the problem of status and relations of art history, visual studies, cultural studies in the contemporary scientific fields, and with the new theory approaches and interpretative tools offered by them. Sharing similar interests with Michael Ann Holly, W. T. J. Michael, Mike Bal, Norman Bryson, Stephen Melville for the semiotic interventions in the field of art interpretation and being aware of importance of upcoming phenomena such as visual culture, he participated in the construction of fresh appropriate interpretative models and tools that can be used in understanding the complicated situation of images production in contemporary societies.

Keith Moxey is an author with the very strong theoretical position defined by the use of semiotic interpretation of history as the linguistic process and with the deconstructive anxiety about un-stability of produced meaning. On this basis he elaborates several very important ideas. According to him, the context in which an artwork or an image is produced is not a fixed system defined by social, political, ideological, cultural agendas, as it was in the interpretation of T. J. Clark — a social art historian. On the contrary, for K. Moxey, the context is unstable, open system depending on interpretative possibilities of the beholder as much as of the active role of artwork or image in its own constitution. Here we are facing the new position of artwork/image inside the context. It is not a frozen element with ahistorical aesthetic values, as it was in mind of T. J. Clark, in which art historian can trace influences of contextual elements and analyze the ways of including art in some actual process in the society. In T. J. Clark's theory art work is presented as

some kind of phenomenon still different from the process which is taking place in the society. That is the view that Keith Moxey was willing to change in his theory. Denying to see the art work as some distant element of reality that may have some elements of it, he insists on the notion of the art work as one of the equal constituents of context. In his text *Semiotics and Social History of Art* he presents his arguments against the main postulations of T. J. Clark's theory elaborated in his work *On the Social History of Art*<sup>6</sup>. Disapproving Clark's refusal to admit the existence of metaphysical nature of art work and his belief in the aesthetic value as universal, ahistorical, everlasting category inherited from the traditional art history based on Kant's aesthetics, Keith Moxey is suggesting new interpretation of artwork inspired by semiotic readings of representation.

The artwork is regarded as an aesthetic subject with metaphysical nature that has both active and passive role within the context. Once again, by the instrumentality of semiotics, and creating something he called "internal approach" to the artwork, Keith Moxey analyzes its very nature as some kind of structure and its aesthetic value as a changeable and unstable system. Reminding us of the important achievements of semiotic theoreticians such as Saussure, Voloshinov, Bakhtin, Piers, he explains his own theory about aesthetic values as a social construct that is produced by the culture as one of the elements of the context of creating artwork<sup>7</sup>. Here is the main difference between the theory of aesthetic value as universal as it was adopted and used by traditional art history, rooted in Kantian aesthetics, and new critical theoretical model offered by Keith Moxey. The other very important thing for his theoretical position from which new art history is having great benefit is the position and role of the beholder, art historian, interpreter. Combining the semiotic theory with Lacan's use of Saussure's linguistic theory in psychoanalysis, Keith Moxey produces the idea of interpreter as the one who is led by the signs offered by artwork in the process of interpretation but is also investing his own subjectivity as the system of signs in the interpretation of the artwork.

From this point of view, interpretation always depends on the abilities of the spectator, his or her system of values, social position and, at the first place, by his or her distinctness and limitations posed by his or her own context. On the other hand, being in the constant stadium of reception of art, art historian or interpreter is taking the very important role in the field of producing the meaning, so to speak, and creating the context, too. In that process, regarded as the continuous „proliferation of signs", artwork and the spectator are in some kind of a significant game, in which artwork is in front of the very eye of spectator but at the same time resisting it<sup>8</sup>.

The spectator/interpreter/art historian is the one who through his/her own subjectivity makes the interpretation that is necessarily "compromised by the historical circumstances in which it is formulated"<sup>9</sup>. Here we can trace the effect of deconstruction in Keith Moxey work that is strongly elaborated in his book *The Practice of Theory: Post structuralism, Cultural Politics, Art History*, 1994, that we find very important for understanding his theoretical position. Through this book, organized in two chapters, he explains the elements of his theory, as well as his concept of art history as a discipline. In such a way, in the First Chapter that deals with some important terms for art theory such as representation, ideology, authorship, he presents the main theories that are offered to historians/interpreters. He announces that semiotics is the best tool he chooses and explains its development and effects that it has in the interpretation of the terms mentioned above. The Second Chapter is devoted to the Practice, as the First is devoted to the Theory. Here we can find his examples of notions elaborated in the previous chapter. Making

the metaphor for the opposing positions of old / traditional art history and new / critical one that he represents, Keith Moxey chooses to analyze one of the texts by Erwin Panofsky. Here he demonstrates the way the cultural values of the author become an “essential aspect of his theoretical ideas”<sup>10</sup>. By interpreting the Panofsky’s work about the famous artist Albrecht Durer, he is trying to see in it manifestations of his subjectivity and the way they colored his analysis of Durer’s work and personality.

