Contents

3 Visual Pleasure: A Feminist Perspective  Johanna Drucker

12 A ROUND TABLE ON CRITICISM
  Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe  Jeanne Silverthorne
  Sidney Tillim  Robert C. Morgan  Mira Schor
  Saul Ostrow  Klaus Ottmann  Marjorie Welish
  Joshua Decker  Steven Melville  John Miller  Pat McCoy

28 Brisas del Caribe: Renegade Space, The New Era Project, and the Value Discourse  Collins & Milazzo

38 Innovations in Image Technology  Joseph Nechvatal

41 Book Reviews by Daryl Chin, Robert C. Morgan, Jessica Prinz

50 Letter by Yve-Alain Bois

53 Contributors
VISUAL PLEASURE: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

JOHANNA DRUCKER

Pleasure in Perspective

It seems astonishing to me that nearly twenty years after the first feminist formulations of visual pleasure as the provenance of the male gaze, that there has been no coherent way to think ourselves out of the apparent dead end of debates which pit the symbolic construction of gender against the seemingly essentialist insistence on the gendered body in the discussion of feminine sexuality. Critics, art historians, and academics keep taking up Laura Mulvey, Jacqueline Rose, Juliet Mitchell, and other psychoanalytically informed practitioners of feminist theory, as if the basic description of the woman in their models were not patently absurd. The premises of the debate have bogged down the theoretical apparatus in a hopeless mess of nuanced "yes-we-know-the-model-is-flawed-but" type qualifications.

Meanwhile, discussion of theoretical issues has shifted to topics whose timely significance obscures the fact that part of their usefulness lies in their blocking ongoing consideration of feminist issues. Witness the eclipse of discussions of feminist theory and visual pleasure by the attention to, for instance, post-coloniality and multiculturalism, issues whose currency has been granted more political viability, and whose appeal is not, I would assert, incidental. It was certainly not necessary for feminist concerns to compete with multicultural concerns as if only one token "other" at a time could be present on the mainstream platform. But it was certainly convenient to cast middle-class white women feminists in the role of careerist opportunists and split the advocacy of "otherness" along ethnic, racial, and class lines. Convenient for whom? Not for any of us who remain in the "other" categories - and all the trendy theory of current conference titles serves to deceive us not one whit about our present status.

Feminist concerns did not fall out of favor because of the ascendancy of the rhetorics of multiculturalism or post-coloniality. If there is still no place for the feminine subject within the patriarchy, then it is because the place of exclusion remains legislated, and the fundamental asymmetries on which patriarchal power gains its legitimacy remain intact. The undoing of this asymmetry is not an academic exercise in theory language, but a subversive attempt to, finally, wrest that order out of its hold on authority. And feminist theory came dangerously close to empowering women on their own terms before it encountered both theoretical and political impasses.

Along the way, the investigation of women’s pleasure got dumped on by puritanical feminists as a bourgeois concern and now gets put down as trivial by contrast to other (supposedly more serious) instances of power relations and
abuses. But the fact that there is still not a viable theory of feminine pleasure, and of visual pleasure from a feminist perspective, shows all too clearly that women's issues are being written off again. The issue of pleasure is central to the feminist agenda — how we are to become the subjects of our own subjectivity and our own sexuality. The problems that pertain here are those of any disenchanted, unempowered, abused or colonized class of subalterns, secondary, or "other" individuals whose subjectivity is severely threatening to the terms of hegemonic power.

In addition, the too-comfortable consignment of theory dealing with female sexuality to the mooted (misused) post-feminist domain is perfectly in sync with a general state of cultural affairs in which Anita Hill's utterly ordinary statements of common women's experience are construed as the ravings of a sexually depraved (deprived) female, in which most date rape charges are dismissed by undercutting the credibility of the woman violated, in which Jeff Koons displays himself in the Hallmark Hall of porn, and in which Camille Paglia becomes the spokes­woman of the new right's misogynist condemnation of women's struggle for parity in social and symbolic arenas.

The need for the christian, fundamentalist, right to repress female sexuality is just the usual story, and the reinforcement of feminine subservience, of women as the objects, not subjects, of their own language and desire, is part and parcel of the structure of extreme conservatism. But the (surprise?) attack from the supposedly radical leftist arena of theorization of female sexuality takes the form of condemning it as the indulgent preoccupation of privileged, educated, white middle-class women whose chief concern is achieving multiple orgasms within the confines of conventional (safe) heterosexual relations. This point misses the distinction between apparent privilege and specific opportunity — that if a certain measure of privilege is required to permit the investigation of fundamental and ongoing forms of repression (oppression) then the attack should be aimed at the repressive structures, not at the liberating investigation.

This essay is intended as an opening to debate, to disambiguate and discuss, about the status of visual pleasure in women artists' work and critical theory. It is important to render explicit a hierarchy at work within criticism which continues to confine women to the supposed feminine category of visual pleasure. The language which gave rise to the fiction of visual plenitude was one that firmly and unambiguously located women's work within the category of the feminine. Visual pleasure — aggressive, indulgent, tactile, phallic.

The theoretical vocabulary with which women artists and critics come to describe and represent their own subject position is burdened with the confusions of a patriarchal legacy. The terminology and premises of that discourse are fundamentally misogynist. Or, they are so steeped in the naturalized sense of women's "otherness" that remarkably, several generations of brilliant and insightful feminist theorists have bought into the "description" offered by psychoanalysis without condemning it as a prescription, and have been unable to think their way out of the dead end which theories of the symbolic construction of gender railroaded us into on the rigid tracks of Lack. Women's artistic practice demonstrates the inadequacy of the theoretical model, as does women's experience. If there is any chance for parity in the decades looming darkly before us, it will come with the undoing of the distinguishing marks of difference and all that they stand for historically through an insistent articulation of our existence as the subjects of our own pleasure and through the symbolic construction of ourselves as subjects, gendered, but not gendered subjects. The order must reverse itself if the consequences of difference may be understood within a construction of difference as a consequence, not a cause, of gendered identity as a cultural form.

Visual Pleasure and Women's Work

To begin with the discussion of pleasure is already to announce the political stakes at the center of my concerns. Women painters' work is rarely theorized as visual pleasure — either source of it or evidence of it. Women's work, when it bears clear evidence of the tactile, sensual, handmade, typically receives praise of faint and damning variety: pretty, decorative, ephemeral, or, flowing, stained, and sensual (i.e. receptive to stimulation/response, not capable of generating, initiating). Male painters, in contrast, have been able to lay claim to a visual practice legitimated not only through praise, but through theoretical validation.

If we look back onto the relatively recent history of painterly activity (I confine myself to painting for the sake of simplicity here) of the last half century, we find that male painters have systematically been theorized as bearers of visual pleasure in paint, and that that pleasure is linked to a notion (however misguided) of the possibility of visuality as a plenitude — full, replete, autonomous, and self-sufficient. Certainly the bulk of post-1945 painting by men, especially the Pollocks, Newman, Rothko, Tobey, Twomblys, generation, through to Saieh, Fischl, Kiefer, and then Goldstein, Bleckner, Richter is distinguished by this term of pleasure and through the symbolic construction of ourselves as subjects, gendered, but not gendered subjects. The order must reverse itself if the consequences of difference may be understood within a construction of difference as a consequence, not a cause, of gendered identity as a cultural form.
ing counterpoint, her assured engagement with an iconography of sexual signs, of bodily form, and sexual potency... now transposed into the machismo gesture of the big machine.

By and large, the women artists who have recently achieved a place in the mainstream of theorized work have moved far from the handmade, physical, tactile mode of production and squarely into the realm of text, appropriation, fabrication, and photography. It seems that the farther the work is from any trace of or imprint of the woman's body, the more likely it is to achieve a measure of critical success.

Women artists who succeeded in their bid for authority and recognition, often did so by claiming an integral relation to theory. That meant text. Visuality per se could not be theorized in feminist terms, but text could play in the high stakes critical theory game. Many women artists renounced any direct engagement with material as pleasure in production and opted instead for a critical stance exemplary of theoretical positions which could be glossed out in critical writing. This was an important achievement, but it left in place a hierarchical set of distinctions according to which women had to work through particular modes, not others, in order to achieve legitimacy in critical terms.

Present Practices as the Source of Theory

The relation between theory and women artist's practice has taken a grotesquely distorted form in the last ten years. Somehow a perceived distinction between the "theoretical girls" and other artists has come to be grounded in the notion that the former use "typography and Marx" while the latter employ such retro materials as the "paintbrush." This characterization lifted in this instance out of a Dan Cameron essay, but just as likely to be found almost at random in pages of *Arts, Artforum,* and other mainstream critical journals) unjustly demeans both groups while making it seem that they gain their definition through oppositions of the intellectual/political and the tactile/personal. In a similar vein one has barely skim the same journals to find painters like Joan Mitchell described as someone who has "continued to paint without relying on critical theory as a buttress for her work." Theory is reduced in such formulations to that which is often expressively political and always necessarily linguistic. Any practice which is bound up in the material aspects of production is deemed untheoretical by definition.

But if we were to look across the many faces of women artists' productions of the past decade — could we not reformulate a concept of theory from observations of such varied practices? If, after all, Pollock, Newman, Reinhardt, and other male painters could be, and have been almost as nauseum, used as points of departure for theoretical discussion of representation, indexicality, phenomenological, and semiotic models of visual production — then why not Joan Mitchell? Joan Brown? Ellen Phelan? June Leaf?

My point is not to demonstrate a feminine mode of production — I frankly don't believe in one — but to demonstrate that women's work can be used to generate theoretical discussion on a par with that generated by male artists. Looking at the work of Joan Mitchell or June Leaf, for instance, it is immediately apparent that both women are engaged with a primary form of pleasure — the pleasure of production. With Mitchell this plays out in the open textures of her surfaces, the glyptic rhythm of her forms, and the investigation of relations between bounded and unbounded areas of activity. Her concern with rhythm and boundaries, chaos and limit, is in no way duplicated in the work of her male contemporaries and predecessors; it uniquely contributes to formulation of these issues in visual terms. June Leaf also makes evident a pleasure which takes the initial rhythmic activity of hand to canvas into the domain of the densely layered surface. Much treated and worked, the surface of a painting like *The Golden Steps* (1986) becomes a field of tactile, physical reality as well as one in which the organization of visual forms into readable icons insists on the ambiguity of figure/field and mark/sign relations. These are theoretical propositions, as are those of Mitchell, and the evident pleasure of production need not be reduced to a somatic or physical expression linked to female painters. Again my point is not that women's work bears distinct marks of biological gender, but that the one absent feature of the critical reception of women's work has been the understanding that there are theoretical propositions within these visual, tactile, physical activities.

Pleasure of production is one of the most fundamental elements of most painters work — nothing quite beats the satisfaction of mushing pigment around on a surface in thick, loose impasto or veiling washes. But this pleasure, reductive, even infantile, primal as it is, is not the only production pleasure available in the construction of visual works. Pat Steir, for instance, self-consciously explores the range of ways in which this painterly investigation leads to intellectual and theoretical understanding of issues basic to visuality: how does a mark participate in the production of a meaningful image? If Leaf and Mitchell give evidence of the way in which a painter's being "in" the work can replicate that interiority in the field of visual encounter offered to the viewer, then Steir moves in and out of such fields/marks/distinctions to articulate the range of meaning production in which a painter's strokes participate. The systematic deconstruction of painterly practice in *Blue Sky, Red Tree, Blue Sea* (1984), for instance, makes clear the ways in which Steir's work is overwhelmingly theoretical, and her theory concerns are painting concerns. But if Steir's work has been granted a degree of theoretical credibility and legitimacy, perhaps it is because she herself has claimed such terms; certainly the work of Leaf and Mitchell has not.

