Proa: The French sociologist Nathalie Heinich wrote that contemporary art must meet three basic conditions to be considered as such: 1. the predominance of the aesthetic function (and not the utilitarian or religious), 2. a certain degree of originality (even when recreating something that already existed, the approach must be new), 3. the signature of an artist legitimated by the arts community. How do you, as a sociologist, define contemporary art?

Alain Quemin: Personally, I don’t think I have to define contemporary art as a sociologist, but to analyze how the actors themselves define contemporary art and the sociological relevance of this definition or, more precisely, of these definitions. More than the anthropologist - who is often tempted by the quest for unity - I think specifically of the structural anthropology of Levi-Strauss, to better show what the various cases have in common and gain in an overall view of the process, to operate a smoothing of observations on which it is based - the sociologist must be sensitive to the diversity of the social phenomena and their definitions. As a sociologist, I must consider that the definition of contemporary art varies worldwide. What is considered contemporary in different in New York, Paris and in a small French town, thus it is different for the actors who belong to these various social spaces. For me it is impossible to provide a definition when the agent’s views are so plural.

Proa: In 2000 you conducted a major survey, in which you found that, despite the universal statements, the passports of the artists still played a very important role in their success or marginalization. How do you explain the predominance of certain countries in the global art scene, including Germany, United Kingdom and the United States? Is there a connection with the existence of public policies for the efficient culture in these nations?

Alain Quemin: If in the 19th century and during the first half of the 20th century, Paris was clearly the heart of the market and of the international art world, nowadays this position is undoubtedly occupied by New York. In a time when the various agents of the art world want to believe more than ever in globalization and hybridity, in cross-breeding and disappearance of borders, the sociological approach demonstrates that the U.S. clearly dominates the market and the international scene. Germany arrives 2nd, separated by a comfortable distance from the United Kingdom. Then we have, way behind, France, Italy and Switzerland; the role of the other nations was anecdotal in relation to the international scene and market. The only major change in recent years is the rapid breakthrough of China and its artists, but mainly in the relation to the market, through auctions and fairs. If nationality or the country of residence are constantly denied as relevant factors of success, it is clear that at least unconsciously they determine choices. Public policies play a role, but not a a fundamental one, as attested by the example of France, which spends a lot to defend its artists, but whose positions are becoming ever more fragile despite this commitment.

Proa: Can the current global economic crisis change the position of artistic dominance that has endured for decades?

Alain Quemin: The evolution of national positions on the market and on the international art scene is mainly played on medium and long terms. China is probably one of the only countries to have exploded on the auctions market within a short timeframe. Previously, Germany imposed itself massively during the eighties. If the economic crisis has less impact on certain areas, this will probably benefit their artists. Since contemporary Chinese artists are supported by national buyers, their success relies on the support capacity of Chinese collectors. But overall, I think the prevailing hierarchy of the international context and market will remain unaffected by the crisis.

Proa: In our inquiry, the nationality of the works is a major category. What would be the if in a similar research we used as criterias elements such gender (male / female / gay) and/or social background of the artists?

Alain Quemin: If I decided to focus my work on the nationality or country of residence of the artists, it was to go against the romantic belief that the artist is totally free from any influences of the society he lives in, and that he will evolve in a world without frontiers, while there still – in this context as well as in many others - a real social determinism. I think it would be interesting to expand the analysis based on other factors such as gender or social origin, because they also play an important role in the act of becoming, or not, a recognized artist.
Alain Quemin (* Lyon, 1967) graduated in sociology, economics and demography at the University of Paris X-Nanterre and has a PhD in Sociology from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales [EHESS Paris]. He is Professor of Sociology at the University Paris-Est and since 2005 Member of the Institut Universitaire de France. He is member of National Committee of CNRS in the 36th section (sociology and law) since 2004 and member of the Institut Universitaire de France since 2005. Former Chairman of Research in Sociology of Art, International Sociological Association and former vice-president of research group in the sociology of art of the European Sociology Association.

His research topics include sociology of the art market and its actors; sociology of contemporary art; sociology of work; sociology of globalization. Alain Quemin currently works on the theme of the internationalization of contemporary art (visual arts), a sector where, despite the commonly accepted discourse on globalization and hybridity, a sociological analysis demonstrates that the territorial and particularly the national determinants remain particularly strong. His current research focus on the international movements of many visual artists towards the strongest cities in the contemporary art field. He is also undertaking a research on the New York galleries (especially on the role of women), on visitor studies and on the sociology of the works of art.

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