Could art history be affected by doubt? Today this discipline, which so superbly rejected the world, with a disdain based on the aura of its object, is accused, even from amongst its own ranks, of having refused to open up for too long, of having rejected debate, critique and renewal.1

It is with these words that Laurence Bertrand Dorléac began her report on the state of art history in France in the mid-1990s, an article that draws a pessimistic picture of the state of the discipline in the country. This account was all the more remarkable for having come from the margins of art history, since Bertrand Dorléac is an historian and her article appeared in a history journal. But at this very moment, doubt had spread across the field of art history, as was attested to by the results of an inquiry published some years earlier in one of the main general intellectual reviews in France, *Le Débat*, under the title: ‘Where has art history come to in France?’ (‘Où en est l’histoire de l’art en France?’).2 It emerged from this that art history was accused of being behind the times in comparison with the situation in other countries.

Not wishing to pass our own judgement on the state of the discipline in the country, we shall settle with seeking to understand the reasons for this ‘crisis’ and, furthermore, its origins. This is the reason we pay particular attention to what appears to be characteristic of the discipline in France, namely, the confluence, which can also turn into conflict, of three traditions. The first is drawn from the world of art criticism; the second depends on the domain of the university, and the third tradition emerged in the museum world, where it continues. Starting with an outline of the principal stakes involved in a certain fragmentation of the discipline

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between these three sites and approaches in art discourse, we shall then observe them within a specific research field, namely, the study of modern art; this field appears as a laboratory in which this conflict of traditions is clearly revealed. We are deliberately leaving to one side other aspects or, indeed, other debates, such as those concerned with national artistic identity (the debate on the existence of the French ‘primitifs’, or of a French Renaissance, or a French Baroque), even though these questions could equally well have been addressed as interesting foci of historiographic and epistemological observation.3

As a point of departure, let us return to the sense of crisis attested to by various writings in the 1990s, and which stood in contrast to the health of the art world as well as the infatuation of the public with heritage and with exhibitions in general. Critics saw a discipline that was, essentially, turned in on itself, holding on to an autonomy thought to be pure of all admixtures, a reflex that became all the more marked in a time of crisis.4 The most prominent aspect of this trend was a mistrust of the other human sciences and their interpretative theories, which went beyond the strict collecting, authenticating and dating of artistic documents with a view to the production of catalogues.5 To put it simply, one might say that the debate tended to be polarized between ‘internalists’, the heirs of an antiquarian tradition, and ‘externalists’, who instead laid claim to the tradition of cultural history, calling for an opening up of art history to other fields of knowledge.6

This distinction stems from links to different historical traditions. In order to acquire scientific legitimacy and gain autonomy from history, of which it was for a long time regarded as a simply auxiliary science (academic recognition has been very slow), art history was compelled to set itself apart from a certain ‘essayistic’ tradition, symbolized by figures such

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