



## La lettre du Collège de France

7 | 2015  
Collège de France Newsletter n°7

---

### Interview with Roland Recht

Marc Kirsch

---



#### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/lettre-cdf/2726>

DOI: 10.4000/lettre-cdf.2726

ISSN: 2109-9219

#### Publisher

Collège de France

#### Printed version

Number of pages: 72-75

ISSN: 1628-2329

#### Electronic reference

Marc Kirsch, "Interview with Roland Recht", *La lettre du Collège de France* [Online], 7 | 2015, Online since 03 November 2015, connection on 17 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lettre-cdf/2726> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/lettre-cdf.2726>

---

This text was automatically generated on 17 August 2022.

All rights reserved

---

# Interview with Roland Recht

Marc Kirsch

---

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Source: *La lettre*, no. 35, December 2012



Your teaching has unfolded over a succession of Chairs of History of Art at the Collège de France, and has at the same time offered a new way of asking the question of the history of

art, its nature and function. The question of style is at the heart of a journey that has led you to address a wide variety of themes. What does style represent for you?

The question of style has constituted a common theme since my early work. But the notion itself has not kept the same definition for me. I was the student and then the assistant of Louis Grodecki, himself a disciple of Henri Focillon, who was a great formalist. For them, style related to a set of general features with which to situate works in space and time. Later, I came to see style as an interpretative model founded on a binary relationship between the artist and their patron. In this case, style is a given answer to a given programme in very specific historical conditions. Nowadays, I would rather tend to revert to the detailed analysis of style so as to deconstruct the work in order to identify its signifying formal units, up, however, to the threshold beyond which no unit has any meaning anymore. There is, then, a departure from the global point of view of my initial understanding of style, to get closer to the work in a way, and with what I would call an “archaeological” perspective. Medieval art offers an ideal field of study for this type of approach, as the vast majority of the works are anonymous.

Until the 1970s the purpose of examining style was to attribute each work to a “hand”, to which an alias was given. Nowadays, particularly under the influence of the archaeology of buildings, the aim is to extend as far as possible our knowledge of techniques, artistic traditions handed down, tools, work organization within a workshop or a construction site, etc. Ultimately though, the technical aspect of style was introduced in the nineteenth century by Gottfried Semper, and an anthropologist such as Franz Boas had already brought the handling of tools to the forefront of the scene...

You distinguish between two aspects: a taxonomic element used mainly to attribute a piece of work to a style, and another aspect that could be associated with Michel Foucault's idea of archaeology, which concerns the establishment of the conditions of possibility of certain ways of representing and doing things.

Manipulating such notions presents a danger of several temptations: to see large cyclical movements, apex and decadence phases, to build hierarchies, to make a style the expression of a given culture, etc. As soon as art historians target a system, they drop the singularity of each piece of work into the background. Yet what is of prime interest to them is this very singularity, how it was made possible at a given time and what it teaches us today about its own time as well as ours...

You talk about a single piece of work, not the complete work of an artist.

Yes, I talk about a unique object, which cannot be replaced by another, even by the same artist's hand. At least that is how we must characterize works of art, insofar as we do not take the phenomenon of seriality into account. Yet to recognize that each work is singular means that there is something in each one that cannot be reduced to style. Ultimately, while the artist handles a set of forms and more or less intentional symbols in each work of art, in that very moment of handling them he or she is in a given psychological state that will never be experienced again. However, and I here return to your reference to Foucault, the possibilities for representing things raise the problem both of the form and the meaning of this form, for they can only be grasped by an audience within the framework of a horizon of expectation, otherwise it would not understand them. This means that the artist appropriates a symbolic

register and shares it with the people of his or her time (and sometimes beyond) while also enriching it, that is, in turn by transforming it.

But a link with taxonomy remains: we continue to act as though there were a sort of ideal or prototype, subject to variations, and with which we attempt to constitute classes.

And the real question to ask ourselves is what purpose this kind of operation can really serve. Does this construction serve only for attributions, spatial-chronological distributions, or does it have other functions? I think it serves precisely for a hermeneutics of art. Using objects, we are able to return to the modalities according to which their form was produced. The aim, in Wilhelm Dilthey's words, is to "understand better than the author understood himself". But the idea of style supposes a coherent configuration and that is a dangerous assumption. Throughout the Middle Ages and until the classical period, artists were far more versatile than we think. Moreover we know of artists who, during the Renaissance, also produced décor for festivities and princely stage designs. Even at the beginning of the nineteenth century, painters still did restoration as well as producing their own work. The birth of modern art in the mid-nineteenth century – illustrated by Courbet's workshop – is what gradually brought an end to this type of activity, which amounted to tremendous versatility.