Jane Hammond, taking a completely different approach to paint and iconography, allows the tension between critical concerns and painterly production to be worked out in her canvases. A work like *Untitled* (141, 257), 1989, for instance, positing the cliche cut-out silhouette of an "old fashioned" woman (high coiffure, long skirts, elaborate, bedecked and ribboned garb) in front of an easel while the worked surface, distinctly painterly, sustains the words "defensive" and "jitters," is again squarely involved with theoretical propositions. These are made in visual terms — the image of the silhouette functions through associations of a legacy of femininity, while the pleasure of looking provided by the complex surface works against the pain of identification with the dilemma of the woman painter.

Thus pleasure of production and pleasure for the viewer, not isomorphic by
any means, both function in these works while the works themselves raise issues which are theoretical insofar as they investigate the very fundamentals of visuality, representation, and image construction. Certain investigations, such as those which work to quote style and reformulate canonical imagery through visual means, can only be worked out through paint and canvas. I am thinking of the works of a Canadian artist, Alice Mansell, whose reworkings in the style of De Kooning, Kahlo, and others, is of a different order of critique than the appropriation/citation work of either Levine, Diao, or recent Fischl. Taking up the brush and reformulating the styles of canonical (not exclusively male) figures she inserts herself as a female subject of production into a discourse from which she has been historically excluded. Again, clearly a theory project.

Likewise, the eclecticism of Joan Snyder, with its seemingly irreconcilable heterogeneity of activity in the frame of a single work, is of a different order altogether than that of, say, Sigmar Polke whose visual inventiveness is certainly granted theoretical status. And the object/image dialectic of Ellen Phelan calls into question much of the language used to define and delimit the Minimalist project in its relentless pursuit of object status. This enumeration could go on — April Gornick and Joan Nelson enter into clear dialogue with the melancholy and nostalgia of romanticism precisely as it is coded into paint and understood as a painterly activity; Jeane Quick to See Smith interrogates the icons of ethnic identity in both her manner of painting and thematics; and no one more than Joan Brown had challenged a self-constructed sense of identity through a sequence of painted images.

The link to theory in these works seems more logical and insistent than its denial. How, actually, can their theoretical aspects have been overlooked? Partly, I think, through the false opposition, the sense that theory work is language based, and that visual means are inadequate for the directness of critique unless they come out of a mass culture, mass media mode of production. The pleasure of production — whether in the physical rhythm of painting, drawing, mark making, or the tactile satisfaction of working a surface, or in the engagement with the proposition of intellectual concerns as visual issues worked out in assemblage, imagery, thematics, or at the level of textural visuality are pleasures well known to any artist. That women engage in this pleasure, are involved in it, unbounded and unbound in it, bounded and unbounded, is a subjective identification, formation, expression, and articulation through the visual and material pleasure of such production means would seem to be obvious. The extension of this claim to theoretical legitimacy and the fact of pleasure in the work and women’s clear position as the subject of both that pleasure and the visual enunciation, can be extended to work which is sculpture, installation work such as that of Louise Bourgeois, Maureen Conner, Kiki Smith, Barbara Bloom — the list would be as eclectic and cross generational, cross disciplinary and varied in theoretical stance as the group of painters mentioned above.

However, a curious thing has occurred, if one can generalize (which is dangerous) in respect to the transformation of women artists’ practices as they have made a bid for or received and then responded to critical attention of an overtly theoretical variety. That has been the tendency to reduce the handmade, tactile qualities of such artists’ work and move toward the hard surfaces, removed production, and synthetic seamless object status of fabricated work. That what is repressed in such manufacture is also the trace of the body in production, is, I think, an effect of the extent to which women’s physicality suggests a disadvantage vis a vis theoretical credibility. Visual pleasure from a feminist perspective, and a theoretical formulation which would allow women their real bodies without condemning them to their anatomy, continues to be a non-articulated area. That we are continually condemned to that anatomy in practical, legal, and medical terms seems not to shake the foundations of a perverse theoretical stance which would wish away the real body as if it could be replaced with a symbolic construction. The difficulty lies in theorizing a symbolic construction of identity, psychic, interior and represented, within a real body whose identity is socially disciplined on terms which are anything but symbolic. The only way out of this disbalance, I think, is through shifting the terms on which that symbolic ordering is understood — which means, basically, dismantling the role and function of the phallus.

So why theorize this visual pleasure, of all things? Because the conspicuous absence of critical legitimacy for women artists engaged in painting as pleasure is a clear symptom of the current state of theory. But also because the issue of pleasure, as formulated within psychoanalysis, is at the heart of subjectivity. We know, as women artists, the pleasure of production and production of pleasure — intimately, complicitly, complexly, in all the vicissitudes of subject/object relations and their interchangeable configurations of our psychic positioning. That this knowledge has led to practice is abundantly clear. But it has not led to theory.

**Feminist Theory and Visual Pleasure**

In fact, no theory of female pleasure from a visual perspective has emerged from production. Where Pleasure came into theoretical discourse, it came in terms of reception, critical reception, distanced, arch, and superior. Frankly, that’s a limited notion of pleasure — imagine describing the pleasure of eating some disgustingly indulgent food (chocolate eclairs) in the same terms (I was constantly aware that the eclair was a mass culture low level production and my critique of its construction let me enjoy my flirtatious identification with the instance of its consumption . . . ) — nobody would buy it.

The women artists who entered the critical mainstream in the 1980s — Kruger, Holzer, Sherman, Kolthowski, Bender, and others — made use of theoretical strategies and, increasingly, fabricated work, to demonstrate the symbolic nature of gender construction. The Feminine was a matter of signs, not essence, and could be critiqued as such through self-conscious manipulation of these signs and their cultural production. Therefore, the body as such, the female body in particular, became highly disputed territory in the visual arts. If men used it they were sexist and if women used it they were essentialist. On the one hand, the Body became the site for authority and the legitimating term of critical and artistic discourse — performance artists in particular like Gina Pane, Carolee Schneemann, Karen Finlay, and others — used their bodies as a means of insisting on the feminine body and of entering a discourse with means no man could dispute. On the other hand, the body was successfully wished away by the Baudrillardian post-
modern simulacrum, where it was evaporated along with all other traces of the "real."

By the end of the 1980s, then, gender was all symbolic, but women were excluded from a place in the symbolic order by virtue of their anatomy — but that anatomy was not real either, bodies having become conveniently taboo through intersections of post-feminist discourse (women don't exist), taboos against eroticized bodies brought on by the AIDS epidemic as imposed on the artistic community by the moral christian right, and denial of the reality of either bodies or women by theoretical extremists of the Simulacral.

The root of this difficulty continues to reside in the psychoanalytical model that is at the basis of all these theoretical positions. In psychoanalysis, women cannot have pleasure, cannot be in pleasure, cannot be subjects (to begin with), and certainly not subjects of pleasure. Where Freud was simply baffled, unable to come up with either a narrative of childhood development that permitted women to come into gendered identity through anything but a series of perverse and complicated denials, transformations, and so on, Lacan turned femininity into the truly dark continent.

Lacan declares that since sexuality (hetero, always) revolves around the male genitalia, woman's role with respect to pleasure is always only to provide it. She can't have it, and if she does, she enters the deep space of no return, no articulation, and no subjectivity. While male pleasure (of having, not being the phallus) is conceived within a subject position, feminine pleasure (a non-existent category anyway) is conceived of as always outside of subjectivity. In fact, woman disappears in jouissance. She can't know anything about it, can't articulate it or form it, and can only experience it — but not as a subject.

Enough. There are ad nauseam tons of texts explaining the nuances and details of this position — but they all depend upon the same basic concepts: gender difference in psychoanalytic terms is defined in reference to the privileged term of the phallus. We know this is wrong, incorrect, absurd. What seems incredible is that such formulations were not only accepted, used, described, but that they persist, and with all kinds of apologies attached to them. Jacqueline Rose asserts, for instance, that psychoanalysis "does not produce that definition. It gives an account of how that definition is produced." But psychoanalysis does continue to produce precisely that definition of women as the without-penis-and-thus-lacking-lack-differently gender. The psychoanalytic model of the subject continues to be completely and utterly useful — we do live our lives as psychic beings — but the burden of Lack is one we should have theorized out of existence ages ago. Why? How? Because we have the right to and necessity for the assertion of our subjectivity as women (we are women — difference does exist) and we can achieve this through the theoretical and practical articulation of our own pleasure.

The issue does come down to real women, and to women as such. We are returned to our bodies with a vengeance in the current condition of culture — and to theorize ourselves out of that recognition is to bury our heads in the sands heaped up by conservative forces. The risk of being criticized for essentialist biases is nowhere near as great as that incurred by repression of and self-censorship of the impulse to become the subjects of our own desire and claim a space as subjects within the symbolic. The problem of reinserting the body into both artistic practice and theoretical formulation remains, and has acquired a new urgency. More important, it seems absolutely imperative to theorize gender in terms which both include the body as a real and determining factor and also, include the realization that most of what follows from that determination is socially and culturally produced.

Since art remains the least alienated form of labor in our culture, the one domain with at least that mythic idea of work as one's own attached to it, then it seems logical that it would be the first, and most likely place, to look for the manifestation of feminine pleasure as praxis. Hopefully, then, this essay has also made a contribution toward beginning to demonstrate that it may be the most likely place to begin a theoretical articulation of that feminine pleasure as well.

Notes
3. In a gross, reductive analogy, one could compare the largely appropriated and fabricated works of the Plastic Fantastic Lover Object show at Blum Helman Gallery, Fall 1991, with the distinctly more tactile, physical work of the Physical Relief exhibition at The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery at Hunter College, Fall 1991.
A round table discussion on criticism took place in New York City on May 19, 1991, initiated and organized by Robert C. Morgan and Saul Ostrow, and moderated by Saul Ostrow. Marjorie Welsh, Sidney Tillim, Jeanne Silverthorne, John Miller, Mira Schor, Klaus Ottmann, Joshua Decker, Pat McCoy, Stephen Melville, and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe were invited to respond to the following premise:

Our culture is in the midst of a shift in criteria and the basis for cultural (read art) production is increasingly philosophical rather than limited to aesthetic formalism. The role of criticism takes on new importance. No longer does it function to define criteria merely to define quality, innovational importance, or progress, or the interpreter of the artist’s intention. We now take on the active role of interceding between object and viewer, using the artist’s intent as so much raw material for the construction of a field of activity which is only determined by a self-conscious, self-reflective practice of interpretation. The present situation claims a subjective and semiotic indeterminacy to be our general state. The telos of progress and emancipation and all the other master narratives and received truths of the 19th century we now subject to doubt and denial. Most of us are aware of this situation and how we address it in our critical practice.

It may be of mutual benefit to us all to organize a round table on criticism so that we may collectively discuss the territory of criticism today.

The following preliminary statements were circulated among participants before the event. Also involved in the discussion but not represented by written statements were Peter Halley and Joseph Masheck. An edited transcript of the proceedings may be published by the New Institute of Contemporary Art in Amsterdam later this year.

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe

Happy as I am to take part in the discussion proposed by Robert Morgan and Saul Ostrow I feel I should say at the outset that I’m a little perturbed by the terms of the reference they’ve set for it. For one thing I should have thought that “aesthetic formalism” was philosophical if it was anything at all, so I’m not sure what is meant when Morgan-Ostrow say that criticism is moving away from that toward something which is “increasingly” philosophical.

Similarly, contrary to what M-O seem to be suggesting, it seems to me that criticism has always interceded between the viewer and the object, not least by proposing “criteria,” whether these have to do with “quality,” which I take to refer to aesthetic judgement of some sort, or of “innovational importance,” which I take to have to do with the historicism which dogs art criticism as it has perhaps generally (i.e., historically) haunted aesthetics.

I agree that the idea of progress is one now securely lodged in the past, although I think I should want to suggest that our continuing need for it is to some extent confirmed by our willingness to allow it to sneak back in under the name of irreversibility. Those of us who long since rejected progress would have great difficulty doing without the idea of irreversibility. When I say “us” I mean a vaguely defined group which includes me.

