

Abstract

Critical debate in the United States from the end of the 1970s has had to take into account the need to rethink methods of art analysis, first in reacting against the rigid rules that the Formalist method had dictated from the end of the 1940s and then, progressively equipping itself with the analysis of new art practices and hybridizing instruments borrowed from other disciplines. The departure from the disciplinary confines of art as a traditionally-understood institution on the part of critics and artists who shared a perhaps by-then past season of continual posing of the problem of roles, instruments, methodologies and finalities of critical action, led to the atomization of the Formalist system which had been adopted as the principal reference point of art historians in the United States until the end of the 1970s.

The foundation of the magazine "October" responded to this process of self-analysis and the attempt to build new instruments with which to analyse the complexity of artistic experimentation. The group of authors who worked together on the magazine never satisfied themselves, however, with simply looking at the novelties in art which came forward in those years, but instead combed through the whole of the experience of twentieth century art in its entirety, always considering it in a dialogue with the interpretative stage. The experience of art and criticism together build up a cultural history that can not in any way be kept separate from the speculative processes which from the end of the 1970s overcame the subject in its individual and social dimension. The emergence of the epistemological crisis that postmodern philosophical reflection highlights, contributes to an articulation of a discourse of art criticism which is more and more consciously open to the previously unknown possibilities suggested by the adoption of investigative instruments borrowed from different disciplines. "October" magazine is one of the places in which this debate takes place, where new proposals are put forward for art criticism which break with an asphyxiating and immobilizing past. "October" is the place where hypotheses are tested and from which one may move to constantly pose problems regarding methods; it is the place where procedures are verified and supporters, profitable meetings and exchanges are counted, but it is also the place where a new method is affirmed whose validity is cared for by the exclusion of dissenting voices.

The present work is the outcome of an investigation into the transformation of methods and critical positions which have been presented in "October" magazine from its foundation in 1976 until the publication, on the part of the most influential authors among the *octoberists*, of the work *Art since 1900. Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* which marks the apex of the affirmation, in the context of American debate, of the critical positions of the magazine's editors.

In the last few years, critical debate, both in the Italian and the Anglo-Saxon sphere, has long been occupied with magazines, mapping them and constructing a network of relations between the different nuclei of an intricate terrain. In the climate of widespread interest in the study of magazines as places of experimentation of previously-unknown methodological and interpretative proposals, it seems necessary to reconstruct the singular nature of the critical process conducted by "October".

The present study was further stimulated by the presence in the Italian and international debate of continuous references to the critical proposals put forward by "October" and at the same time by the absence of a historical-critical recognition of the theoretical processes which were started by the United States magazine. The study of the review was taken on after having singled out some recurring themes: analysis of mediums and the centrality of photography (not only with reference to the essay production of Rosalind Krauss, who more than any other has studied these subjects, but also with reference to other theorists); the process of interpretative re-elaboration of the art of the European vanguard in anti-formalist terms, the analysis of the art of the present and of the contexts in which it acts and by which it is co-produced, the constant posing of problems regarding critical discourse and the instruments of art history.

The study continues with the analysis of certain theoretical lines and the development of critical method from the foundation of the review up to the publication of the *manual* of history of the art of

the 20th Century. To an initial, militant, phase of continual methodological reflection on critical proposals which took place in the magazine, a second is added, which is distinguished by a process on institutionalization of discourses inside the manual. Analysis of the critical proposals was carried out by attempting to contextualize individual theoretical innovations put forward by the review in the wider United States debate, and where possible also in the European, reconstructing a genealogy of the theories in comparison with the wider bibliographical production of those who worked with "October" and, more in general, of scholars active in the United States.

In the first chapter, the initial phases of the foundation of the magazine and the beginning of the process of radical questioning of the formalist theoretical-critical system are reconstructed, a questioning carried on beginning with the choice of the name through the revision of the American critical tradition of the history of the art of the avant-garde.

In *La condizione postmoderna: un passaggio cruciale nella critica americana* the careful process of revision to which the critics subjected the American historical tradition forged by Clement Greenberg, is reconstructed in the light of the emergence of postmodern critical innovations. The centrality of the analysis of photography, at the same time aesthetic object, artistic medium and complex of signs, is underlined by the relationship with the study of Surrealism, another nucleus of investigation in which the group of authors developed original analysis. The emergence of the consciousness of a definitive epistemic change in the postmodern cultural condition drives the debate which after the 1950s had become bogged down around Greenberg's proposals. Reflection on the postmodern paradigm allows the definition of some aspects which regard criticism of the Modern. In the third chapter the investigation of critical methodologies highlights how over the years of publication of the review the view has prevailed that no critical-aesthetic discourse can be considered as separate, neutral and independent from conditioning. To the *Octoberists*, what instead appeared necessary was to map out contextual relations in such a way as to reconstruct the complexity of cultural dynamics. Context and reflection on the discipline are in this way the key questions which drive the analysis of the specific positions which have been articulated over the years around the question of art in public spaces and Institutional Critique.

The last chapter is dedicated to the critical setup of the *Art since 1900* volume and to the contrasts in its reception. In this way we complete the trajectory of the critical proposals which, having migrated from the review as a laboratory of ideas, came to be crystallized in a system which legitimates itself through its own interpretation of the facts. In the appendix the texts of the interviews carried out with Rosalind Deutsche and Douglas Crimp are published.