In this book, as in many other works, Keith Moxey elaborates his doubts about the validity of epistemological ground of discourse of art history, so he poses the question: “Does the history of art lay claim to a knowledge that is forever valid?”<sup>11</sup> Refusing to accept that kind of belief embodied in the traditional art history, he is suggesting that art historical writing and knowledge constructed on that way should be understood “as relative to the time and place of their formulation”<sup>12</sup>. So, that’s the main reason for dividing between his critical approach to history and the traditional one. The art historian is the one who is acting from the status of his own subjectivity in the very specific time and space looking at the phenomena from the past or present defined also by the specific temporal/spatial conditions. His interpretation is marked by these facts, so to speak by the dynamic system of “political conflicts and ideological struggles”<sup>13</sup> whose manifestation can be seen in his writing.

Problems of historical and art historical writing, problems of subjects of art history and its tasks in a wide field of image production and its relation with the visual studies are main interests of Keith Moxey and are the main topics of many of his works. He shared his interest for visual culture with Ann Michael Holly, who participated in organizing Summer Institutes during the 90s at the Rochester University gathering many progressive authors around the recent problems of methodology of art history. We should mention some publications he, M. A. Holly and Norman Bryson co-edited, such as *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretation* – an anthology of lectures from Summer Institute held at the University of Rochester, New York, 1989; *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation* – an anthology of lectures delivered at Summer Institute held at Hobart College and William Smith College, Geneva, New York, 1987; and with M. A. Holly : *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies* – an anthology of lectures delivered at a conference held at The Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, 2001. Maybe one of the most important arguments of Keith Moxey is that in this atmosphere of post-epistemological state of art history as the discipline, in the time marked by the idea of the death of the subject, art historians shouldn’t be afraid of merging the visual studies to their field of interest. Instead of that he suggests cooperation of both disciplines because it is good for improving their own tools in the era of constant and exuberant production of images<sup>14</sup>. In these works as in many articles and lectures held at many universities he was trying to explain, from the post structural point of view, the functioning of both art history and visual studies, how they relate to each other and how they move their established boundaries. He says that visual studies as discipline are dealing with many different subjects such as film, television, advertising etc. It can be helpful for art history in stepping out of its canon and paying attention to something that is not of its prime interest. The gathering point for both disciplines, from Moxey’s critical point of view, is the need to explain the images within the historical context with the awareness that their production should be understood as one of the elements of that context, but also the medium in which one can see the manifestation of political, ideological and social changes. But one thing that separates them is the strongly established notion that art history is a discipline dealing with works of art that are very distant

from all other phenomena produced in contemporary societies, the idea about art as some kind of transcendental event in which the aesthetic value is reflected as constant, universal quality closed for influences from the outer world and the other visual phenomena can be regarded as the aliens within art historian enterprise. Instead of that, Keith Moxey is suggesting that art works are phenomena marked necessarily by all elements of context of their creation, such as social, cultural, ideological as are other visual phenomena and therefore art history should seek the answers about the nature of art in these factors too. Also, every attempt of looking at art and writing about art is essentially conditioned by the unstable and decentred subjectivity depending of those factors mentioned above, so knowledge that art history is producing can't be viewed as a definitive one. Instead of that, it should try to meet the recent challenges: „If art history has a future, it will depend on the status of art as a discursive practice rather than upon its claims to transcendent autonomy“<sup>15</sup>.

