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**Rebecca J. DeRoo**, *The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art: The Politics of Artistic Display in France after 1968*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xii + 271 pp. Notes, Bibliography and Index. \$80.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-521-84109-7.

Review by Kirrily Freeman, Saint Mary's University.

How did the student revolution of May 1968 influence the French art world? What were the repercussions of the activists' social criticism on museum practice and artistic display? How was contemporary art informed by these critiques, and how did French cultural policy respond to the new artistic imperatives that emerged in the decade that followed the protests? These are the questions examined in Rebecca J. DeRoo's, *The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art: The Politics of Artistic Display in France after 1968*.

DeRoo begins by examining the critique of French museums and the French artistic establishment that arose out of the 1968 protests. May '68 generated a "reassessment of the unified collective history and national identity that museums were seen to embody" (p. 5). The Museum, as *lieu de mémoire*, represented France to itself. But with the revolution of 1968, this conception of museums as "representations of a unified national culture"—an approach to cultural policy embodied in particular in André Malraux's *maisons de la culture*—"had come to appear elitist, outdated, and disconnected from the everyday, personal, and political experiences of the diverse groups that made up the French people" (p. 5).<sup>[1]</sup> Museums thus became not only a key element of the larger struggles of 1968, but remained a focus of social critique throughout the following decade as activists called for greater inclusiveness, accessibility, relevance and political engagement in artistic production and in French cultural venues, and as French art institutions took up these challenges.

The thread that DeRoo employs to weave the various aspects of her study together is this notion of "the everyday" that was central to the political discourse of 1968. Inspired by Henri Lefebvre's conception of everyday life as a site for a new, creative politics, student protesters and other activists, such as the Situationists, a group of artists and writers who called for revolutionary politics and cultural intervention, made the artistic realm a focus of political action. The incorporation of everyday objects and experiences in art and the interaction between art institutions and people's everyday lives is, as a result, the author argues, a dominant theme in French culture in the aftermath of the student revolts. DeRoo thus focuses on the work of Christian Boltanski and Annette Messager—two prominent French artists whose work has been widely interpreted as engaging with notions of the everyday launched by the '68 protests, both in its oppressive nature and in its revolutionary potential as articulated by Lefebvre. The author demonstrates persuasively, however, that although Boltanski's and Messager's work indeed reflects the spirit of '68, it is not in the way that the French cultural establishment assumed. In fact, DeRoo argues, the dominant interpretations of both artists' work rest on fundamental and problematic misreadings.

Christian Boltanski's exploration of quotidian objects, personal memorabilia, and family photography was lauded by French curators as turning away from elitist high culture and privileging a mode of expression that would resonate widely and be accessible to museum visitors of any class or background. One of Boltanski's most celebrated projects of this era was his *Vitrines*. Boltanski assembled personal, autobiographical material, photographs and memorabilia, as well as elements of prior projects in museum display cases. Critics lauded the *Vitrines* as windows on the everyday life of the artist. DeRoo

argues, however, that by using private materials in this manner Boltanski created not a “universal art” but instead a subtly problematic one. Boltanski decontextualized these everyday objects by presenting them in a museological, even anthropological, setting. Rather than making these objects universally accessible, their presentation made them instead impenetrable in their anonymity. Furthermore, through the fabrication of many personal biographies, Boltanski in fact created multiple and often fictional identities that challenged notions of authorship and explored how artists’ biographies were framed by museums. DeRoo thus locates Boltanski’s work firmly in the notion of the ‘death of the author’ that fuelled many of the ‘68ers cultural critiques. Ironically, however, curators often took a strictly biographical approach to interpreting Boltanski’s work, particularly when the artist revealed his father’s Jewish heritage and wartime struggles. Boltanski’s play with the notion of museum practice and authorship—often through the deliberate manipulation and misrepresentation of his own life story—significantly complicates both the use and reception of his work in the post-’68 context.

DeRoo performs a similar reevaluation of the reception of Annette Messenger’s explorations of everyday experiences. Like Boltanski, Messenger’s work was seized by French curators and critics as a demonstration of the revolutionary potential of everyday life. Drawing from school primers and the popular press, Messenger compiled hundreds of notebooks in which she documented the daily roles and obligations of French women. “Rather than simply depicting everyday activities and chores in the abstract,” however, “Messenger’s work documented the ways that these everyday labors were taught exclusively to girls in the national education curriculum and then reinforced in mass cultural products such as magazines that were aimed at the female market” (p. 129). Messenger’s work demonstrates, therefore, that contrary to much of the political discourse of May ’68 and its institutionalization in French museums in the decade that followed, daily life was never universal, and nor was it necessarily emancipatory. DeRoo also uses Messenger’s work to highlight one of the shortcomings of Lefebvre’s approach to the everyday. Although he acknowledges that the contradictions and routines of everyday life are lived and experienced unevenly, “for Lefebvre, the revolution of the everyday was one in which women played little part” (p. 128). Yet, DeRoo argues, the French feminist movement found women’s daily routines grounds for dissatisfaction and political mobilization. It is in this context, she argues, that Messenger’s work must be read. Ironically, however, just as feminist concerns were marginalized during the 1968 protests when female students found themselves relegated to appropriately feminine tasks, the feminist content of Messenger’s work was also overlooked by the French art establishment—its “gendered specificity...swiftly pushed aside when it was brought into the institution of the museum” (p. 165).

DeRoo continues her investigation of the institutionalization of the spirit of ’68 with a chapter on the creation of the Pompidou center in 1977. This new museum—“transparent, open, flexible, crowded, user-friendly”—appears at first glance to engage directly with the criticisms that activists launched at “museum-cemeteries.” Its architecture, café, shops, audio guides, media center and—not least of all—location in a former working class neighborhood can all be seen as creating a more democratic and accessible art institution through an incorporation of the everyday into the museum experience. Following Baudrillard and other critics, DeRoo argues, however, that the view of the everyday that the Pompidou center actually embodied was one centered on “popular entertainment, mass media and commodity culture” (p. 168)—a “supermarket of culture” in which the public was relegated to the role of passive consumers.

*The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art: The Politics of Artistic Display in France after 1968* makes an important and welcome contribution to our understanding of the broader impact and legacy of 1968 in French art and culture. It investigates the cultural policy of a decade that has received comparatively little attention, and provides a thoughtful and nuanced overview of the evolution of French cultural policy from Malraux to the 1990s, and contextualizes this evolution in the major theoretical debates of the period. DeRoo’s examination of the institutionalization of May ’68 critiques in the creation of the Pompidou centre; her reassessment of the significance of Christian Boltanski’s and Annette Messenger’s

work, as well as the misinterpretation of this work by French curators adjusting to the post-68 cultural climate; and her broader investigation of the politics of artistic display in the second half of the twentieth century make *The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art* a valuable resource for specialists and non-specialists alike.

## NOTES

[1] DeRoo provides a succinct overview of the scholarship and debates surrounding André Malraux's tenure as Minister of Culture and his legacy in chapter one ("Museums as Political Centers") and chapter five ("Institutionalizing '68: The Pompidou Center").

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