In today's art, style as a collective phenomenon has disappeared. If we are following an aesthetics of indeterminacy, as you put it, is style still an operative concept to analyse the art currently being produced?

I don't think so. The refusal of style, in other words the struggle against any form of identification with a single model, was a characteristic trait of some of the most significant artists of the twentieth century: I am thinking first and foremost of Picasso, but also of Marcel Duchamp, and closer to us, Gerhard Richter and Giuseppe Penone. Picasso alone is the *whole* history of painting; Duchamp went so far as to remove the hand, autograph writing, except in the signature – his *ready-mades* –; Richter reworked large parts of the history of twentieth century painting – abstraction, hyper-realism; Giuseppe Penone never drew on writing but on observation, and the coherence of his work stems from his gaze focused on humans and nature. In contrast with these attitudes, the art market requires sufficient unity from each artistic production to match the expectations of the public and therefore of collectors: it must be immediately identifiable.

Paradoxically, the desire to free oneself from constraints and claim total freedom of creation results in the dictatorship of self-reproduction: the artist is forced only to offer productions that are certain to be identifiable. How then can one envisage new forms such as, for example, installations?

Installations raise very interesting problems. An installation is first the appropriation of a space, or rather a *locus* whose outlines are generally rather fuzzy. The artist's installation is subject to variations, depending on the *locus* chosen. It therefore takes over a more or less significant part of the museum or gallery space and, in its definition, seeks to be both the content and the container, which was indeed the aim of the avant-gardes who spawned it: the artist not only creates an object but also the place of its exhibition. Finally, far more than any other works of art, installations are dependent on photographic pictures which memorize the general arrangement.

This is a problem of our time: we are capable of taking any form seriously, but we are not very sure of what fits within the “art” category and what does not. What constitutes this category, which encompasses an infinite variety of things into a single concept?

As soon as *mimesis* and the associated concept of ideal beauty were dismissed, they gave way to novelty – Baudelaire gave it a name, as early as the mid-nineteenth century: modernity! What began from Duchamp’s time – to simplify – was the novelty of an idea, a movement, an attitude, a form, however shocking or even trivial. Yet nothing is more fleeting than the new... Of course, what I am saying here does not hold true for all artistic production over the last few decades: abstraction continues to exist, so does realism, and both produce very interesting works, which can perfectly fit the definition of art as a quest for beauty. But this no longer serves as a universal reference and the public must therefore “learn” to look at the world of forms for purposes other than aesthetic satisfaction, which is often simply the comfortable satisfaction of finding what one is already familiar with.

What is known is thus what history of art has revealed. You have written on the history of this discipline. Could you remind us of the context within which it emerged?

Wilhelm von Humboldt carried out two great reforms: designing the museum and defining the university. From then on both were to be places where the *bourgeoisie* developed its culture and sensitivity. The taste for travelling, followed by the development of photographic processes, strongly contributed to providing this social class with an overview of what we would call the world heritage.

In Germany, history of art is moreover not just a branch of history, but also a matter of philosophy and aesthetics. During the nineteenth century, the first major German art historians, Franz Kugler for instance, a Hegelian like many of his contemporaries, sought to identify within a work of art the spirit of a moment, the spirit of a people. This is the context in which the first textbooks were produced, claiming to embrace the very long term and the entire world. This time, there were no more breaks: no more Middle Ages that were not spoken about, and the historical perspective continued right up to the present – 1840 for Kugler. His aim was a universal history of art. In his architecture textbook he spoke about the architecture of China and of India – neither of which he had seen –, placing them on the same level and demonstrating a growing awareness of the relativity of the European world – even though Europeans still remained at the centre, this time because it was their gaze discovering all this and conceiving of it as a whole. As for history of art, it did emerge in the midst of historicism, in so far as it was thought, like Ranke did, that the past could be described “as it had been”. Art could then be considered as a crucial witness in this venture to reconstitute the past.

In Germany this historical and speculative position with regard to art was complemented with the idea of a hermeneutics of art. Dilthey, for example, heavily emphasized the way in which a work of art answers questions we have about ourselves. What we call “history of art” is a discipline in which a philosophical dimension actually comes into play, which is not the case at all when discussing history of art as a historical discipline.

History of art is the fruit of a cultural evolution. You talk about the influence of universal exhibitions, the decorative arts trend and the way in which the arts entered what can be called the *bourgeois* way of life as a highly valued element, etc. What role

do you think sociological elements played both in the production of history of art and in the evolution of the arts and their place in society?