In which regard I have one more reservation to express concerning the presuppositions underlying our discussion. In their letter to us Robert and Saul advance the idea that most of “us” are “aware of this situation and how we address it in our critical practice.” I’m not so sure. In my opinion the chief irony of the recent past has been that so many people have convinced themselves that they are being ironical. That Jenny Holzer should represent the United States at the Venice Biennalle does indeed seem ironical, but the irony in question seems to me not to have attracted public comment. What’s ironical about the choice of Holzer has nothing to do with any capacity on the part of the work of art to be subversive, but rather the reverse. It illustrates the collusion between the cultural left and the political right which has characterized the past decade, and in so doing demonstrates the similarities between the two: both offer nicely (usually expensive) presented slogans as the key to power. The America of Reagan-Bush and Holzer is governed by Ayatollahish slogans which lead only to self-gratification and the obfuscation of that which the slogan pretends to address. Faced with someone wearing a Holzer tee shirt which said “Use what’s dominant in the culture to change society,” the L.A. painter Roy Dowell asked “What does she mean, stupidity?” This seems to raise some questions regarding the current state of the territory of criticism which one might want to discuss.

On the matter of “aesthetic formalism,” as opposed, for example, to what Derrida calls the “blind formalism of the context.” I should say we need a lot more of it rather than any less. Actually describing works of art can enable one to see how they make meaning rather than simply — as if that were ever the case — reflecting it. I take the position that we live in a Realist era that deludes itself into believing that it’s post-Modern, and by realism I mean any discourse which is reducible to the complementary discourses of history and the psychological. I am therefore suggesting nowadays that the whole situation would be considerably improved if we were to permit ourselves to consider the question of the beautiful, if only so that we may have access to a way of thinking which attends to the work of art as complete and inhuman rather than as a product of human lack, fear, trauma, and failure (typically, at the historicist end of the Realist cosmology, failure to progress, or most customarily failure to progress in the right way).

I should at the same time suggest that the various criticisms of the context be opened up to a more rigorous kind of analysis with regard to its own methodologies and motivations. This would allow us to consider the extent to which the context is never one thing, one set of relationships, and also the way in which...
we seem to have invented an historical period in which shopkeepers get to tell us what art history is with the help of critics who consistently imply, or even propose, that this is in some way a counter-cultural phenomenon.

Jeanne Silverthorne

Part of the problem has been choosing a focus for this preliminary statement—'I've left it unfocused. I'm using the first person (an already outdated anachronism) because one thing I do want to talk about is the possibility of making theory more revealing of its own processes, about how it can shake its authoritarianism. I usually start an essay with a series of notes on index cards (the approved academic fashion). Here are some cards before they've been ordered, keyed, or edited.

Card: Benjamin (what a tired old reference!) argues (with lots of other people) that no amount of revolutionary content does anything—you must change the technology—so too with criticism, theory? We need a new technique(s).

Card: Suit the format of a piece of writing to its use—contextualize. This virtually demands a plethora of forms, including, for some audiences, that of the dense, logocentric academic essay.

Card: On the subject of use: the question of the review. One writer compares this very rigid format to that of the sonnet. Interesting in that it suggests how far from the objective or from the consumer guide the review should go. On the other hand... Your letter says that criticism can no longer operate as the elucidation of the artist's intentions. I agree. But I also think that the practice of putting yourself in the shoes of a critic gives its distinguished philosophical history from Heidegger to Shapiro to Derrida of the maker of a piece—especially in reviewing—is an antidote to bias (or rather creates a happy bias). In a way this is about arriving, under one's own steam without the help of the intentional fallacy, at the producer's intention. However it generally has the wonderful effect of being both on and wildly off the mark, from the producer's point of view, thus extending the life of the piece and revealing all kinds of things about the problems of originality and difference.

Card: Along the lines of context and use: what about Said's notion that theorists become journalists, write for more popular organs (how about the tabloids?).

Card: In 1980 Gregory Ulmer wrote that "theorists are the mode best suited for moving out of the impasse reached by the modernist movement in the arts." Now we may think that theory, although it has broken from "mimesis," is still too totalizing. In turning from the center (a fine accomplishment) perhaps it turned too far inward, perhaps it is now not social enough, not outgoing enough. It's like a monotonous, monologue. Maybe we should take the call of the early 80s for a "paraliterary" more seriously; instead of talking about how we should do it, we should do it.

Sidney Tillim

STATEMENT

I want to approach the subject of the role of criticism today from the point of view of the artist as critic. Early in my career my writing was better known than my painting. In the early days of the National Endowment for the Arts I was denied a grant in painting when a member of the panel (whom I knew) said I was a critic, i.e., not a painter. In those days artists were recommended by "experts" and an insider had assured me of an award. Ironically, one of the members of the review committee would later become my dealer and besides I eventually received an NEA grant in 1974. In those days Donald Judd was a critic—we wrote for the same magazine and, indeed, Judd reviewed my first New York show of view of the artist as critic. Early in my career my writing was better known than my painting. In the early days of the National Endowment for the Arts I was denied a grant in painting when a member of the panel (whom I knew) said I was a critic, i.e., not a painter. In those days artists were recommended by "experts" and an insider had assured me of an award. Ironically, one of the members of the review committee would later become my dealer and besides I eventually received an NEA grant in 1974. In those days Donald Judd was a critic—we wrote for the same magazine and, indeed, Judd reviewed my first New York show in 1965. He has since denied his role as a critic, which you can do when you are as successful as he is. By the same token, as soon as Fairfield Porter was established as a painter, he stopped writing for The Nation; in 1969 I did the same thing. Today many artists write, but criticism does not have the ideologically decisive role it once had and if you're Tom Lawson you can say it's just another way of contributing to the "disciplinary." Though I did not publish between 1969 and 1983 (there was one exception) and only intermittently recently, I think I'm still tagged as a critic by some. But I have a new take on the problem. In the 60s and earlier, art in general had more of
an identity problem than criticism. Not only was criticism's role more secure, but also writing as a craft was more acceptable to bourgeois culture. The writer does not work with his hands and is a natural sort of aristocrat, or courtier-aristocrat. In addition high art was unsure of itself in the face of the sheer weight, power, credibility, and influence of what we loosely and patronizingly refer to as popular culture. Criticism was crucial (and even respected, however grudgingly), but it gradually was discovered that the successful artist was more reassuring than criticism which, as the cult of success developed, became more involved in larger social and political questions. Very simply, its modernist role of advocacy had been eliminated. The obsessive Greenberg-bashing in post-modern criticism is really a function of criticism's attempt to reestablish itself as art's ideological consort. Meanwhile, no onus is attached to the artist who writes today because art journalism is usually received as a species of publicity. Inevitably, I find the premise of this "round table" somewhat disingenuous at the very least. Virtually no formalist criticism exists, yet once again a new criticism is proposed as an alternative to "aesthetic formalism.

However, there may be something eerily plausible, perhaps inevitable about this private congress. Over forty years ago, LIFÉ magazine organized a round table on modern art to discuss a tendency in the plastic arts that a society with no real commitment to high art nonetheless felt threatened by. Among the participants were Meyer Schapiro, Clement Greenberg, James Johnson Sweeney, various scholars and curators from Europe as well as the United States. At one point Greenberg says, "I think it is one of the tragedies of our time that great painting has to do without 'recognizable' subject matter." Is there a way in which, mutatis mutandis, this discussion, implying a no less uncomprehending public, is analogous to the one that took place a few years before New York allegedly stole the idea of the avant-garde?

Robert C. Morgan

The practice of art criticism requires a method that is not an adherent to a specific style or movement. The practice of this method should not be confused with theory, although the best criticism uses a set of criteria determined through theory and history.

Criticism is a subjective means of thinking and writing in direct correspondence to the observation and interpretation of the art object. The method does not have to impose an evaluation.

Qualitative judgement is determined through a subjective intervention into a structural paradigm, a binary system, which is implicit in the process of writing. Evaluations are the consequence rather than the rationale behind criticism.

There are three necessary components in good criticism: history, theory, and intuition. A certain tension occurs in the process of writing in order to maintain a balance of these three components. Ideas proceed inductively from observation, yet the point of tension in the writing is a visualization of the object — an in-

tentionality that is bound to the process of thinking. Visualization is different than observation. Visualization is a conceptual reconstruction where contact is made through knowledge of history and application of theory. Theory in criticism is a matter of appropriation, of appropriate cognition in relation to a purposefully subjective language. The object ultimately matters and is thus dematerialized as language.

Mira Schor

Saul Ostrow's first letter to us stated that the "basis for cultural (read art) production is increasingly philosophical rather than limited to aesthetic formalism. I find the polarization implicit in this statement problematic. Painting was crippled by the exclusionary nature of Greenbergian formalism — its elimination of narrative content. But it is more than a possibility that a philosophical basis for art production would cripple visuality. I would note in passing that aesthetic formalism had its basis in philosophical systems, so that it should be more explicitly stated that the philosophical systems in play now are not only based in language but stress linguistic concerns. Painting as practiced in the wider art community rather than at the edge of the postmodern avant-garde has suffered from its lack of contact with and understanding of critical theory. And much art work produced under the aegis of critical theory seems opposed to visuality and visual pleasure. Who does this polarization serve?

I would hope for a renewed attention to the art object and to art practice as it actually exists — what artists are actually doing and thinking as opposed to mediation of the art object and art practice through exclusive/excluding scrims of prescriptive/proscriptive theories which value language above visuality.

I note certain recent trends in art criticism and art practice which perpetuate the imposition of polarizing systems onto art practice. On the one hand it seems that we may be in for a body of overdetermined, illustrative, polemic, and ultimately conventional in its visual formulations, political art, art work which hews to the most stereotypical concept of what political art is and should look like. On the other hand, we seem to be headed for a period of retranscription into equally conventional new neos, neo-spirituality, neo-abstraction, neo-modernism.

This polarized trend does not critically examine some of the ways in which the avant-garde and its several critical establishments themselves engage in exclusionary practices: for example, in the multitude of ways in which the history of feminist art has been obscured and current readings of gender work have been warped by the hierarchical dichotomy between so-called essentialism and social construction of gender; or, for another example, in the subtle ways in which the question of "quality" has come to represent an occluded return to high art universal standards.

One would hope for genuine multicultural diversity, rather than a dual system in which avant-garde aesthetic and intellectual criteria are stringently applied to one group (white artists) while "other" groups are tactically ghettoized: for exam-
ple by excluding emotional, personal, narrative, and decorative impulses in the work of the first group while tolerating it from groups traditionally considered Other. Further, the art critical system seems to only be able to focus on one Other at a time which it can coopt and absorb, pitting Others against each other, for the attention of the One, the center. If it is people of color, then it can't be women, if it is gays, then it can't be people of color and so on. True diversity would stress the critical system and threaten the tenets of modernism/postmodernism and notions of the avant-garde.

A broader relationship to art of the past, or rather, a relationship to a broader spectrum of art of the past would also help move discourse past the limited arena of oedipal reversals among modernism and postmodernism which underpin the concept of the avant-garde. Similarly a more inclusive conceptual base is called for: it is crucial, for example, not to reflexively jettison poststructuralism and deconstruction in search of the "next" ideological form. A more synthetic position is called for, an art of complexity (and, similarly, an art criticism of complexity -- the two go hand in hand).

