

Interview with Yve-Alain Bois
July 2nd, 2005 in his office at Harvard University
by Jane de Almeida*

Recognized for reviving the polemic about Formalism, art critic and historian Yve-Alain Bois discusses in this interview important issues related to contemporary art. Bois reflects about the contextualist art criticism, points out academic blackmails, puts into question the concept of post-modern and remembers his relationship with the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark.

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Q: You have said that in your youth in Paris, Latin-American artists especially appealed to you. Besides the exoticism of the situation and the long discussions with Sérgio Camargo and Lygia Clark, what else do you remember? Or what else remains as reference for you as an art historian?

YAB: Lygia is the one who really remains... I got to know Latin-Americans artists when I was very young, I was 14, through Jean Clay who was at that time very a famous art critic in Paris. He was a defender of kinetic art. He introduced me to Soto (Jesus-Raphael), to Carlos Cruz-Diez, to a whole bunch of people.

A lot of them were Latin Americans. First there were no Brazilians, because Lygia was not yet in Paris. I went to see all the shows, I went to visit a lot of artists, some of them good, some were not very good...

By the time, I met Lygia, which was two or three years later, I'd lost interest in this art myself. I think that Jean also.

She might have been playing a part in telling him it was really a kind of gadgetery.

She might have been important in his own education, although he was 15 or 20 years older than I was. She certainly was in mine.

Jean Clay started the journal Robho. The first issue was basically entirely dedicated to Kinetic art. The issue before the last had a big dossier on Lygia Clark, in 1968. In the last one, published I think in 1969, there was also some little piece that I wrote on Lygia, I think, and a text by her which I helped her put into French. That issue marked really the definitive departure from kineticism on the part of Jean.

He was also much more politicized at that time. There was a lot of politically interesting things in the world at that time. So this last issue switched completely and then it stopped publication.

So, Lygia might have represented in a way, for him, also a means to get away from this kinetic stuff that had become extraordinary commercialized. There was one gallery in Paris, Denise René, which functioned as a kind of center for Kinetic art, and was very successful in the mid to late sixties. The gallery was pushing the artists to repeat themselves, make salable objects, and it deliberately ignored their more interesting propositions. They got worse and worse and it's amazing how fast the movement dried out.

Lygia arrived with a completely different set of mind. I met her when she was on her way back from Venice. She had an exhibition at the Biennale de Venezia. She had just arrived and her apartment was almost completely empty (almost no furniture, nothing on the walls), except that it was full of boxes

because she was receiving this stuff from Venice. She was very depressed, her ex-husband had just died.

I think she had been traumatized by the commercialism she had witnessed in Venice and also it was a politically complicated moment in 68. The Robho issue dedicated to her has not appeared yet but Jean had shown me some photos and given some of her texts to read, and I wanted to meet her. Jean told her I would call, and Camargo too, and I think that she was a little intrigued by this idea of a French teenager wanting to meet her. I was 16 years, living in Toulouse, doing little jobs like washing cars or stuff like that, taking the night train to Paris every time I had accumulated enough money for a ticket. So when I called her, I thought that I was going to spend a half an hour, because she said she was a little ill. And then she started unpacking her boxes, pushing the things with me...I remember the first one was the stone with an air bag, she blew into the bag and she put it in my hands – I remember it was warm and very delicate – and she put a pebble in equilibrium on the corner, with the slightest change of pressure from my hands making the pebble go up and down; then she had all of these kinds of pebbles with elastics on the table. And she started unpacking all *Bichos*, all this and that, and *Breathe with me*, you know, it was extraordinary for me because I could see her get into it...I was fascinated.

After that I came to see her every time I came to Paris. Then I went to America for a year as an exchange student. We started corresponding even though her French was not yet very good.

Q: Do you still have those letters?

YAB: Yes. But not as many as I would have wanted. I probably threw away some, but I still have quite a few. And some of them are very nice.

And then when I came back to France, after a miserable year spent in Pau, where my parents had moved, I applied to study at L'Ecole des Hautes Etudes with Roland Barthes. So I came to Paris and that's when I really got to know Lygia very well. Strangely enough, this is indirectly related to her Psychoanalysis.

Q: Did she have a Lacanian psychoanalyst or do you see a Lacanian influence and her work? Because some part of her work is so connected with the Lacanian topology of the unconscious...