Very similar to Keith Moxey's are the ideas about the state of art history as the discipline of his colleague Michael Ann Holly, professor of art history and chair of the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Rochester. They both participated in three Summer Institutes dealing with problems of art history and visual studies, during the 90s at the Rochester University. Being interested in art historiography, criticism and history of art history, M. A. Holly dedicated her research to the aspects of art historical writing, problems of the position of art historian in the project of creating history and the role of artworks as active participants of that process. Coming from poststructuralist theoretical field as Keith Moxey, and at the same time disposing of a very good knowledge of traditional art historical methods, she gave in her main works very productive and inspiring interpretation of the mechanisms existing within the art history as the humanistic discipline. In her book *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image*, 1996<sup>16</sup>, M. A. Holly is elaborating her basic idea that the constructing of historical interpretation of art is based on the constant exchange between past and present. In that process an art historian is the one gazing to some objects from the past who is trying to reconstruct their presence in the past and whose own nature is subjected to the influence of this process.

By doing that, he necessarily invests himself, his subjectivity to the interpretation which bares the traces of the present in which it is constructed. But M. A. Holly insists that interpretation of art work is not only influenced by defined subjectivity of the interpreter, artworks are actively engaged in making history through that interpretation. She argues that writing of art history is the consequence of the “melancholic” attitude towards the past, because the one who is looking to the objects of the past, trying to get the life back to them, always has a feeling of capturing and losing them at the same moment. Like Keith Moxey, M. A. Holly believes that art work is an agent of the process of making meaning within the art historian's enterprise, because it guides the art historian to the specific interpretative models from which it is able to escape. Because of that, M. A. Holly argues that an art historian's interpretations and knowledge based on them is necessarily fragmented. Because of that, as M. A. Holly believes, in art historians' writing we have “melancholic rhetoric” coming from the fact that art historian is faced with the objects from that past such as works of art that are present and absent, caught and lost at the same time. She analyses the problem of the interpretation of the gaze in her text “Past Looking” in the book *Vision and Textuality*, 1995. Here, she poses some important questions, such as: “What do we do as art historians when we talk and write about art work?”<sup>17</sup> She

suggests that when art historians talk about art works, they talk about themselves in the terms offered by artworks. Therefore, the interpretation and the artwork as the object of interpretation are in very special and complicate relationship. Writing about art is acting in the same way by the rules that artwork creates for us. From Holly's point of view, art works and their spectators / art historians are caught in the game of mutual observing. Picture looks at the spectator as the spectator looks at the picture. In that kind of game each of them manifests own power. So, she concludes: "Watching is a power, but to force someone to watch is power, too" and in that fact, she believes, lies the "hidden horror" of art history<sup>18</sup>.

The other author in whose writings the art history is strongly rethought and the studies of the visual culture are further developed is W. T. J. Mitchael. Because of the lack of space in this short text, we are not able to give detailed analysis of his work, so we will mention only crucial theoretical notions of this author. W. T. J. Mitchael is professor of English literature and art history at the University of Chicago and founder and editor of the well-known magazine *Critical Inquiry*. Trained well in both disciplines, he based his theoretical approach to the visual culture on the belief that image and word are in constant, complex and paradoxal relationship.

All his works, such as *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, 1994; *The Last Dinosaur Book: the Life and the Times of Cultural Icon*, 1998; *What do pictures want: the Lives and Loves of Images*, 2005, deal with the problem of kinds of interplay between language and vision in art, media, literature. Trying to give answers to two crucial questions, what is an image and what are the differences between images and words, he comes to the idea of great importance of establishing the visual culture studies. His reaserch based on artefacts of various periods and visual objects such as films, photographs, advertising, television etc., led him to the conclusion that it is not possible to make true and universal definition about the relation of word and image on which a valid theory can be constructed. The reason for that is the fact that every image theory is influenced by ideological content – social, cultural, political that are historically defined. So, thinking about the images and writing about them is always the question of multi-layered system of human nature and nature of images. What is the most important idea that W. T. J. Mitchael brings, is that all arts are composite because there are no pure visual and no pure verbal arts, as well as all media are mixed media. So, he suggests that relation between image and word in our historical moment which is determined by merging image to word and vice versa, forming something that he calls „imagetext“, shouldn't be regarded as binary but as dynamic and dialectical<sup>19</sup>.

Therefore his achievements are significant for elaborating the basic notion for the visual culture studies, as well as is for his influence on other authors, such as M. A. Holly. The image theory produced by W. T. J. Mitchael problematises the status of art work as an image in the wide field of visual production in contemporary societies and necessarily questions the theoretical ground created for it in modern and postmodern theory production. As much as his work was fruitfull for the new field of visual culturestudies, it ruffled established theories in the field of art history.

