

Critical report about text
The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art
by Martha Buskirk

Jana Stejskalová

Exhibition: Theories and Practises I
Faculdade de Belas Artes da Universidade do Porto
Academic year 2015 / 2016

Introduction

The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art is a title of the book written by Martha Buskirk, published in 2003. This report will deal with an introduction text, that summarizes all the topics later presented more broad in each chapter. I have decided to work with this text because I think it raises interesting questions, that also many students of curatorial studies ask themselves, when they get to the art and gallery practice. The author of the book is Martha Buskirk, a curator and professor of art history and criticism at *Montserrat College of Art* (Beverly, MA) since 1994.¹ Recently she has published another book about art practice entitled *Creative Enterprise: Contemporary Art between Museum and Marketplace* (Continuum, 2012).

The Introduction to *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, also the entire book's focus diverse from questions about author and authorship, original artworks and it's copies, questions about who is authorized to realize an artwork according to it's plans, stylistic unity as an aesthetic criteria versus different materials and techniques used by the same author of the context of the artwork. Due to the limit of this paper I will choose only one of the topics – the question of authorship and authority, which I will try to think through in detail.

Authorship and authority

The most interesting topic, of all mentioned above, for me is the question of authorship. Martha Buskirk deals with the question whether it is possible by an author's intended act to withdraw the status of artwork from an object. She gives two examples when artists were confronted by a "violation" of their authorship rights and therefore were forced to withdraw through declaration the status of the artwork. First example is one of Robert Morris's *Litanies* bought by Philip Johnson. When he didn't receive his money six months after the purchase, he decided to publish the *Statement of Esthetic Withdrawal* (1963), duly signed and notarized, that he withdraws from it all esthetic quality and content and declares that from the date hereof said construction has no such quality and content.² The other example mentioned by author is that of Donald Judd, published in the form of advertisement in the March 1990 *Art in America*, saying that

¹ Retrieved December 14, 2015, from <https://www.bu.edu/prc/prcpov/artists/a05.html>

² Buskirk, M.: *The contingent object of contemporary art*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press., 2003, p. 1

the exhibited sculpture at *Ace Gallery* in Los Angeles was an installation wrongly attributed to Donald Judd. Because the fabrication of the piece was authorized by Giuseppe Panza, the art collector and owner of the original object, without the approval or permission of Donald Judd.

The main question arising from these examples is that of what power an artist continues to have over a work of art after it has left the artist's possession; in particular, to what degree the artist can change the status of the work without physically altering the object itself? In my opinion, it depends mainly on the circumstances. Both of these artists are well-known and also accepted by well-known galleries. That means that their decision to withdraw authorship from an object was accepted by the art public. It's questionable whether such a decision would be also accepted from an artist who hasn't created himself such a strong authority yet. It seems to me that anyway it always depends not so much on the decision of the author, but rather on the decision of the art public, to accept such act and only after this acceptance it becomes generally valid. Just hypothetically, we can think about this example: if an artist, whose artwork was purchased by famous art gallery, said that such artwork is no longer a work of art, but the gallery would disagree and would continue to exhibit this work, which one of them would be in right?

Another question regarding the example of Donald Judd is who has the authority to decide about the artwork, specifically who has the authority to realize a work on the basis of plans after being sold to the collector (or museum)? Is it only the artist or the owner of the plans too? Again, I would answer that it depends on the circumstances. But the text says that Judd sold his artworks to Panza with statement that he wanted to retain final authority to approve or disapprove of works presented under his name.³ That means Panza knew that he is not allowed to make such decision to authorize creating a copy of the artwork. Martha Buskirk asks the question of why would it have seemed plausible to a collector and a major art gallery that an unauthorized copy could be substituted for an absent work of art? But my question is even more simple: Why didn't he ask Judd for the permission and didn't let him authorize the copy? What was the problem that he felt he can't ask him? Even if he's minimal art artist why would Panza think that with the purchasing plans he has absolute ownership of the work and

3 Buskirk, M.: *The contingent object of contemporary art*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press., 2003, p. 6

doesn't need to ask for approval even if Judd stated he wants to retain such decision making?

The authorship issue is very wide and very controversial in contemporary art, since it is possible to exhibit anything in the gallery as an artwork, as author also mentions several times in the text. This reminded me of another interesting example, although not about removing authorship from an artwork in the same meaning. It's Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953 purchased by *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art* and described as traces of drawing media on paper with label and gilded frame.⁴ Rauschenberg asked de Kooning to give him one of his drawings so he can erase it and there no other photographs of traces indicating the original drawing appearances. Above that there are two more facts worth mentioning. First – even Rauschenberg honored the unwritten respect for an authorship of another artist by asking de Kooning to give him the drawing even he knew for what purpose. Second is that the authorship of the artwork had changed and it was purchased by the museum as Rauschenberg's drawing. The question that arises from this example is what would happen if Rauschenberg didn't ask for approval and erased or over-painted someone else's drawing and he disagreed with it? Would the museum still purchase it?

Another area that I feel is very important in contemporary art and wasn't mentioned in the text, is an issue regarding artistic groups and collective identity. In the presence, there are many active art groups that work under the collective identity. That also means they exhibit their artworks under their collective name so it isn't important who created which part of it. Or it doesn't have to be an art group, it can be only a group exhibition where artists decided not to have their names under the artworks. This also happened during one of our student exhibitions – students prepared the exhibition together so they decided leave the photographs without labels and many visitors were confused by this act and kept asking „Whose picture is this“? The reasons why they have decided for this way of exhibiting are three: first, they really work together on many of the photographs, one of them holds the camera, another one composes. Second, it guarantees the exhibition some kind of visual unity even if it's prepared by several different artists. And third in Czech republic, there is actually no point in differencing each student exhibiting, because there are very poor conditions for art market, not only

4 Retrieved December 14, 2015, from <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.298>

in student area, but in the contemporary art in general. There are only few collectors willing to invest their money into contemporary art, but they would never jeopardize their investment by buying student's artwork, that has no certain price. That seems to me to be an example from the other side of this issue about authorship, when artists voluntarily give up their own authorship on behave of the collective one. But even so, it does not mean that it would justify potential buyers/owners to think that with the purchase they have the right to own the work absolutely.

Finally, I would like to return to the text of Martha Buskirk and the example of when the artist gave the gallery (collector) the exclusive right to reproduce his work. Janine Antoni's artwork called *Gnaw* (1992) is consisted of two large cubes made from chocolate and lard. But since the lard is very unstable material, it was necessary to resolve the question of how to preserve the artwork. Antoni has decided to grant permission to the museum to reproduce the cube (from the mold) every time it is exhibited. So the work combines a specific and limited authorization to recreate or copy with otherwise direct traces of the artist's actions.⁵ One might even say that the gallery is committed to mandatory recreation of new copies of her work.

Conclusion

The issue of regarding the authorship is very wide and diverse, so it is impossible to get deep enough to it in this short amount of pages. I tried to present the thoughts that appeared for me from the text, by using another examples except only commenting those used in the text. Besides the issue of removing the aesthetic quality from the artwork or the artist's designation without physically altering the object itself, this report also dealt with the question of transition of the authorship by destroying someone else's artwork and claiming it my own, exhibiting under the collective identity or the committing the gallery to the mandatory creation of copies of a particular work of art.

I am aware that I focused only on a narrow topic of those presented in the Martha Buskirk's text, but I hope it would be accepted as appropriate for a critical report instead of only summarizing the entire content.

5 Buskirk, M.: *The contingent object of contemporary art*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press., 2003, p. 8