YAB: No. She was in analysis for long periods in her life, and always with very well-known analysts, but she did not like Lacan. She had been in analysis with Daniel Lagache, Lacan's nemesis, during her previous stay in Paris. Now her analyst was Pierre Fedida, who belonged to the group of Laplanche and Pontalis...so Fedida was living in a small street where Mitterrand was also living, and my room was there... So she used to come everyday to see Fedida, five times a week, and had lunch in a little café of the Place Maubert. I would see her there all the time. She had always the exact same lunch, which was probably not very good for her health, she had the usual plate, two sunny side up of fried eggs, which is not so great for cholesterol.

And then, on the weekend she had a very open house and so when she was depressed she used to call me to come and play cards. On Sundays she always had a small party, she would often do a feijoada. She would ask me to help with some stuff sometimes even getting the stuff at the market.

The French TV, at that time, was only 2 channels or 3 and Sunday night there were films. It was a very usually extraordinary programming it was brilliant, you really saw a lot of stuff there. I remember the Satyajit Ray movie, *The Music Room*, which was extraordinary. I think it was one of the most beautiful movies made. When the film was too boring we said “okay, let’s go back to playing cards...” or listen to music, or whatever...She always had at least 8 people for this.

Q: But she never used films in her works...

Y-AB: No. But she knew a lot about film. She had a very strange taste. She opened me up, because my education in films was very *Nouvelle Vague*. I was little dogmatic, not the dogmaticism of the Cahiers. The Cahiers du Cinéma at that time had become so stupid because they were Maoists, they were completely ridiculous. She made me watch films that I probably wouldn’t have watched, early Hollywood movies. She knew absolutely everything by heart...She particularly liked “The Barefoot Contessa” by Mankiewicz, with Ava Gardner...

So we went to see a lot of films. I remember dragging her to see a lot of films that she really didn’t like. There was an early film by Nagisa Oshima, *La ceremonie*, which she didn’t like at all. We had different taste sometimes, but she was always reading and discussing things. She helped me completely get away with this very “stiff” and fraudulent interpretation of abstraction....and in particular Mondrian, who was prevalent at that time in France, and in Europe. She was the one who put me on the track of a Mondrian which has nothing to do with that NEO-platonic Monk but was more of some kind of anti-formalist destructor.

Jane: Was this point of view important for you?

YAB: Yes, it was completely a turning point. For me Mondrian was one of the first artists I liked, when I was 14, and the one who made me discover art. I stumbled upon a book by Michel Seuphor, who was in great part responsible for this *Mondrian the Monk* type of idea. That was the first big book on Mondrian, published in the fifties. It was very expensive for me at that time, so I asked my grandparents to give to me for my confirmation. And then I read it...it was the first art book I read, so I was not very critical. I bought all the rhetoric, even went to see Seuphor. But Lygia totally changed my mind about this kind of approach. Lygia also thought that Albers was a surrealist. She didn't know, and I didn't either, but some other people had the same thought (I am thinking for example of the American art critic Gene Swenson). I never thought that Albers was a Surrealist, and when she explained what she meant it made perfect sense. She also made me understand that the kind of position that was made at the time (especially by Seuphor) between gesture and geometry was simply intellectually bankrupt. She is the one who introduced me to the work of Martin Barré, on whom I ended up writing a book. She was very open about things that had nothing to do with her own work. You know, my artistic culture was big for a small kid at that time but it was still very limited, and she opened me even more to a lot of things. Plus we had discussions, intellectual discussions about a lot of things. I was reading about Structuralism, Post Structuralism, I am speaking about a little later, in the early seventies, when I came to live in Paris as a student. I was still into that and she was not very interested in it. She was much more interested in Merleau Ponty, whom we discussed, but she made me read Winnicott, and things like that.

Jane: Today, how do you see her work?

YAB: well, it's complicated because there are two parts of her work...I don't know what to make of the late work...and I, you know, this film that we saw, *Memória do Corpo* [film by Mário Carneiro] ...I just don't know what make of it. One thing which I am absolutely sure is that she wouldn't have wanted to be exhibited in an art context...because that was not the way. She didn't see it as art per se. The early work, I think, is fantastic and there is a logic even to the end. You can see the way it stems from the early one, but I just don't know what to make of the end in itself. I see there's a development of the early thing. But you can see from the geometric things to the *Bichos*, to the *Grubs*, to the *Caminhando*. You can see a gradual evolution outside of the object, and into some kind of practice, and to some kind of collective work that she did in Paris, at La Sorbonne, as she said.

That was extraordinary then, and it's still kind of stunning that these things happened. It's easy to understand why her work gets mythologized a little bit because it was quite fantastic, frankly.