As an artist who has taken on "the active role of interceding" not so much "between object and viewer," as between artist, art object, and critical establishment, I find myself of two minds about the "territory of criticism" and the necessity for artists to intervene within criticism. Occasionally I've experimented with a very old teaching method, the demonstration painting, in order to enhance students' awareness of painting as a metaphorical manipulation of material: the interface between what the painting says and how it uses paint to say it has been stunted by recent discourse. In these instances, as I become involved with the materials and the activity of painting, I find that I cannot speak. Although criticism and "theory" have been of enormous value in the development of contemporary art, and, I feel, of my own visual art practice, there are times when it seems to interrupt the flow of paint, as painting can interrupt the flow of language. — April, 1991

Saul Ostrow

The job of the critic is to be partisan and the purpose of criticism is to recognize or propose the terms by which resistance to banality and mediation may be implemented. The critic identifies, indexes, points the ways by which art and criticism may remain dynamic and compelling in a tricritical relationship of subject, object, and context. Such a view may just be one of those historically produced ideological prejudices but I do believe that a culture that merely articulates effects in place of content, is a culture that is striving for the meaningless in the same way that certainty is nonsensical. However I'm not sure if it is our job to help fulfill the Hegelian or Kantian projects that already infect our practice. I cannot believe that we are engaged in a cliffhanger in which an enlightenment program, project, telos, paradigm, (once we do away with the metaphysics) is needed to establish our present practice. Such a view seems to lead back to a type of formalism in which idealism and tradition alone rule.

The use of semiotics has displaced formalism's interrogation of its own vocabulary by extending the framework upon which a critical response may be formulated. Forays into phenomenology, philosophy, and psychoanalysis have given us new tools by which to further interrogate art. By expanding our frame of references we increase our defenses against the threat of a culture that grows paradigmatically indifferent to criticality.

Criticism transverses its subject, penetrating it and in turn colonizing its host at the point of interception (along the line of trajectory and fragmentation). We no longer seek to judge only the material object's primary characteristics but the terms and criteria by which the object of our scrutiny claims validity within its category. In its more aggressive forms criticism seeks to assert the terms by which the object may be validated conceptually, aesthetically, and/or morally. Such teleological claims inevitably are disappointing failures or self-fulfilling propheses.

It is the resistance to banality that necessitated criticism and art to open its forms and content to subjects previously closed off while reciprocally reviewing those that it now embraces. The new is not enough. Novelty is trite, an addiction that blinds us from articulating our needs. In the context of critical art and criticism (philosophy?) all those involved should reassess their experience and the framework in which art is only recognized for what it is not rather than for what it is at the moment. The critic should not be intent on making an indifferent content interesting enough to be viewed by disregarding the physical context (the object form of the work), by supplying viewers with their own experience of searching out a point of interest, in what may be inconsequential novelty or exhausted forms. Instead it is criticism's job to revitalize both our position and the object/subject by exposing how previous stances or assumptions have entropied into cliche or contrite meaningless deceits and untenable moral or social positions. In the course of this challenge the artist's and critic's ability to validate their enterprise is in turn brought into question. It is the critic's role, like that of any producer, to enunciate a self that is capable of reasserting its terms even if it only momentarily redefines its being and function.

Such a critical approach necessitates a rethinking of art's function, including a multiplicity of purposes and functions which may not have a common core. We are not just trading new paradigms for old, this is a recognition that art is not singular in either conception or as a social practice. Criticism in and of itself has a myriad of forms, and has a capability of maintaining, or even extending, a diverse range of experiences and relationships. Within this process, criticism splits its subject and itself between its social reflectivity and the possibilities of its functional/formal characteristics. The split locates criticism (for our purpose) as the dialogue between both the practice of art and the practice of substantiation (and focus), as each asserts new functions for the other. This inquiry leads to the questioning of what does and/or can the existence of each represent by opening it to doubts about its place in the order of things while announcing a receptivity to the artificiality of such an ordering. All of this is done to resist an ever encroaching banality. Criticism ought therefore not confuse itself with its object but should remain a means to intensify and clarify perception and its context.
The often repeated modernist and post-modernist assertion that art as we know it will disappear comes to us with increased frequency as our society finds itself trying to retrieve art and criticism from platitudes, novelty, and decaying forms. We are questioning what is the nature of the basis upon which this enterprise can even be justified beyond historically reified terms and institutional structures. Hegel may be correct about art passing into its philosophy or taking up the task of philosophical inquiry in a practical form. But our job is not to be philosophically "right" but to sustain art as a viable propositional form.

This goal of such a critical view interiorly (the artist) and exteriorly (the professional critic) and anteriorially (tradition) is to encourage both artists and a sector of the professional audience to focus on the idea of extending art beyond the accepted dualities of social reflectivity and aesthetic self-referentiality, perhaps into a self-actualizing process of discourse, justifying itself by being a discourse in which such terms function as they do nowhere else. The idea of the inevitable dissolution of art as a category of objects having some intrinsic value or characteristics is fulfilled by this challenge.

Klaus Ottmann

3 statements on the role of criticism

1. To write criticism is to reconstruct a work of art in such a way as to manifest thereby its rules of functioning and to locate it inside the semantic space which Lacan called "the beyond in which the recognition of desire is bound up with the desire of recognition."

2. Criticism has to take sides, reintroduce a notion of ethics into art, and demand that art is, in Michael Fried's words, imposed rather than gratuitous.

3. Criticism today has to address the fact that it is exclusive and oppressive to the accepted dualities of social reflectivity and aesthetic self-referentiality, perhaps into a self-actualizing process of discourse, justifying itself by being a discourse in which such terms function as they do nowhere else. The idea of the inevitable dissolution of art as a category of objects having some intrinsic value or characteristics is fulfilled by this challenge.

Marjorie Welish

The question initially put to us by Saul Ostrow and by Robert Morgan is, What lies beyond a critic’s willing consent to hear artistic intention and report it, and beyond such publicity, What alternative critical models are there? An answer might well be: The critical models that center on methodologies of explanation, on reconstruction, and on interpretation.

Much art critical practice, in fact, fails to distinguish between the intention delivered by the artist in his/her studio and the intentionality informing the art despite charming or urgent claims made on the art’s behalf. An artist’s expressed belief creates a verbal representation precisely of that belief yet only approximate-ly of the content of the visual representation he or she has created. In “The Studio Visit” (“Art Criticism, Winter 1988-89), drawing on twenty years of studio visits, I maintain that, contrary to the legendary commonplace that an artist, alone and suffering in the studio, is typically victimized by the visiting critic, the artist often manipulates the critic, if only through “descriptions” of the work, and through intellectual or psychological stances designed to extract approval. Criticality initiated and encouraged by the artist is rare. The artist’s wrought verbal icon may then be interpreted by a critic as though it were an art work itself. The artist’s stated intention, then, co-exists speculatively (if not creatively) with the art work; it stands as a description to be interpreted as well as an interpretation conferring meaning on an art work that happens to be his or her own. Beyond this, the artist’s statement may also provide the critic with information or interpretive matter useful for clarifying the intentionality of the visual art at hand.

Ongoing territorial disputes over the term “intentionality” agitate critical discourse, leaving contemporary thought confused. According to the analytic language philosopher John Searle, intentionality is not consciousness, nor is visual experience to be confused with visual perception, phenomenologists believing they’ve had a red experience when they’ve seen a red canvas. To Searle, intentionality is directedness (belief and desire aimed at a goal; intentionality in speech suggests those particular characteristics of the speakers’ intentions that “make them meaning conferring.” This said, it is no wonder that the meaning and significance of intentionality is in contention, for the hermeneutical approach to criticism posits the very intersubjectivity that analytic language philosophy disallows. Also contested here is the representation of meaning. The analytic critic looks for explanation, the hermeneutical critic looks for reconstructing the history of meaning the art work stylistically and culturally “drag along with it” (Mash-eck). Since Dilthey distinguished between natural sciences and human sciences, not explanation but understanding has been taken to be the goal of cultural historians and the art historians, like Panofsky, allied with them.

Then, too, certain art lends itself to absorption into (the projection off?) a wide variety of critical and stylistic schemes. Nothing exposes the critic’s inten-tuial assumptions better than his or her being persuaded by the importance of art inherently ambiguous. Critics who would otherwise attempt to annihilate each other all claim cultural possession of Jasper Johns, an aim that reveals itself in the display of the many disparate stylistic emplotments one finds in the literature, each corresponding to the version of art history in which each — Max Kelleff, David Shapiro, Harold Rosenberg, Joseph Masheck, Rosalind Krauss, and Barbara Rose — is most invested (Welsh, “Frame of Mind: Interpreting Jasper Johns,” Art Criticism, May 1987). Reconstructions of meaning that are so diverse suggest the difficulty of establishing a compelling historical explanation or “causal field” (Baxandall) for these particular artistic works, even when such intentionality incorporates the artist’s own oracular, if technically precise, statements of intention, and even when the cultural and sociological context of an artist is available to contemporary witnesses.

Criticism, then, is neither the verbalized ambition of the artist nor is it entirely stylistic content of the art as conveyed by an eyewitness. As commonplace are these revelations in theory — in new exposes of art historiography, especial-
ly — they are rarely assumed in art critical practice. Even among sophisticated critics, explanations of ideological goals and assumptions, and of criteria of adequacy that inhere in the art are treated uncritically. Acknowledgement of the critic's own interpretive assumptions is rare as well.

That genuine critics today adopt a range of interpretive strategies in the studio visit as well as in print is evident (a survey of the critical practices by Gilbert-Rolfe, Masheck, Ashton, Storr, and Welsh may be found in my article, "The Studio Revisited," Arts Magazine, September 1989, where critical models from the formalist critical theory to the hermeneutical phenomenology, from the numm anthropological to the existential encounter are confessions.) The criteria of adequacy in interpretation put forth through any critical model remain an issue, however. In other words, now that modes of historical explanation have been dismissed as culturally biased and replaced by interpretation construed through theory, by what criteria does any one critical theory prove itself to be more compelling than any other?

Unlike some of his colleagues, Hayden White does not dismiss the intellectual validity of explanation or reconstruction, though he favors rhetorical interpretation of history as developed from Structuralism and Post-Structuralism. This suggests that White is willing to allow constraints on assigned meaning, constraints that clarify the art plausibly, that is to say, what it is actually possible for the artist in his or her historical context to have adopted. I wonder what this round table would put forward as adequate constraints on interpretations.

**Joshua Deeter**

**REFLECTIONS UPON A PARADOX OF ART CRITICISM: COMPPLICITY OF OPPOSITION?**

In the introductory chapter of Edward Said's *The World, The Text, and the Critic*, entitled "Secular Criticism," the author offers a trenchant critique of the current state of literary criticism arguing that this discipline — conceived as a matrix of relationships which take place within the institutional frame of the university (i.e., the Academy) — has become an increasingly specialized domain of activity that has relinquished its "critical" relationship to other social and political domains wherein "power" is manufactured.

Said states:

Now the prevailing situation of criticism is such that the four forms represent in each instance specialization (although literary theory is a bit eccentric) and a very precise division of intellectual labor. Moreover, it is supposed that literature and the humanities exist generally within the culture (our culture as it is sometimes known), that the culture is ennobled and validated by them, and yet that in the version of culture inculcated by professional humanists and literary critics, the approved practice of high culture is marginal to the serious political concerns of society. This has given rise to a cult of professional expertise whose effect in general is pernicious. For the intellectual class, expertise has usually been a service rendered, and sold, to the central authority of society. Although Said was not speaking of art criticism in particular, his comments are relevant in terms of the institution and discipline of art critical practice as it exists today. For it is no mystery that much art criticism, conceived of as an instrument particular to a cult of expertise, functions in a necessary reciprocal relationship to the central authority of the marketplace. This has been an intrinsic condition of art criticism from its inception as an autonomous practice in the late 19th century. Furthermore, by alluding to this historically-determined condition, this is not meant to suggest some type of vulgar reduction to "purely" economic factors but is only meant to underscore certain dimensions which are usually sublimated in most discussions regarding the discourse of art criticism. The languages of art criticism have necessarily taken shape in mediated relationship to the development of the cultural marketplace, which in it fact was designed to promote within a widened public sphere of the bourgeoisie.

