Artforum: 'Bertrand Lavier', by Daniel Birnmbaum, April 2003

Bertrand Lavier
By Daniel Birnbaum

DANIEL BIRNBAUM: In a way, postmodern thought is a French invention, isn`t it? Were French artists of the 1980s interested in the books of, say, Jean Baudrillard or Jean-Francois Lyotard?

BERTRAND LAVIER: Not really. Those texts held nothing particularly exotic or attractive for us. Lyotard might have been involved to some extent with the art of the `70s, but not really with that of the `80s. In the US the French thinkers were received in a different way. Philosophy tends to suffer from a kind of jet lag; it seems to take about a decade for a text to cross the Atlantic. At that point things are twisted and distorted-and made productive in a new way. That happened with French thought of the `60s and `70s. Baudrillard was, of course, quite important for people like Peter Halley.

DB: Were those thinkers interested in the art that you and your colleagues were producing?

BL: No, not at all.

DB: It seems that most French philosophers have pretty bad taste in art.

BL: Lyotard has written about Daniel Buren, but that`s one of the very few examples of an important philosopher writing about a significant contemporary artist. Roland Barthes`s Mythologies has had a big impact on artists, I think. And then there`s the general fascination with Gilles Deleuze, which I share, though he had very little to do with the world of contemporary art that we`re talking about.

DB: So what was your main source of inspiration as a young artist, the work of other artists?

BL: Yes. I remember one great conversation I had with Joseph Kosuth and Art & Language at Galerie Eric Fahre in Paris in the late `70s, when we were all showing there. Those were the kind of contacts that I was looking for. Daniel Soutif and Bernard Marcade were also important to me. Soutif was a philosopher who worked as a critic for Liberation at the time, and Marcade was an independent curator. Apart from those two and Pierre Restany, there weren`t really any French intellectuals with whom I had an ongoing conversation. Catherine Millet, for instance, had no interest in the kind of art I found challenging. She was still involved with American artists like Stella and, it seemed to me, also nostalgically bound to Supports/Surfaces. And then she made a kind of leap to the American neo-figurative painters of the `80s, such as Eric Fischl and David Salle. What a jump!

DB: Well, now we know she was busy with other matters.

BL: Apparently.

DB: Were there no other French artists you were close to during this time?

BL: I was rather solitary. I think things have changed recently; there seem to be artists-people like Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe-who share certain interests again, like there were in the `20s and `30s. When I was a young artist, in the late `70s and early `80s, people worked mainly for themselves. I did talk a lot with Daniel Burcn, who is ten years older than me, and during the late `80s I became increasingly close with Christian Boltanski.

DB: Other than Buren, were there any older artists with whom you had a dialogue?

BL: Only Buren-and Raymond Hains. There was no one else.

DB: Were there other international artists of this period with whom you felt some kind of affinity?

BL: I remember seeing Reinhard Mucha`s work in the late `70s. We were both in a show in Stuttgart called "Europa `79," curated by Max Hetzler and Hans-Jurgen Muller. I met Mucha there and had some interesting discussions with him for a year or two.

DB: What would you say are the most central works you did in the `80s?

BL: Well, definitely the painted piano. For me that piece deals with important issues of representation. To paint on an object somehow destabilizes categories. It is a painting, but it is also an object. The true painters didn`t see it as a painting then, but now I think most of themvsee it as a kind of painting in the classical sense, even though it`s three-dimensional. My ambition was a bit subversive: I wanted to challenge traditional ideas of genre. Another important work from the `80s is the refrigerator on the safe, which of course has to do with sculpture. It`s about my formula: 1 + 1 = 1.

DB: It`s about bringing together incompatible things and creating hybrids?

BL: Yes. As you know, I have a background in horticulture. I studied for four or five years at the Ecole d`Horticulture, which is located in the garden of the chateau in Versailles. Some things I picked up there have stayed with me-for instance, an interest in grafting one thing onto another. It`s important for me because through grafting you produce a third thing out of two things. If you combine an orange with a mandarin, for instance, you get a tangerine. It`s really a fifty-fifty mix of the two fruits. Similarly, when I paint: a piano or put a fridge on a safe, the result seems to float between two separate things. Under the layers of paint is the real piano, but you can also concentrate on the paint as paint. One could say that my works are like tangerines.