I call the "late work" the work she did after, which is therapy. That's the one I don't quite really know what to do with. But before that, all the things she did, they were not therapy. I don't know what it was. It was not performance because there was no spectator. She called it "the classes", but it was not a class.

Q: Do you think that the voluntary exile from the world of art was a reaction against the art market, or not? Was it a way for her to be an otherness?

YAB: Well, I think that the art market is something so corrupt. I think she had a kind of "yuck" reaction of disgust to the Biennale de Venezia. But, I don't think that it is the main cause. I think that the main cause is simply a kind of logic of the

argument. You go from the “plane” to the “Bichos”, and then the object becomes interactive with the spectator, but she didn’t use this word - she used “participant”, at some point it doesn’t need the object anymore. The main thing was in the between the participant and the object, which are more and more like props than anything else. And so that’s logic. It is very consistent, I think. And everyone has been writing about it. She passes a threshold when she decides to make it a kind of “cure” or something. And I don’t know, I just don’t know, I mean, I have no clue if it has any validity as therapy. I reserve my judgment. I think that you need to have a good discussion with a psychoanalyst about it, because I don’t know what to think about it. It seems to me a little like playing with fire. You don’t know what you do, but psychoanalysts they do play with fire all the time. Sometimes it ends badly as we know. So I don’t know.

Q: Lets talk about formalism... You have been identified as a formalist by friends and enemies alike, both fairly and unfairly, in positive and negative ways. What is your formalism?

YAB: My education is Structuralism, and Barthes was my professor, and basically the idea that is behind this form of criticism and mode of analysis is that you can’t separate form and content. That is a wrong separation. It doesn’t exist. Form is always carrying a meaning and the deepest or the most important meaning is always at the level of form, not on the level of the referent, or iconological content. Let’s say the form of Piero della Francesca’s *Flagellation*, monocular perspective, is more important than the depiction of the flagellation to analyze what is meant by art at this time. Or if you take another example, the form of a Madonna by El Greco and the same

subject, Madonna and Child by Bellini, they are completely different, and the meaning is completely different, even though it's exactly the same scene. I mean it's exactly the same, you know, two characters, the Virgin Mary and the infant. But in the case of El Greco, there is this kind of tortured, person that is going to almost dissolve into flames, and in the other She is going to be a big mantle protecting the world.

Barthes and Foucault were strong defenders of formalism, contrary to what people think. But then it was also through Barthes that the Russian Formalists were translated in France. Not by him, but by his students like Todorov, and then, little later, by Kristeva, she also translated Bakhtin, which is also including criticism about formalism but is nevertheless part of the same, let's say epistemological group. And for Barthes, there was also Brecht, as someone who is deeply interested in the ideological function of form.

Q: They are part of the European formalism and then you moved to USA and met the “Greenbergian” formalism...

YAB: yes, and what was interesting in Greenberg formalism from a French point of view was that he was rather precise in what he had to say about works of art, even though I don't think that this is true now when you look at it in detail. While in France at that time, art criticism was like pure fluff written by poets who just don't know what they were talking about, which is still exactly the same by the way. Most of our criticism in America is now the same, too. But Greenberg was the one in America who was opposed to the *Art News* belletristic crowd, to Thomas Hess and people like that. They still are very powerful. In America today you have Dave Hickey (crítico e curador de arte, escreve para *Art in America* e *The Village Voice*) and Peter Schjeldahl (da revista *New Yorker*). It's absolute fluff.

There's nothing there. I mean, no rigor, neither in description nor in interpretation.

So, Greenberg used to say: okay, I am going to describe, and he was fairly good at certain things, but there were two things which I slowly understood was a danger: One of them is that he was not interested whatsoever in the process, in the actual material of the works of art. In fact, he often makes unbelievable mistakes at the level of description of the material. Often when he describes a painting it could have been a photograph: for him form is without matter.

That is related to his ideology that gradually grew and consolidated in the early fifties, which is a kind of a very narrow interpretation of what painting should be, and to his idea opticality, which is a kind of equilibrated illusionism, and that led to a lot of misinterpretation on his part, but also to a very strong bias. He always pretended that he was describing, but he was not describing. He always said that he was not prescribing but he was.

But by comparison to the mediocrity of the French criticism at that time, it was quite stunning to read Greenberg. When I was doing the journal called *Macula* we published all the texts by Greenberg on Pollock. His canon only really solidified in 55', 56, but the very early stuff, he doesn't know what to do. It's quite wonderful to watch him struggling with Pollock, not knowing what to do. The all-over became this kind of great mark of Greenberg's pantheon. Well at first he was not so sure that it was such a good idea. It was very interesting for us to discover him a bit late. The funny thing is that, when we published it in France in the mid seventies, a lot of our American friends said "are you crazy?!" At that time Greenberg had become very reactionary politically. He had also been denounced as corrupt, in cahoots with the market.