This should not be a mystery for those of us who practice art criticism, yet it is our obligation to reflect upon such conditions, as well as to reconsider the degree to which our disciplinary activity has become segregated from other cultural practices within the social field. Certainly, we must acknowledge that when Said refers to the "serious political concerns of society," he may be overlooking, quite strategically, the degree to which contemporary politics within the U.S. maintains an institutionalized presence in society.

We should also understand that contemporary art practices which claim to construct a so-called "critical" or "politically-critical" meaning, function and/or effect operate within a quite clearly defined institutional field (a matrix of ideological constructs, concrete applications, methodological developments, and so on). By extension, such practices may be construed as forms of cultural criticism. Yet, this can now function, ironically, in the place of art criticism — that is, only if art criticism can also be conceived of as a type of cultural criticism in a general sense, and most cannot. It is also necessary to examine the relationship established among certain self-consciously "critical" art practices and those critical discourses which function as a mode of hermeneutic support on the linguistic order of polemical contestation. If it is tenable to conceive of some so-called "oppositional" or critical art practices as socially transformative (a notion which is itself rather complex and unstable), then it is also vital to consider the apparatus of art criticism as a potential tool for social transformation? Perhaps, yet is this an appropriate task for art critics who would like to be both "cultural experts" (and, by extension, cultural legitimators) and "politically committed" activists who may be following the lead of those practices which are also deemed "political"? Should art critical writing be "oppositional?" But what does it mean to be oppositional within the context of the contemporary art world? For Said, literary criticism "must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are non-coercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom." Said also argues that ". . . criticism belongs in that potential space inside civil society, acting on behalf of those alternative acts and alternative intentions whose advancement is a fundamental human and intellectual obligation."

We may not choose to endorse Said’s model of what criticism should be, but...
his position does reflect a neo-humanist ideology that underlies the oppositional methodologies and strategies of the few remaining pockets of "cultural activism" or "resistance" which exist in the realm of contemporary visual culture — and much of this has been appropriately organized around, and respondent to, the AIDS crisis.

This is an essentially human issue which permeates all domains of the larger socio-cultural matrix, and needs to be addressed on various fronts and through various strategies — including the realm of high culture, a community which has been strongly affected by this health crisis. Art practices have become instruments in the struggle to change governmental health policies regarding education and research; cultural production has become an agit-prop device to raise consciousness, to inform, and to dispel myths. Such types of art production are important instances of cultural activism, and are strongly issue-oriented; art criticism has a very small role to play in these precincts, unless it were to transform itself into something virtually unrecognizable: a form of activist criticism with a much broader scope of cultural inquiry and analysis. Simply writing positively about Gran Fury within the territory of an art magazine is not indicative of activist engagement or intervention; the symbolic gesture of critical writing must be extended into material acts, both within and outside the prescribed institutional boundaries of the so-called art world. In a way, this brings us back to Said, who suggested that criticism should function to support the "alternative," that which might exist outside the precincts of the Academy.

But when art criticism is enlisted to support the so-called "alternative," it facilitates a process by which that alternative practice enters into the portals of legitimation; the marginal migrates towards centrality. In this way, art criticism seems inevitably locked into its historical role as an intellectual tool of the cultural marketplace, wherein even acts of resistance and opposition produce the type of disturbances that feed into the institutional logic of vanguard culture.

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Steven Melville

THE FUNCTION OF CRITICISM AT THE PRESENT TIME

A good title, commodious and well-used.

1. This is, as it has been more or less continuously since, say, Kant once again "the age of criticism," and the central function of criticism must be to insist again and anew on this fact. It does not stop being new.

2. If in its earlier incarnations this age could be counted as the time of philosophy or as the time of literature's dormancy or even end, it now is to be counted above all as the time in which we refuse, to the extent possible, to let our thinking take leave of the actual stuff of the world.

3. We take then criticism to be a primary and irreducible activity. But of course its primacy is inextricably intertwined with the admission of its secondariness — say, our historicity.

4. The time in which criticism functions is thus never fully the present; recalling this is a large part of its function.

5. To say that ours is a time of criticism is to say that it is a time without models and given over instead to the actuality of objects. In French, this actuality is called impossibility.

6. Only after Hegel can we see what Kant meant in naming his age: Hegel presumably understood the priority of the Third Critique over the First.

7. That we insist, at least in the circles I frequent, on taking this persistence of criticism for the triumph of theory is a mistake and a symptom.

John Miller

CRITICISM AND USE VALUE

First, to sketch a role for art criticism: If criticism is not simply to reiterate any given instance of cultural production, it must engage some taut or unconscious aspect of that process. Those who fault criticism for its marginal instrumentality seriously underestimate the indispensability of its humble revelations to the teleology of non-authoritarian culture. This discussion offers an opportunity to reflect on these premises.

Pierre Macherey identifies two common critical pitfalls in his book A Theory of Literary Production: the intentionalist fallacy and the interpretive fallacy. It's striking that both are reductive in nature. The former reduces the meaning of a text (or, by extension, artwork) to the intentions of the artist; the latter, to the intentions of the critic. Macherey instead maintains that critical discourse distinguishes itself by attempting to explain how a work is made: "The necessity of the work is founded on the multiplicity of its meanings; to explain the work is to recognize and differentiate the principle of this diversity. The postulated unity of the work which, more or less explicitly, has always haunted the enterprise of criticism, must now be denounced: the work is not created by an intention (subjective or objective); it is produced under determinate conditions." The work, as such, appears not as an inevitability, but rather as one possibility within a general economy or as one kind of "utterance" within a certain linguistic competence. Macherey's terminology goes beyond the sociological version of art history espoused by Duchamp — that the viewer "completes" the meaning of an artwork and that the totality of its meanings equals the sum of its interpretations — to engage so-called unconscious meanings through the artwork's very insufficiency. And here, the unconscious is re-extensive with what any ideological construction might repress; it is not a kind of compensatory plenitude.

All the same, Macherey's formulation offers only a model of how materialist criticism might function ideally. Compare this to the concrete history and practice of art criticism: an aggregate of imperfect texts produced under determinate conditions akin to those which inform an artwork. Because it necessarily profits a securalized readership, art criticism itself is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is the feuilleton which inspired art criticism as a genre (Baudelaire's essays, for instance) and which links it to the rise of capitalism. This relationship dramatizes art criticism's intrinsic compromises. But to pronounce the utter capitulation of art criticism, as some have done, suggests the rather moralizing fantasy that once upon a time it was free from the taint of commerce. As Walter
Benjamin said, every cultural artifact is a record of barbarism. Art criticism is not exempt. Inadvertently or not, it like all economistic forms under capital, helps to perpetuate the asymmetry between the production and the distribution of wealth. Yet like Marxism, psychoanalysis and linguistics, it does propose a dialectical truth value. If this kind of truth value arises out of capital's progressive, rational demise, it nonetheless refutes capital's nominal and univocal logic of valuation. If it militates against authoritarian culture, it alone is powerless to transform that culture. To do this it must first be re-allocated to a deliberately ideological set of intentions. Because progressive artists and critics, in the United States especially, tend to divide the culture into procurstean categories (i.e., "You are either part of the solution or part of the problem."), one should be careful to distinguish between the success or failure of art criticism as criticism per se and that of art criticism as political activism.

Pat McCoy

A few thoughts about critical intent.

Critical practice, as it constitutes itself in the field or the activity of art criticism, retains for me, at least, a certain pragmatism. This pragmatism is driven by how to make evident both the social and the individual, lived and experiential, within the "economics" of what has largely been the repression of the natural world, and an increasingly acculturated one. More than any one particular "theory," this pragmatism tries to make manifestly present the conditions in which art apprehends these conflictual issues and contextualizes them in a view. Specifically, the individual and culture both have a more primary site than a theoretical body. Yet paradoxically, it is our culture that requires real and explanatory theory which ultimately it does not always get. And so this pragmatic inquiry is focused on the capacity for criticism to consider the primary and the theoretical in equal terms. Called to question are the predictive languages, representations, and the pseudo-marginalizations placed upon the primary.

The notion of language, which most precisely functions as the methodological tool of the critic, is conceptualized in the work of a pragmatic criticism as a fact of secondary sequence. The solipsism which can too frequently occur in writing about art, or any other "object-based" writing for that matter, wire closed a loop of meaning, where meaning becomes reductive and language becomes prior to the field of artistic objects. Historically and seasonally, this language manipulates the actual process of artistic intentions and presence. One effect is that any autonomy of the former field of activity, the artwork's capacity to represent itself — is conceded to the latter activity or the signal importance of the written word. Yet this is not meant to imply a single cast of judgement either, protecting or profiting the artistic object. Often enough it too smoothly renders itself as a thinly transparent watershed of a "received" acceptance, through a prior received language. No longer exposed to the various biases of vision, or naming, or subject to assessment, these art objects finally illustrate critical popularity or critical populism.

Specifically denied and neglected, also from previous critiques, have been the affective and idiosyncratic complexities, the outcome of the disorderly chaos of day-to-day life. It is this site which has been introduced as the first order in this pragmatic critique, in an attempt to conceptualize notions of content away from the fixed — towards dynamics. More than the accumulative obviousness of the loss of the private and the singular, however, is the added absence of "interior experience" and sensation. Removed from existing vocabularies and empathy, this is the very lack which pragmatic critique points to, hoping to establish a discourse based not on the incredulous, but rather on reciprocal analysis incorporating the everyday, the mortal, and the ordinary.

This particular critical inquiry, in observing these problems, reflects a critical empathy for working process; that is to say, the generation and construction of meaning related to primary sites, the conceptual use of materials, and the transfer of affective states. In laying open this inquiry, various methodologies are critically used, in the dual purpose of description and interpretation (linguistic critical theory, feminist, phenomenological, psychoanalytic...). Each successfully describes a degree of direct "primaryness." At the same time, however, there is the recognition that each methodology carries an inherent dialecticism with potential values hinged to them.

In selecting descriptive and interpretive methodologies, there is always the thought that each strategy properly engages only a facet of a work of art; and the art to be experienced begins with its own complex, uniquely equipped, presentation. Here, it has too often been observed that an artwork's production of potential content is elided into a more limited spectatorship. By consistently evoking the descriptive process of indeterminacy, I have attempted since 1987, beginning with a show entitled "The Inscribed Image," to disarm any one interpretive agenda, by employing a consciously additive process. By marking off, or staking off a curve of co-terminologies, the aim is to engage a descriptive inclusiveness — one which opens up into a systemic interaction between the mental and the physical field that a work of art particularizes. If there is not a notion of a political subtext, or an agenda, in this pragmatic inquiry there are instead a certain number of operative notions, ethical and esthetic, which investigate the nature of an art subject, a perceiving subject, and their authority in the role of making and unmaking aspects of culture. In relation to the perceiving subject and to culture, are the implicitly utilized ethical and critical theory, feminist, phenomenological, psychoanalytic... Each successfully describes a degree of direct "primaryness." At the same time, however, there is the recognition that each methodology carries an inherent dialecticism with potential values hinged to them.