DB: Are these works also about commodification-a bit like, say, Jeff Koons`s vacuum cleaners?

BL: Yes, I would say that they are about consumer society. Incidentally, they are from the same years as Koons`s early work.

DB: Your art has often been interpreted as being in the tradition of the Duchampian readymade.

BL: That has been a bit irritating, because I think my works owe more to certain American influences, the most important being Andy Warhol. Most people who were looking at my work and writing about it during this period didn`t really see that.

DB: But you have shown a lot outside France as well, in New York, for instance.

BL: In fact I`ve shown mostly outside of Paris. I`ll give you an example from the 1980s: When I had a show at John Gibson Gallery, I showed the refrigerator on a safe, and no one mentioned Duchamp and his readymades. People were more interested in the commodities themselves: the safe as a container of money and the fridge as a container of food. That was a great relief for me. It wouldn`t have happened in France, where Duchamp has made it impossible to see the objects for what they are, or even to see their sculptural aspects, for that matter. The fridge on the safe is also a sculpture on a base.

DB: What other works from the `80s are still important for you?

BL: In 1984 I did the first pieces about Walt Disney-or rather of Walt Disney. The image is taken from a comic strip; it`s a piece of abstract art as represented by Disney. I`ve followed this line of thought for many years. With these works I`ve commented in my own way on the distinctions between high and low, fine art and popular art, and so on. I introduced this line of inquiry in my one-person show at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1984, and it has remained important to me over the years.

DB: Were the `80s a productive period for you in Paris, despite all the limitations you`ve mentioned?

BL: It was a very good time to work, because everything was completely quiet. There was no pressure. But it`s funny-if you ask someone like Raymond Hains, he would probably say the same thing about his youth. The Ecole de Paris would dominate everything in the `60s and `70s as well, so he could concentrate on his works and their relation to language. The Ecole de Paris has been continually redefining itself for fifty years.

DB: What French institutions made a difference for you?

BL: Suzanne Page at the ARC was doing very important things, as she has continued to do, but otherwise the interesting institutions in the `80s were not in Paris. I would say that Le Consortium in Dijon and the capcMusee d`Art Contemporain de Bordeaux were the most crucial.

DB: What about the Pompidou?

BL: The presence of Pontus Hulten in Paris has been of great importance. He presented an alternative to the superacademic style of the Ecole de Paris; he`s always been more direct and pragmatic. But he`s also always been a bit like the Pope, hovering above the petty problems of the rest of us. Actually he gave me my very first one-man show. He was preparing the Pompidou in 1975 and saw my work somewhere. He asked me if I had a gallery, and I said no. Three days later his secretary called and said that Hulten wanted to show my work, which he did at the Centre National d`Art Contemporain in Paris, a kind of temporary space, like a Kunsthalle. That was two years before the Pompidou opened.

DB: Was the Pompidou important for the artists working in Paris during the `80s?

BL: No. Hulten opened with Duchamp and On Kawara, and then came his large historical shows. I can`t remember any living French artists getting much attention.

DB: Not even Buren?

BL: No, not at all. He had his big show there only recently.

DB: And how was your financial situation? Could you live off your art?

BL: I was lucky, because I started to show early with Eric Fahre, and he bought a lot of works for his own collection. I didn`t make a lot of money, but I could survive. The golden `80s were a reality only for very few, primarily a few painters in Paris, like [Jean Charles] Blais and [Robert] Combas. Many showed at Yvon Lambert, where I now show.

DB: Do you ever wish that you hadn`t been French?

BL: No, no. I think that with my kind of art I would have had an easier time had I been in New York, but in the long run I don`t regret having stayed here. It was never an issue for me, actually. I always knew I would stay, like Fellini staying in Cinecitta, just to see how things would go.

Daniel Birnbaum, a contributing editor of Artforum, is director of the Stadelschule art academy in Frankfurt and heads the institution`s Portikus gallery.