We should distinguish between different sociologies. Art historians sometimes realize that a given sociologist offers them not necessarily answers to the questions they ask themselves, but perhaps parallel questions. At one point it seemed to me that Norbert Elias could open up perspectives on the whole question of codification. In my 2004-2005 lectures on the court arts around 1400, I addressed this question of the codification of forms of upholding, of ties to customs, and of the distinction between a social codification and a codification introduced in the representation of the social. To talk about it, we use images; that is how Norbert Elias himself proceeded. Since then, with Pierre Bourdieu and his students, we have turned towards the sociological study of the art market, which has provided operative models for the economic study of the art market in the fifteenth or seventeenth century Netherlands, for example. Not to mention Bourdieu's work on the museum and photographic practices.

You say that photography has changed art, as well as the representation of what art was, in the sense that the way in which we made the history of art changed from the moment that reproductions of works were available, for instance.

It is obvious that photography introduced changes in artistic practices – look at how important it is in Picasso's or Rodin's creative process. But it also changed the history of art as a discipline. Photography particularly allowed for a comparative study of styles. It afforded the constitution of vast photographic libraries encouraging the study of iconography – see, for example, the photographic documentation gathered by the Warburg Institute (University of London).

You say that photography multiplies the capacity to compare, and that it makes the discipline evolve. New technical systems give access to other ways of proceeding and thinking. This attention to the techniques and concrete practices of a discipline – and to its sociological aspects – can also be found, for instance, in the philosophy of science. Is this a recent orientation?

About thirty years ago, art historians, primarily in Germany and the United States, began to take an interest in the importance of the photographic medium for the history of art: the first photographs of monuments, the famous heliographic campaign, the creation of the major publishing houses like Braun or Alinari – in short, everything which gradually allowed for an increasingly faithful reproduction of works of art in the nineteenth century. A photographic history of art gradually developed. The glass plate, slides, today's presentation technology, tell different histories of art. The apparatus therefore influences the way in which a professor organizes his or her lecture: a projected image, mobilizing a whole room's attention like at the cinema, or an engraved reproduction distributed in the room when there were no projectors yet, as in Jacob Burckhardt's time. This then raises the question: how does the art historian who needs the image build his or her discourse based on the different media he or she uses? This question remains largely unexplored, mainly because these procedures are rarely documented.

What responsibility do art historians have in society? Why is it important to know how to look at art works?

We are swamped with images: this is a trivial observation. At the same time, the whole educational curriculum goes against learning greater visual acuity. Looking at things differently, seeing what surrounds us, understanding what an image is, the

difference between an image and a picture: these skills have largely been left idle. Yet the flow of images is so invasive, especially given the omnipresence of audiovisual media, that we don't know how to see anymore. To see is to mark a pause in the flow. A time for contemplation and reflection which always move forward together. A painting or an architectural monument form complex configurations that no gaze, however informed, can scan in one go without losing of its substance.

How can we give art a place in education? How can we teach children to look, when most of the time we try to teach them to do?

Contrary to the widespread opinion, held by our successive Ministers of Education in particular, I do not think that giving art a place in the school curriculum is exclusively and primarily a matter of creativity. There is an essential need to provide everyone with the conceptual tools needed to form their critical sensitivity. And this necessarily involves reflection, language engaging in a game of reciprocal stimulation with the gaze.

As well as being an art historian, you have been head of museums, and a curator. You have written about the art of the Middle Ages and of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, but also about art in the last forty years... What ties all these activities together?

They revolve first around the study, conservation and promotion of art works, and second, around art in the making. I think I had a unique opportunity to be able to engage in all these activities, which enabled me to approach the work of art and our methods from different angles every time. I think I learnt the most at the head of the eight museums in Strasburg, at once about the theoretical challenges of what the art historian does, about the promotion of heritage, and about the question of exhibiting. I carried out my work in direct contact with living artists and works of the past, which was extraordinarily enriching for someone who had only ever written and taught. I must say that I cannot imagine an art historian with no interest in contemporary art, or else out of dogmatism. Having said that, the best way to entirely close oneself off from the art of one's time is still to immerse oneself fully in that of the more or less distant past. And it seems to me that blindness is a particularly widespread disability within our discipline. Learning to see works of the thirteenth century can make one completely blind to the works of the eleventh or even the fourteenth century. Art historians may not be best equipped to understand a domain which they do not know well. The gardens which our colleagues tend to are often very small gardens, mere flowerbeds, and they readily erect high walls between their own and those of their neighbours. I think positivism has always been and still is a highly widespread evil, its oft-extreme form being a certain attributionism: a certainty founded on nothing but itself.