Q: and about contextualism? Somehow, when you wrote your book *Painting as Model* you didn't write about contextualism exactly, but it was interpreted as if contextualism was a kind of blackmail for you.

YAB: When I came to America to teach in the early 80's, there was a really strange fashion in academia, a fascination for the French intellectual development of the late sixties and seventies, which is often nicknamed *la pensee 68'*. What struck me is that American students (and often their professors) would devour very quickly extremely complex texts by Lacan, Derrida, Lyotard, Althusser, Kristeva, Barthes, Deleuze, etc, and put all these people in the same basket, making a kind of bouillabaisse out to this. But as I had witnessed in France during my student years, these authors were not exactly agreeing between themselves. Well, not only the American students whom I met at that time quoted all these thinkers as a whole, as if these writers had one common voice, but they also felt that it was their obligation to quote this huge textual mass, that no paper would do without zillions quotes from this vast and complex series of texts which they had read much to quickly to fully digest. It was pure fetishism, a kind of invocation without necessity.

This really made me think of Barthes when he said in his inaugural lesson in College de France that language is fascist because it forces you to say things, and to them send a certain way. And a certain kind of social art history had the same castrating structure. Why would I need to read a hundred pages of the history of laundry in the ninetieth century in order to understand Degas if in five paragraphs you can get that laundresses were exploited, that they were poor, that they were taken as sex slaves? You don't need to learn everything about the sociology and history of laundry to say something

relevant about Degas's paintings of laundresses, but there was a period when if you didn't, you were considered a reactionary esthete.

Jane: but sometimes seems to me that you have been always requesting more context...

YAB: Of course, because I am a historian. I am interested in the conditions of possibility of this or that art at this or that time. What I don't agree with is the notion that there is an immediate relation between the social context and the art that is produced. Foucault was also against the idea of a complete immediate match. There's a mediation and have to discover this mediation. You cannot discover it until you have a strong structural analysis of the work itself, of the way it signifies. And it is not the referent that is going to give you a clue about its signification. The meaning is not the referent. The referent is just the superficial level. It is part of the structure of the meaning, but the least interesting in many ways. The least revealing one. What is the structural signification? How does it function? What I did in more recent works is, let's say, of a more Bakhtinian conception, of the work of art as addressing the context...more directly, as in a dialog. I think that the Matisse and Picasso book is more Bakhtinian in that sense.

Jane : is the concept of post modernism blackmail?

YAB: No, I don't think that is blackmail, but I think that it was badly thought. It is a concept that was cooked up by people who didn't think so much, and it caught on because it was new. It was interesting the way that it came out. It came out in two different times and fields: first seriously in architecture, where the concept of modernism didn't exist at that time. Then, in art, the concept of modernism, I mean in America, the concept of Modernism was stolen by

Greenberg, so what people understood by modernism was Greenberg. And what Greenberg meant by this concept ended up being in the 60's basically a sum of four or five artists that he liked, and that's it. So, everything else was termed post-modernism by contrast or in reaction to Greenberg. So it is a concept that became very empty, and even more empty by the people that thought that were thinking about it, because they did a incredible generalization about it. When you read the big book by Jameson, which like the Bible about so called post-modernism, his description is so large that you don't understand what is modern anymore. If Godard is Post-modern, if Joyce is post-modern, what is modern then? I mean, the concept becomes absurd. As long that you have an element of reflexivity in a work of art, as long you don't imagine art to be some kind of transparent language, you know, without any material opacity, you are dealing with a modernist work and you don't need the concept of post modernism. I think that "post" signifies "it's gone". But this is not true. It doesn't mean we are in the same era now that we were fifty years ago, but the concept of reflexivity, or doubting the immediacy of language is still with us, even if it's present in works I detest. I don't like, you know, David Salle, but that is not post modern, as far I can see. You know, it's retro, it's more like old modern than post modern as far as I'm concerned. I don't see what is "post" there, and I always was struck by the lack of rigor of that concept...and I've never used or when I used it, it is always between quotation marks, and if there are no quotation marks it is because an editor took them out...

Q: You have written that the phenomenon of "foreignness" gives to the stranger the freedom to look at a complex cultural system and not have the obligation to follow the rules of the

game, but (s)he can pick up what (s)he considers more vibrant and controversial in a given culture. Considering globalization, in what measure is this still possible?