The artwork itself collaborates with these notations which follow non-hierarchically: • by descriptive inclusiveness, attempt to circumscribe a post-dialectical space; • the post-dialectical space frequently references or registers more original thresholds, experiences, and sensations (pre-history) which comprise a neglected or denied present; • a historize terms of discourse and assessment, these art objects finally illustrate critical popularity or critical populism; • skepticism concerning closure as it pertains to discourse within which a work of art is reconstituted and functions; • juncture between catastrophe, hazard, and history.
was accompanied by a catalogue of the seven exhibitions or parts of the project because of the duration of tampered with a pre-existing expectation about Gallery in New York from January to March 1990. The project had been entitled quite clearly 'A New Era was a 'space' (or a project) and not a gallery, on the one hand; and why, on the other, we were not explicit exponents (and perhaps, not even proponents) of the guerrilla or renegade or temporary space movement or phenomenon of the last several years in the New York art world. This text is not so much an explanation, but a way to comment on a certain cultural activity, our own as well as others, if only indirectly. We had previously done a similar project — 'similar' only in that it too had involved a prolonged period of time (three months), and had also caused some consternation. The media had gone so far as to claim that we had joined the gallery in some capacity or other — which was not true. The project had been entitled quite clearly "A Curatorial Project by Collins & Milazzo," and had taken place at the now defunct Scott Hanson Gallery in New York from January to March 1990. While the project was somewhat strange or unconventional, it was not impossible to understand. We had simply broken, or, at least, tampered with a pre-existing expectation about our curatorial work because of the duration of the project and because it included several one-person exhibitions and one group exhibition entitled Token Gestures (A Painting Show). Each of the seven exhibitions or parts of the project was accompanied by a catalogue. Depending on one's point of view, one can view the discourse in art (or the 'scene' of Promise, for the sake of arguments) during the last two years in New York as being determined by what could be called trickle-down, second-generation, Neo-Conceptual art. This is an extremely ungenerous point of view, that would assimilate the entire of the last decade, as secondary to the commodification discourse of art, has emerged as an ethical 'object' and as primarily morally concerned. This is a caricature of both periods, which ultimately shortchanges both. A less rhetorical and more factual description would characterize the last ten years very differently — as multi-dimensional, hybridized, with the discourses of commodity art (the 80s) and political correctness (the 90s) as broad, sweeping generalizations, containing only limited validity or value. If you read the culture hyperbolically, then you will read it hortically according to these generalizations, which then get converted into reifications; if you read it hypothetically, or somewhat more provisionally or less generally, then what begins to emerge is a discourse of complements or a complementary discourse, as opposed to pseudo-dialectical discourse of self-assuming oppositions and contradictions, which is not the outcome of a market or media or abstract, academic manipulation but the process of cogitation that is predicated upon actual cultural investigation. In other words, there is nothing sta-
made five in-depth presentations of their work each month. We divided the 10,000 sq. ft. space roughly equally among the artists. In October, we presented the works of James Hill, Harland Miller, Dana Moylan, Jeffrey Plate, Adam Rolston; in November, Robert Beck and Jeff Litchfield, Billy Copley, Joo Chung, Nancy M. Hoffman, Nicholas Howey; and in December, Robert Burke, Tony Feher, Fabian Marcaccio, Joan Snitzer, Tyler Turkle.

The space itself was left completely raw; we had a few lights (fluorescent) replaced, the floor swept, the windows washed, and left the walls unpainted (dirty blond). We hired two people, both artists, to keep an eye on the space, answer briefly any questions, and take orders if there were any — for example, Adam Rolston’s installation of 14,000 “I love Jodi Foster” paper cups, entitled My Vagina Aency, was available in minimal units of 20 cups, a dollar per cup. We also hired another artist to help with the installations. There was no phone on the premises — the few calls that were made, were made from the Spanish-Cuban restaurant on the corner of Broadway and Broome, Brias del Caribe [Caribbean Breeze], of which one of the artists in the project, Harland Miller, used as the title for one of his paintings — and the space closed at five (when the building closed) in instead of six.

With regard to the artists in the show and their works, we made no effort to keep the presentation open-ended — undetermined if it is not reflexive to the groundlessness that substantiates its very existence.

II

While we would like to feel sympathetic towards the value discourse — since we feel that we helped to initiate it as early as October 1986 with such exhibitions as Modern Sleep at American Fine Arts Co., and most emphatically with The New Poverty at John Gibson the following year, and continued to articulate the discourse through the late 1980s with such exhibitions as Media Post Media (Scott Hansen, January 1988), A Deer Manger, A Dress Pattern, Farthest Sea Water, and A Signature (303 Gallery, February 1988), Off White (Diane Brown, May 1988), and Pre-Pop Post-Appropriation (Stux, February 1989) — we also feel that its present permutations and vectors spaces that did not belong to us. This seems to be a way to generate a context, or forward the discourse of art, without having to become a slave to or becoming trapped in the internal logic of a particular ideology. On the surface, it appears to be a very derelict way to proceed; it fosters a certain sense of irresponsibility or liquid meaning; and yet, such an approach requires a wired sensibility, extremely taut acts of will, and a form of judgment that does not simply circumvent or transmogrify precedents but fully embraces them into its “humor” or juridical constitution as an option.

We do not know if this method of doing things is “politically correct” — we can only assume that we have behaved in a slightly untoward manner, insofar as we have never been attracted to an axiology of gratuitous sentiments or prolonged allegiances and have always been fully invested in this luxury of implausible options. Perhaps in this regard it could simply be said that while some of the artists in the New Era project specifically exploited the values of political correctness, there were others who exploited the values of abstraction; and while some of the artists in the New Era project specifically exploited the values of political correctness, there were others who chose to examine the valences of gender; forms of naïvete competed with principles of metatasti and dererealization; psycho-social caricature existed in tandem with existential desuetude; modes of mass reproduction were coterminal with thresholds of subrealism.
are somewhat belated, insouciant, and, by this
time, very, very 'safe' or predictable. It is the go-
ing model; what had been 'marginal' has now as-
sumed center stage. There is virtually no gallery
that does not sponsor work that is in form else-
dealing with the Body, the elemental, the scat-
tered, broken or dispersed object (of desire), the
environment, Nature and the Social in a diastolic
struggle, and an overall, generic context that is lit-
tered with the refuse of the cultural object on
overload and the debris of that struggle. Robert
Gober's cat litter pieces could not summarize this
ethos better — but in a most profound and pre-
scient way. There is nothing gratuitous about
them. There are even galleries who have them-
selves taken on the look and feel of an impoverish-
ment setting — American Fine Arts Co. is prominent
in this regard. Where Stux Gallery carried on a
'remance' with this ethos of impoverishment
(which we endeavored to skew toward a construc-
tivist mode in our show), American Fine Arts Co.
has articulated it as a form of cultural delirium.
While the latter may be a far 'hipper' mode (in the
minds of a few) than the former, both are never-
thless a bifurcation of the same discourse. Jim
Shaw's "Thrift Shop Painting" show (and book)
and Dooley Le Cappellain's "Value" project are
the latest configurations of this impulse. Meritor-
ious as these examples are (and they are admir-
able and among the best efforts), they cultivate a
fascination with the rhetoric (rather than the 'real-
ity'), which, of course, they understand, no longer
obtains of contradiction (the-90s-as-opposed-to-
the-80s mentality), when, in point of fact, a more
accurate case can be made for the extenuation
of discourses, if not their complementation. But even
if we reassert the Value discourse according to its
complementary valances, this is, by this time, to
repeat, a rather belated rapprochement — and far,
very far indeed, from what may be needed at this
time, namely a radical disengagement. While the former dis-
course (Neo-Ex) was indeed too self-indulgent for our
taste, the latter (the pictures discourse) was too self-regres-
sove and moralistic. This led us to formulate and articu-
late a third discourse, so to speak, which, while deriving
characteristics from both of these previous discourses,
was restricted to neither. If Neo-Ex fed off of the Spec-
tacle, and the pictures discourse constituted itself as a
cri tique of the Spectacle, then what interested us, what
presented itself as a possi-
dibility and what seemed to have promise, was a hybrid
synthesis of these two discourses — what we called the
'Spectacle of Critiques', which would confute the unre-
pressed (and unexpressive) visual dimension of Neo-Ex
but the critical mass or func-
tion, serious purpose, and in-
tellectual integrity not so
much of pictures art or dis-
course (with its self-monitor-
ing repressions) but of Classic Conceptualism of the 1970s
less the pretentions of its
own graysih, non-descript,
brainal, over-intellectualized
approach. This was the germ
of what the media later called
(and reduced to Neo-Concept-
tualism in the last decade. A
cognitive form of art that
had tremendous visual ap-
pal, that did not, in effect,
take to suppress its psy-
chological and physical being
or self in the world, and yet
upon the actualities of value and desire, the by these disparate terms. Where we cannot focus staged, the worlds of public and private value - discrepancies it encourages, it would, in fact, on the contrary, be rather difficult not to resolve the disparate fronts society today.

The critique of representation has not exhausted the crisis in ethics or in criticism itself. More importantly, it has not determined up to the abstract nature of Value. While the discourse establishes that all experience is mediated, staged, or coded, and asserts critically as value and while the reification of the discourse has, by this time, assumed meta-value as critique, it denies the experience of closure itself but forecloses on value as a construct distinct from or other than criticality. The self-reflexive value of criticality is of limited use in relation to the ethical void that confronts society today. (Flash Art; No. 149, Nov-Dec., 1989).

"Given the premises of Exposition Imaginaire, and the 'ideality of openness' that accompanies the role or position of the model in this scheme of things, it would not be difficult to impose upon the painting within Courbet's painting the value of the hyper-frame. Given the allowances it encourages, it would, in fact, on the contrary, be rather difficult not to resolve the disparate coordinates of inner and outer worlds it recommends, the world of the real and the world of the staged, the worlds of public and private value - in short, the late world of Truth as appropriated Value and the recent world of the 'child as an allusion to originality.' To resist the temptation to resolve these albeit fruitless discrepancies would be tantamount to asserting as Value the void created by these disparate terms. Where we cannot focus upon the actualities of value and desire, the temporal and post-appropriation discourses - which later became the foundation for the early 90s discourses, which are summarily being clumped together by many today as the discourse of political correctness. We believe that the non-dogmatic or less dogmatic aspects of this discourse (PC - political correctness) are further extensions of this complementary discourse of the late 80s - a discourse that we have generally described for the last five years as the 'void-as-Value.'
discourse, or, more simply, the Value discourse. More recently, we have described its latest developments as the "New Low" or hyper-or super-kitsch. We have also referred to the discourse itself, as well as to some of its examples, as scatter or refuse art; whereas others have used the term "pathetic" art -- references and terms which are, in the final analysis, too limiting. The "New Low" or Value discourse is wider than this, and encompasses a diverse set of concerns that even begin to transcend or overcome their focal value status. We have elsewhere identified some of these concerns as Postmodern Abstract Expressionism, Contemporary Folk Art, New Formalism, and Mannered Conceptualism - but, again, such terms function to limit rather than articulate the 'promise' of their complemen-
tation is to present nothing, to impose nothing, especially when this 'nothing' is the absurd construed as the display-value of the void. We simply do not want to impose upon this void.

But while the objective is to focus upon the actualities of value and desire without imposing focal value upon this void, we do not want the notion of an imposition-free void to function inadvertently as a model. Therefore, it must also function necessarily as a frame-in-reverse -- lending itself by default to Value as a negative ideal. It is only in such a capacity, as negative 'ideality of openness,' that this void may sustain imposition and inquiry relative to its value." ("Hyperframes," The Netherlands Office for Fine Arts, 1989).

III

Even as early as 1987, with The New Poverty show, we bracketed critically the latest fat and the time value of the conceptual in art -- a particularly difficult form of self-critique to brandish, given the role that we played originally in setting the wheels of that paradigm into motion.

As discussed earlier, the redimensionalization of the conceptual in art would now seem to entail a 'radical disengagement.' The seeds or precondition for this disengagement reside perhaps in the phenomenon and notion of 'mannered conceptualism' that we have been tracing (and the condition for this disengagement reside perhaps in the phenomenon of 'mannered conceptualism' that we have been tracing (and encouraging) for the last several years.

