



Leo Bersani is Emeritus Professor of French in the University of Berkeley (California). Specialist in literature, psychoanalysis, visual arts and sexuality, is author of several books: *Homos* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1995) and *Caravaggio's Secrets* (MIT Press, 1998) of which he is coauthor with Ulysse Dutoit. In this work, Bersani and Dutoit do a psychoanalytic reading of the portraits of Caravaggio and study the attempts of the baroque artist of being moved beyond the relations based on the paranoid fascination, towards a space that suggests one not-relation, a sensuality devoid of eroticism whose radicality offers, at present, an attempt at the time of rethinking and even reinventing the notion of community.

Question: In *Caravaggio's Secrets* you analyse the types of relationality implicit in Caravaggio's work. The process of perception appears as a complex embodiment of forms of sociality. Relationality has a twofold dimension between the epistemological and the social. Both are related to a radical anti-essentialism. As far as art is concerned, relationality is not an act of representation but rather something generated by the modes of sociality implicit or produced by the works. Somehow art is a "relational machine". In that book you write that art illuminates relationality by temporarily and heuristically immobilizing relations. How to make a political reading of the agency of the beholder and the kind of relationality involved?

Answer: I have frequently been asked to specify the political implications of our attempts to formulate - following Foucault's injunction - "new relational modes." It should, however, be clear - if only from the accurate brief description you have just given of this project - that our work could easily be subverted by excessive and premature "political" specifications. There can be no effective or durable political change without a reconfiguration of the relational field that is the ground of all sociality. It seems to us necessary to begin with questions about the ways in which our culture formulates relations. Not only intersubjective relations but also relations between the human and the nonhuman. Every culture more or less deliberately promotes what we would call certain styles of movement in space. This is something fundamental in the education of the human subject: the way in which the individual is taught to go towards or to turn away from others. How does the most complex sociality stem from these "lessons in mobility" and, more specifically, from the way a culture defines, values and hierarchizes difference and sameness, the other and the same? In a sense, these are already deeply political questions, but they obviously don't provide easily applicable formulas of governance.

What I referred to a moment ago as "lessons of mobility" could also be called a training in (and this is the title of our latest book) forms of being. How are we in the world? It is not a question of knowledge about the world, but rather of a certain

positioning of the human in the universe. To put things somewhat schematically: notions of social relationality have, at least since Descartes, been determined by the privileging of epistemological concerns over questions about the nature of being. Following Heidegger and his critique of Cartesian epistemology, we would reverse this priority, although by being we of course do not mean an ontological essence or entity, but rather something like a principle of universal connectedness. A modern reflection on being must be aware of itself not as an approximation of metaphysical truth; rather, the ontology most congenial to an age of information is one that identifies being as relationality, as the principle of connectedness assumed by all technologies of transmission, as well as by the social imaginary that can refract or violate it.

P: Relationality is in your writings a negation of the epistemological and dialectic opposition subject-object. There's no subject but only objects, without psychological interiority of any kind. From this view a formal paradigm appears: the world of relationality is a world of forms. A relational world has no subject. How to understand this formalism? How to differentiate it from the common notion of formalism as a rupture from historical conditions into a kind of pre-political stage? Does the disappearance of the subject mean the disappearance of history? Again, concerning the question of the historical dimension of art, in your books, notably in *Arts of impoverishment* but also in *Caravaggio's Secrets*, you seem to construct a discourse which breaks traditional historical categories. How to articulate agency with this kind of a-historical vision?

A: In the United States, *Caravaggio's Secrets* was at times criticized for "formalistic" readings. However, nothing could be more different from our analyses than a nonhistorical formalism. It's true that in all our work we affirm the possibility of a critical approach that would be both transhistorical and transgeneric. It is only because we are in a different historical context from that of Caravaggio that we can see what seems to us to be his most important historical achievement: the reconfiguring of his culture's dominant relational field. In his work there is often a tension between the thematized meaning of a painting (proposed by the titles: *The Betrayal of Christ*, *The Death of the Virgin*, etc.) and meanings that are, at first glance, purely spatial, such as the crowded space of *The Betrayal of Christ*, or the huge and indefinite beyond to which the fan-like structures of *Saint John the Baptist With a Ram* seem to be pointing us. The perception of these visual options is, we argue, an excellent point of departure for a relational re-education. Such a perception depends on rigorous and detailed readings of the paintings, readings that, far from being "formalistic," critically participate in a formal mobility that constitutes nothing less than Caravaggio's disruption of social and spiritual

hierarchies.

Q: In the last chapter of *Homos* you deal with a refusal to sociability as a legitimate civic choice. You mention a refusal to relationality. Refusal to institutions has been a political position adopted by minorities as a refusal to the modern bourgeois state and its inherent liberal ideology. This refusal of sociality and institutions suggests an “outside” from them. What does constitute this outside? How to imagine and deal with it?

A: There is of course no pragmatically conceivable rejection of relationality. The chapter you refer to in *Homos* discursively collaborates with Genet's mythical repudiation of the relational in *Funeral Rites*, a repudiation that is made socially concrete through Genet's deliberate adoption of a repugnant and yet perhaps necessary ethic of betrayal. *Homos* is an attempt to think homosexuality as a relationally inventive "outside," as a betrayal of what might be called a hegemonic subjectivity through the practice of a de-psychologizing sexual and social promiscuity. To be "outside" that subjectivity is the pre-condition of a connectedness to the world that I call "homoness."

Q: This outside then is more to be understood as a kind of alternative public sphere, or a "subaltern counterpublic", using Nancy Fraser's classic formulation? Do you feel comfortable with such notion?

A: While applauding the concrete social achievements of a counter-public, we would be interested in asking whether each alternative public sphere mimics the relational field of the social forces it is contesting, or whether it is based on a reconfiguration of that field. Queer theory, which is now dead in the U.S., seems to me a good example of a sloppy attempt to constitute a politically effective "outside." Queer theory was an amorphous protest against "regimes of the normal." The de-gaying, which I objected to in *Homos*, deprived queer theory of a connection to a real "outside", one based on certain practices of the body that seem to me rich in new relational possibilities. Queer theory astutely saw how the dominant culture prescribes sexual normality, but it had nothing to say about how sexuality is relationally and politically productive. Former queer theorists are now caught in the gay American polarization between studies of a "gay subjectivity" (again, non-sexual and violently anti-psychoanalytic) and the sex-club and internet culture of barebacking (unsafe sex with a communitarian rhetoric). There is reason to be reticent about both these projects...

Q: In this relationality where does the museum remain?

A: You are undoubtedly more qualified to answer this question than I am. I will simply say that nothing is further from my idea of relationality than the "relational aesthetics" promoted by the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. Relationality is not reducible to conviviality, and such interactive events as eating curry with the cook-artist (Tiravanija) or getting a massage from the artist (Christine Hill) transform museums and galleries into servants of the nauseating American ideal of "improving relationships." I'm much more sympathetic to Robert Smithson's comparison of, for example, the NY Guggenheim to a "waste system," a comparison designed - in a felicitously Beckettian fashion - to discourage rather than to invite participation. Too much has been going on recently in museums; it's perhaps time to reflect on stillness as a favorable psychic and spatial environment for a new relational mobility... How might museums become less inviting, and in so doing perhaps help to promote the goal of lessness itself - more specifically, a subjective lessness congenial not to stable identities but rather to the dispersed subject's multiple and always partial identifications and correspondences with the world?