YAB: this is a good question....I don't know quite how to answer that. There are several levels of globalization and there is one, for example in the art world, the one that is heavily funded in the commercial sphere of the art world, in the Bienalle, and all that...that is all the same crap all over the world. At this level, I feat that globalization will end up as a total leveler, given the history of capitalism. It seems to me that this is exactly what is already happening, and that at some point all cultures will be exactly alike. If that nightmare continues to be true all cultures will be the same. There will be no "foreignness", but that's a sinister nightmare... of course there are local scenes which are probably very interesting, but I am not sure that they can provide enough resistance against the generalized levelization of everything.

Well, the Bienalles are already the same everywhere...they are all the same, that's why it is very depressing for me to go. They are just another tourist trap, invented for tourism, to bring revenues to a city, and, you know, the first city that really understood that was Kassel. No one wants to go to Kassel, you know, it is one of the most hideous cities in the world. But Kassel's economy lives entirely of and for Documenta. Documenta makes the city. Kassel was very beautiful in the 18th century. Beautiful parks, you know, and was entirely destroyed in the World War II. So it was rebuilt. It's hideous. Imagine the ugliest city in America and they decide to make an international art exhibition. It's weird. And now, a lot of cities are doing that around the world.

Q: Today you join the Institute, where Einstein, Panofsky were and where you will be free to do what you want to do in terms of intellectual production, because you don't have any obligation to teach. From now on should the artists and theoreticians be more afraid from your critiques?

YAB: No. I am a pretty gentle man. I mean, there is no reason for me to be more aggressive than before. I never refrained from writing criticism if I felt it was necessary. I write what I write without other considerations. I wrote that article on MoMA and I got this letter saying "Oh what a courage!" I said, what courage? You know, even in Bush America we are not yet in fascism, so you can state what you want. I don't see why people should be afraid of me. Is that what you think, that I going to launch Kamikaze attacks?

Jane: but sometimes they are afraid of you...

YAB: I don't think that people are afraid of me...

Q: yes, for example cultural studies, women studies, it was a kind of strong trend and it was called by you as blackmail...

YAB: I never attacked women studies. As for Cultural studies, it seems to me like an excuse to not study. It killed film studies. Instead of really looking at the film as a kind of language which has all different stratification of signification, it dealt with the "Laundresses", so to speak. Film studies was a field that was very good, although it was just beginning to establish itself in America. There were very

good people like Annette Michelson and Noel Burch. But it was completely superseded by cultural studies, which demands far less intellectual energy. It's a kind of fuzzy "discipline" (which has no discipline whatsoever), a kind of thing that engulfs everything. You can put everything in the same level. In that approach there is no difference between a great work of art and any piece of crap. Everything is treated as a document and never as a monument, to borrow Foucault's opposition in *A Arqueologia do Saber*. Everything is exactly leveled, and I think this is a disaster. Because if everything is leveled, there is nothing that is more important, and this means that nothing is important. For me, to criticize means to distinguish...to split...and if you put everything in a big soup, you know...you end up with something tasteless and colorless, without any differentiation.

Q: What have you seen that pleases you? What had pleased you in terms of art lately?

YAB: There is not a huge amount of stuff that I've liked lately, but I rarely write about things I don't like. I don't like to spend a lot of time criticizing art and it takes too much energy to write against somebody or something, but also because, you know, it is very hard to be an artist, so I write about things I like when I see some.

The last time that I saw something that really impressed me a lot was in London. It's a show by this Swiss video/ARTIST-musician called Christian Marclay called "Quartet." This piece is just extraordinary. It is four videos, four screens, and he uses bits of films as the sound for the piece, or rather he uses fragments of all kinds of films as if these fragments (image and sounds) were the notes of a piece of

music, of a quartet. He uses films as instruments. For example if this particular note is given by the voice of Marilyn Monroe very high, you see her singing the same thing each time the note has to appear in Marclay's musical composition. It is just extraordinary...it is really brilliant, musically, structurally, it is extraordinary...and I went with Rosalind Krauss, when we were both in London to launch the big book on 20th century art that we wrote with Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster, and she was also completely fascinated. Maybe, some day I will write about this work.

Q: What are your future plans?

Yes, now I will have some time. I want to finish my big book on Barnett Newman, and I want to write a book on Ellsworth Kelly. I have to do my collection of essays on non-composition, and I want to reopen my big book on axonometric projection. Maybe I will do some work on Matisse. I have time, you know...

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