After nearly a decade of Neo-Conceptualism, it should surprise no one that a species of conceptualism is afoot that would question itself, that would self-consciously step outside itself, through wit, humor, irony, derision, and even self-mockery, to examine its own position, function, and Value. At the same time, it shows every sign of evolving its own 'positive' forms and moving beyond these necessary negations towards new thresholds of art. In fact, what we are beginning to see are examples of highly refined, highly attenuated, refined forms of conceptualism. The tension inscribed in this tautology or vicious circle is relieved by the laughter it would generate in behalf of such efforts. In poking fun at these highly mannered forms of conceptual art, and at the conceptual tory status, particularly with regard to the latter of these terms (Mannered Conceptualism). As opposed to movement or various movements or (minor) shifts within a paradigm (the presiding or dominant one at this time being the one of Conceptualism or of Concept in art) there appears to be signs of a 'dramatic' (i.e. paradigmatic) shift or leap from one (this paradigm to art) to the other - a less conceptual mode or to one that ridicules conceptuality or even to one that altogether rejects the conceptual in art. These signs (of New Promises?) appear in the works of several artists. Perhaps this is due, in part, to the suffocating closure academic to any practice that becomes culturally dominant, and therefore, so deeply stagnant and exhausted, surface activity, appearances, not withstanding. Or, perhaps it is due more specifically, to the way the intellect (just as the senses), when it is so em bearing - regardless of whether its content or anything, for that matter), can become, as it has classically, tiresome, academic, boorish, even when it is exercised with fires. One might even go so far as to say that the intellect is 'inherently' 'moralistic' or overbearing - regardless of whether its content is implicit or explicitly of a specific 'moral' or ethical order. Even an art that is generically in-
mode altogether, it would distance itself from the distance that protects itself from any existential immediacy it might incur. On the most sophisticated level, it brackets itself through the use of irony and humor — even ridiculing itself — but not without bracketing its own use of irony as a highly stylized, even reified, modality. Ultimately, the causal values of Neo-Conceptualism yield to the absurd, existential effec~

But art, as we have seen throughout the ages, is revitalized by such temporary deaths. Even as we saw, in a more contemporary vein, the Classic Conceptual art of the 60s and 70s expire and cede ground to the painting and Neo-Expressionism of the early 80s, we will see, and are seeing, although our eyes are blind to their habits, the various stages and vectors of the Neo-Conceptualism of the 80s and 90s expire and cede ground to the next generation of art and artists — regardless of its approach or approaches. The promise of art, regardless of its example and examples, its working principles and its theories — relies upon such temporary deaths.

New York City, and Tallahassee, Florida.
INNOVATIONS IN IMAGE TECHNOLOGY

JOSEPH NECHVATAL

In art, content and form have alternately been overemphasized or neglected because their inseparable unity has not been clearly realized. — Mondrian
To be a user of the machine is to be of the spirit of this century. It has replaced the transcendental spiritualism of past eras. — Moholy-Nagy

In the French province of Franche-Comté, halfway between Dole and Besançon, stands a unique and interesting monument to idealism: The Royal Saltworks of Arc-et-Senans. The Royal Saltworks was created as an ideal city for workers by the architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux between the years 1775 and 1779. It was centered around a prosperous salt-refining factory which used wood from the Chaux Forest to evaporate brine which flowed in from saltwater sources at Salin. The Saltworks ceased to function in 1895 and fell into ruins before being purchased and restored by the Department of the Doubs in 1927. Since 1983 it has been listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

What makes this monument to the Age of Enlightenment interesting to us today is that it presently houses forward looking, perhaps even somewhat idealistic, projects such as the International Center for Reflection on the Future, a cultural thinktank/work center/exhibit gallery organized around the study of futurology, technology, and art. The place is managed by the Foundation Claude-Nicolas Ledoux which was created in the early 70s by some major French companies. Now the Saltworks has become one of the most important private cultural centers in France. Apple Computer has helped the Foundation to establish a computer work and education center here.

As a guest artist at the Saltworks I’ve been developing further my own thinking and practice along this intellectual axis, for here one can quite easily see the industrial world dissolving before one’s eyes, as solid substance is dissolved into a more fluid digital material. As our world continues to digitalize itself, what will the effect on art be? How has this digitalization shaped the way art is practiced, and how will it most likely continue to do so? Has art managed to reflect our digital reality?

As I think about it, the answer to the last question must be yes and no. Yes it has taken up the mania for sampling and appropriation which digital technology facilitates, but, up to now, it has done so, primarily, with the use of classic (archaic?) tools and materials. What we have not seen yet is the transformation of the factory type art studio into the desktop studio.

I’ve always found it hilarious and ironic that every major museum, gallery, and art magazine makes extensive use of computer technology to manage its information load, yet the creation, support, criticism, and exhibition of computer-aided art is really quite rare. It’s been marginal up to now. It’s almost as if the electronic culture, which is today the big, actual, active energy is trying to be ignored by the reflective art of painting, sculpture, and photography. Painting reacted to the technology of photography, and that brought us Modern Art. What is holding it back now?

Obviously the task which art theory has not yet faced is its own transformation into computer theory, because that certainly will become integral to the development of digital culture. Within art history, the connection will have to be made between the sampled culture and its organizer, the computer. To understand and present to the future our computerized time, art must become computerized. I feel compelled to support the utilization of computer technology in art, not even so much out of personal taste or interest, but in obedience to the dictates of history. It is what history requires. Sure, it’s difficult to comprehend historical evolution after the fatalistic retro/pluralistic postmodern era of the 80s, but to try to do so is our duty to past art. By reclaiming our historical perspective, art can become truly a critical diagnostic tool (as computer aesthetics) and start changing perceptions and habits. Perhaps we can then begin the debate with images on a more equal basis.

People are saying they have had enough of the relapse into fundamentalism which the postmodernism of the last decade helped foster, but how does that consciously translate into art now? How does art liberate itself from its own repetitive and ossified habits? How can the basis of a fresh, dynamic practice be formulated within our electronically sophisticated (image bombarded) culture?

It seems clear to me that first the conditioned imprints of media recognition need to be addressed. The cognitive dissonance of computer-aided production might work towards this end with speed and effectiveness. Nontraditional production allows media information to be seen and reorganized in a new way: as matter, as material. For any serious optic morphogenesis to take place in our culture, the display of information and images as pure quantity must first be achieved. With digital technology we’re ready for the seemingly unlimited cascade of traces which history has rained on us. We’re ready to store them up and to do something with them. I’m suggesting here that we go further towards the deregulation of the symbolic economy and allow the sampled sign to go free back into its digital nebula. By managing visual information inside the computer, we can see clearly how the eventual acceptance of every representation can be the new source of usable energy. It allows visual quantity to finally present itself as the new image. With it we can articulate the mobility of all fixed images and meanings, and our own virtually unboundedness. By using the computer to compile and transform representational information into raw material, we can desemioticize our representational thinking again, but this time not through the method of reduction as was sometimes modernism’s way, but through excess, the means of today. We can put excess to use in new and unforeseen ways.

The most efficient way to deal with our world’s concatenation is with computer technology, for the computer is the metaphor for the most fully realized hypermedia cyberworld (with the human brain being its explicit model). The computer’s possibilities shift artistic culture towards a more mobile, multi-referential...
connectivity, and away from the recent cultural astigmatism. With the aid of our external electronic communication technology, a new electronic image of being human is possible. This new portrait could be made up from a tapestry of once discrete media images, now downloaded as non-semiotic material.

In effect, the culture of images is collected, fermented, and spread out before our eyes as the new picture, the new terrain, the new space. In this digital picture, information as representation achieves passage through the limits of post-modernity. While authoritarian societies can use the computer to reduce indivisibility and human rights to a mere set of numbers, artists can use it to depict the overwhelming overview, the picture of all pictures, the very picturability of human existence. With this neuro-perception, society would exist at the edge of credible information, at the edge of credibility of all representations, and perhaps lead itself towards unspecified and subtle topologies of culture.

If such a digital culture is artistically interesting, it is not only because it extends the formalist revolution, which I admit it does, but also because it really goes to the essence of managing our visibility glut. The computerized morphogenesis of our image-information storm is exemplary, in my opinion, of the very essence of what is happening culturally. It deals with what is given us to perceive and from which to create, at least for those who know how to live in their own time. The contemporary art world is so far behind in this regard that it leaves one perplexed. Without a doubt, the computer defines our paradigm today (need I mention the Gulf War). It certainly handles the insistent, multiple, and fluid material of the technology of painting and photography deposited at our door. That this fertile and spectacular artistic practice will enter our society, in which the cultural space is so saturated with vested interests, is in doubt. The art world, in keeping pace with society, is interested in exploring an artistic expression which has no previous reference, and yet which articulates itself through elderly, disintegrating images; this question remains idealized for the moment. However, as the creation and transformation of Arc-et-Senans illustrates, idealisms have a way of tearing down competing expressions which lag behind them.

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BOOK REVIEWS

REACH OUT AND TOUCH

Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America

by Lucy R. Lippard
Pantheon, New York, 1991, $24.95

Public Fantasy: An Anthology of Critical Essays, Fictions, and Project Descriptions

by Judith Barry
The Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1991, $22

When the Moon Waxes Red:

Representations, Gender, and Cultural Politics

by Trinh T. Minh-ha

There is an old adage that you can argue with someone only if you are in fundamental agreement. Discourse depends on that fundamental agreement. The recent controversies within academe and the art world in terms of the canon and cultural politics would not be possible if not for the shared idea that 'it matters' (an idea which is not necessarily acceded to by all factions in the American society). The advent of the postmodern in contemporary discourse was predicated on the acceptance of modernism as a cultural integer. Thomas S. Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions provided a model for considerations of cultural change; in the 1970s, when the concept of 'the avant-garde' as a central concern of cultural practice became codified, Kuhn's volume would be extensively cited by critics and artists as validation. However, there were problems with this scientific change is based on empirical data ('facts'), and when change occurs, it is because the data base has changed. In cultural terms, Nietzsche's dictum that there are no facts, only interpretations, remains an accurate assessment of the situation of art in our society.

Immediately upon approaching these three books, there must be an assent to the terms of discourse proposed, terms defined in the critique of postmodernism, a critique that might be specified as a "post-discourse": post-colonial, post-feminist, post-ideological. The critical language propounded in these books denote the most committed ambition to consider culture as a significant integer in our society. The considerations in these books relate art and artmaking to an investigation and a critique of the perception of hegemony in American culture.
Critical discourse has always shrouded itself in the cloak of objectivity. The recent appearance of the first two volumes of the collected writings of Clement Greenberg attests to the seeming impregnability of the edifice of critical discourse. The terms of "quality" and of "standards" remain as constants in critical discourse. But these books by Lippard, Barry, and Trinh ask, what standards? Who defines quality? In what contexts can standards be applied? With this in mind, the attempt to assume a stance of objectivity in relation to these three books would be disingenuous. The reason for my consideration of these books in conjunction with each other is that the dialogue which these books hope to provoke is one in which I find myself a participant. There is no neutrality in this regard.

During the 1960s, the arts in the United States were in the process of ascendency; by the end of the 1960s, many young artists found themselves the subject of major retrospectives, and the market potential of the arts seemed unlimited. By the mid-1970s, the art market found itself stratified within class structures which paralleled the most stringent caste systems possible within the society. For this reason, there was the founding of many collectives and alternative art organizations. The establishment of these alternatives necessitated the creation of alternative strategies in dealing with the resulting art: this was but one of the crises which beset critical discourse. The continual awareness of the evolution of consciousness made the critical task more tenuous, as the subject position had to be acknowledged. When critical judgements are made without that acknowledgement, the resultant assertions often reveal the contours of circumscription, causing the dispersal of the basis for discourse. One example would be the critical favor which greeted the arrival of the art movement which was labelled Neo-Expressionism: that favor was founded on terms which did not acknowledge the sexism and the Eurocentrism in which the rhetoric was grounded. When the critical terms were scrutinized, the questioning of the terms under which "quality" was presumed created a collapsing of the "value" of much of that work. 