Here we are coming to the point of concluding our review of the main topics dealt with at the University of Rochester during the 1990s. The ideas of Keith Moxey, M. A. Holly, W. T. J. Mitchael – some of the intellectuals from the larger group of others we couldn't present in this shortarticle, derived from semiotic, poststructural theories combined with deconstructive and psychoanalytical approaches inherited from Derrida and Lacan, influenced

the very productive interpretative models of art works as open, active agents in creation of context in which they are produced. Besides that, those contextual analyses (Keith Moxey, M. A. Holly) provoked the rethinking of art historians' writings as well as of the role of art historian whose interpretation is anticipated by the artworks, but whose subjectivity is strongly invested in their historical interpretation. Those authors naturally reversed their initial interest for the art history to the opening field of visual culture trying to bring to the light new and fresh methods of perceiving, consuming and explaining art as one of the many visual phenomena, tending not to mark the hard edge between the disciplines, but accentuating the potential benefits they both can have from the other; they call to cooperation.

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## ДОСТИЖЕНИЯ РОЧЕСТЕРСКОЙ ШКОЛЫ В ОБЛАСТИ ТЕОРИИ И ИСТОРИИ ИСКУССТВ

Настоящая работа посвящена проблемам изменения методологической структуры истории искусства как дисциплины в течение последних десятилетий и определения места, которую в этой меняющейся картине занимает деятельность одной группы историков и теоретиков искусства, называемой «Рочестерской школой».

Как известно, критический подход в истории искусства — термин, включающий в себя много разных методологий, отличных от тех, что использует традиционная история искусства. Эти методологии были созданы в результате применения марксистской интерпретации истории, психоанализа, феминистской критики, семиотики и структурного анализа. В 1970-е гг. прошла первая волна влияния на традиционную историю искусства социально ориентированного или марксистского искусствознания. В 1980-е гг. внедрение социально ориентированной истории искусства уже вошло в зрелую фазу, подготавливая путь для более дифференцированных подходов. В 1990-е гг. начинается утверждение деконструктивизма и постструктурализма, использующих методики других гуманитарных наук, таких как философия, социология, теория литературы, лингвистика, история культуры и пр. Главная особенность критического подхода в искусствознании — контекстуальный подход к искусству. Контекст определяется как культурная, социальная, политическая обстановка конкретного исторического периода, в течение которого создается конкретное произведение искусства. При этом, было выработано несколько пониманий контекста. Мы рассмотрим один из вариантов критического подхода, разработавшийся в работах 1990-х гг. группы исследователей из Университета Рочестера: Кейт Мокси, Майкл Энн Холли, Стивен Мелвил, Т. Дж. Майкл. Наша главная цель — описать представления этих исследователей:

- о контексте создания произведений искусства: основные характеристики, способы проявления, условия изменений, выявление влияния на них семиотики и постструктуралистских теорий;
- о связях между искусством и его контекстом;
- о возможностях и способах взаимного влияния;
- о статусе произведения искусства как эстетическом феномене в поле общественно-политического и культурного окружения;



- о функционировании таких произведений в этих контекстах;
- о важности восприятия произведения искусства и ее роли в создании контекста: о роли зрителя;
- об основных различиях в интерпретации понятия «контекст» у этих авторов и у других современных исследователей;
- о проблеме взаимодействия истории искусства и исследований визуальных искусств в работах названных авторов.

### Примечания

<sup>1</sup> M. A. Cheetam, M. A. Holly, K. Moxey, *The Subject of Art History. Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspective*, Cambridge, 1998, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Umjetničko delo kao društvena činjenica. Perspektive kritičke povijesti umjetnosti*, L. Kolečnik ed., Zagreb, 2005, p. 365.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 365–366.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 370.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

<sup>6</sup> K. Moxey, *Semiotics and Social History of Art*, in *New Literary History* 4 (1991), pp. 985–1000.

<sup>7</sup> K. Moxey, *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, Art History*, Ithaca, 1994, pp. 32–37.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XII.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XII.

<sup>14</sup> *What does visual studies do? Interview with Keith Moxey*, in *Handwerker Gallery Newsletter Fall 1/3* (1999).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> M. A. Holly, *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rethoric of Image*, Ithaca, 1996.

<sup>17</sup> *Vision and Textuality*, S. Melville, B. Readings ed., Durham 1995, pp. 67–89.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>19</sup> *Art: key contemporary thinkers*, D. Castelo, J. Vickery eds., Berg, 2007, p. 83.