Lucy Lippard's Mixed Blessings continues many of the strategies of her previous books. As in From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art (1976), the emphasis is on discerning the intentionality of the artists under discussion; at times, this methodology has led Lippard to cataloguing as in her book Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 (1973). At times, the survey nature of the enterprise makes Mixed Blessings seem to be primarily a catalogue of current work being done by artists of color. An immediate response to the book is to notice how often the explanatory texts to the lavish and often elaborate illustrations of artists' works depend on artists' statements; formal analysis of the work is included only to the extent that such analysis will reveal the artist's intent, predicated on the sociological implications of that intent. It seems only a false consciousness would be served by criticizing the book in terms other than those proposed within the book itself, that is, for example, by criticizing the book for not including any extended formal analysis. Thus the issue of "quality" does not come up; there is the assumption of "value" in the fact of acknowledgement. Lippard notes this when she declares: "Ethnocentrism in the arts is balanced on a notion of Quality that 'transcends boundaries' — and is identifiable on-
mechanical reproduction, and as the site of conditioned behavior which the contemporary society has deemed proper for the feminine subject. The essay "Casual Imagination" explicates some of her ruminations on the condition of shopping as a condition of perception; her videotape Casual Shopper (1981) is described by Barry as "a love story that never advances beyond that which can be imagined, which is never consummated, but returns to a prosaic scene where dreams are exchanged and desire circulates endlessly." That condition of endless circulation of desire is part of the nature of the media culture which Barry sees as characteristic of our late capitalist society.

The intersection of the concerns of Lippard and Barry comes in the privileging of the terms of representation. The terms of modernism had advanced abstraction as a mode of artistic discourse which took aesthetics from a subset of philosophical inquiry to a separate subject of discourse. To reassert the seriousness of representation as a fitting subject for critical discourse, there must be conditions which redefine the philosophical subtext. In Barry's case, there is the feminist discourse of media consciousness; in Lippard's case, there is the post-colonial discourse of cultural archetypes. For Lippard, the type of art on which her book centers is a representational art which takes the form of representing that which is denied in the discourse of high art, that is, the realities of race, class, and gender. To confront these realities and to move beyond a critique to a genuine aesthetic engagement: these are the aims that can be found in the writings of the filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha, as exemplified by her collection When the Moon Waxes Red. In her essays and lectures, Trinh insists on the instability of the terms of discourse, so that the subject position which is being defined always must be provisional. As she writes, "Working creatively always entails change. To create is not so much to make something new as to shift. Not to shift from a lesser place to a higher or better one, but to shift, intransitively." The terms which the subject position might entail include integers of race, gender, nationality.

The conditions of art at this time have necessitated the declaration of subjectivity. Hiding behind some objective criterion has been questioned, if not outright invalidated, by the instantaneous historicization which is a function of the current self-consciousness of artistic enterprise. There is no way to pretend that the values being valorized are not founded on conditions of what we consider important. The idea of painterly abstraction as the only arbiter of value in the plastic arts is one that has been advanced by such critics as Greenberg, Hilton Kramer, and Barbara Rose; when we read such critics nowadays, there is the predominant sense of nostalgia, as the lack of engagement with the sociological function of art removes critical discourse from responsivity to experience.

Contemporary discourse entails accommodation with the media environment. Theorists of the postmodern such as Gilles Deleuze and Fredric Jameson have often written about media art. This accommodation has meant an emphasis on representation. In the case of Mixed Blessings, this takes the form of figurative painting and sculpture, as well as mixed media installation work: these works, which can be used for direct sociopolitical intent, find cogent testimony in Lippard's cataloguing. For Barry and Trinh, who are media artists who deal with the politics of the construction of images as representations, the problem seems to be to develop a position which retains flexibility, so that an autoanalytic critique can emerge. Barry's work remains tied to the notion of the society as a consumerist construct, both creating and ingesting a rapid flux of signifiers: there is the assumption that the society is built on the access to that consumption. Lippard's book details many artists who develop their work from the position of disenfranchisement, from a lack of access to the consumer index. Trinh's work reminds us that there are other social contracts which remain possible, and that the placement of our own subjectivity on our observations always will cause the shifting of the truth of these observations.

In most cases, a review is used as a consumer guide; in this case, there has been no attempt to provide a market indicator. Simply put, these three books are part of the dialogue on art and culture which I, for one, have found myself involved. These books assume that the readers are engaged in the issues which are being discussed: without that engagement in the discourses of post-colonialism, post-feminism, and a politicized post-ideology, the arguments of these books might seem arcane. Once engaged in these issues, however, Lippard, Barry, and Trinh provide three of the most stimulating of contemporary points of departure; these books do not attempt to provide the right answers, but attempt to provoke the right questions. These books engage art in the shifts and the schisms occurring in society, on all levels, from the local to the global. Yet all three books also are involved in the consideration of pleasure, for though the engagement is with art in its social meaning, there is never the omission of the fact that one of the primary criteria for art is that of beauty. As books, Mixed Blessings, Public Fantasy, and When the Moon Waxes Red benefit from intriguing and elegant design, from a wealth of reproduced images, and from layouts which stress diversity rather than sameness. But the reason to pick up any one of these three books is to engage in a discourse on art which assumes that art matters in the ecosystem of our society. For that assumption alone, these books can claim to perspectives which are, indeed, genuinely radical.

— Daryl Chin

ART AFTER PHILOSOPHY AND AFTER
by Joseph Kosuth
edited by Gabrielle Guerroy, foreword by Jean-François Lyotard
MIT, Cambridge, MA, 1991, $30

Material on early Conceptual Art published in the United States has been difficult to find in recent years. Conceptual Art has always played a more important role in European collecting and aesthetic discourse than it has here. Whereas Conceptual Art was pretty well finished as a trend by 1973 in New York, European collectors continued to be interested. Suddenly, with the advent of something called "Neo-Conceptualism" in the late 80s, attention in the States slowly turned back to some of the major figures who began the process of thinking and working in this vein twenty years earlier.
Along with Robert Barry, Lawrence Weiner, and Douglas Huebler, the artist Joseph Kosuth was one of the Americans who participated in the famous "January show" in 1969. This was the same year that he published his 3-part essay, "Art After Philosophy," in the London-based Studio International. While not the first published statement on the movement for "phenomenon" as some prefer to call it, Kosuth's essay sparked considerable interest and controversy on both sides of the Atlantic. Two years earlier, Sol LeWitt had published his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in a summer issue of Artforum, and as early as 1961, Henry Flynt, a mathematician-turned-artist, wrote a short, though densely technical essay called "Concept Art" (not published until 1963). While Kosuth's "Art After Philosophy" carries a much different historical and philosophical tone than either of the other two essays, it is important to understand what frames his message in terms of what preceded it and what was occurring at the same time.

While I am, in general, supportive of this publication, it is somewhat problematic to consider Kosuth's ideas as if they existed in isolation from other developments that were happening more or less simultaneously. For example, the French conceptualist Daniel Buren had his three-volume set of writings, Les Écrits (1965-1980), published by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Bordeaux, also last year. This is to suggest that Buren was as actively engaged in articulating his position on Conceptual Art as was Kosuth. Other artist-writers of the period, including LeWitt, Dan Graham, and the Art and Language group, which was closely associated with Kosuth, had a collective effect of changing many of the assumed values latent at the time within art world culture.

Even so, Kosuth deserves credit for his enthusiastic will in stirring things up intellectually and in bringing attention to some important issues heretofore unarticulated. Throughout the years of Abstract Expressionism, Happenings, Pop Art, and early Minimalism, the role of language was scarcely ever raised as a problem in dealing with the problems of art. Language as subject matter was all but absent from the discussion. In "Art After Philosophy,"—based largely on ideas quoted from the Logical Positivist A.J. Ayer and the early writings of Wittgenstein—Kosuth radicalizes his "anti-Formalist" position:

Works of art are analytic propositions. That is, if viewed within their context—as art—they provide no information whatsoever about any matter of fact. A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention, that is, he is saying that a particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art.

Clearly such a position, in which art is reduced to a series of propositions, might be argued as more "ultra-" than "anti-Formalist." Given the extreme tendency toward reductivism, beginning with Newman's "zip" paintings in the early 50's, and later Reinhardt's black paintings, Kosuth's radical endeavor seems bent on finishing the job, so to speak. In an interview the following year with Jeanne Siegel, he makes it clear that Reinhardt, next to Duchamp, was a pivotal figure in his evolution as a conceptual artist. Although Ayer is cited in "Art After Philosophy" as his source for deriving the notion of tautology in art, one could easily say that the writings of Reinhardt—particularly "Art-As-Dogma"—were equally as important in establishing this position. Still, it is crucial for Kosuth that his own works and writings come to terms with the expressed ontologies of Formalist critics, such as Clement Greenberg by way of Michael Fried. Kosuth states on numerous occasions that it is not painting that is the issue so much as art; therefore, the artist should proceed to develop a critical position in relation to the large idea of art rather than the specific medium.

The "Introduction" by the editor Gabriele Guercio is a first-rate clarification of Kosuth's development as an artist through his writings. According to Guercio, there are three major subpositions within Kosuth's Conceptualism: The first in "Art After Philosophy;" the second in "The Artist as Anthropologist" (1975); and finally, in writings from the late 70's through the 80's, in which Kosuth's fascination with the language of Freud becomes a major "investigation." Guercio carefully scrutinizes each of these subpositions with charity and objectivity. The critical edge is not as sharp as it could be, but the theoretical explanations are coherent and accessible.

The "Preface" by Jean-Francois Lyotard is more of an outsider's point of view; that is, a philosopher speaking about art and reflecting on the presentation, more than the representation, of Kosuth's work as language and about language.

In general, Art After Philosophy and After makes for lively reading and offers an interesting replay of many of the more serious issues in advanced art over the past three decades. The word "aesthetics" seems to have been out of fashion for a while, and due to its association with Formalism, as Kosuth understands it, the word rarely comes into play. However, one might also consider that Kosuth has been in the process of making a redefinition of aesthetics by zero-ing-in on the psychoanalytic subject as the object of language. This new aesthetics may not be directly political in its agenda, but then one must come to terms, as Kosuth apparently has, with whether art appeals to individuals or to groups. Although he does not say, my conjecture would be that Kosuth favors the individual voice as the more accurate representation of culture.

—Robert C. Morgan

THE THEORY-DEATH OF THE AVANT-GARDE
by Paul Mann
Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1991, $29.95

"The death of the avant-garde is alive and well." This is perhaps the central paradox of Paul Mann's study, The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde. The paradox, like the title, is indeed perplexing, and it takes the full course of the book to tease out its implications.

Mann acknowledges the persistence of what might be called avant-garde activity in our own time. He lists contemporary practitioners of the new, including Vito Acconci, David Antin, Robert Ashley, Steve Benson, Charles Bernstein, Glenn Branca, Chris Burden, Hans Haacke, Jenny Holzer, Lyn Hejinian, Jackson Mac Low, Meredith Monk, Yvonne Rainer, among others. He admits that the Language poets seem in every respect like the sort of group that would once have
been considered avant-garde without question. But the uninterrupted production of new art coincides with interminable obituaries of the avant-garde. The death of the avant-garde is made patently clear. Mann’s review of the obituaries is impressive. He begins by surveying Leslie Fiedler’s 1964 essay, “The Death of Avant Garde Literature,” and then runs through related theories by Hilton Kramer, Jonathan Miller, Douglas Davis, Suzi Gablik, Harold Rosenberg, Roland Barthes, Charles Newman, Peter Burger, Andrea Huysen, Rosalind Krauss, and Robert Hughes, to name a few. Mann’s analysis of these theories is particularly useful as he discerns patterns among them.

“The theories of the death of the avant-garde fall into eight broad categories, a few of which follow here: 1. The death of the avant-garde is a backlash of mainstream culture, “Dada announced the death of bourgeois culture in 1917 and criticism announced the death of the avant-garde in 1971”; 2. Some theories of the avant-garde employ organic metaphors, suggesting that the death of the avant-garde is seeded in its birth; 3. The avant-garde was defeated by the changing conditions in which it had to operate; 4. The rate of change has changed so that mainstream culture has accelerated through the gap that once seemed to separate it; 5. The avant-garde failed: “The failure of a long series of movements to destroy bourgeois culture, to unite art and life, to realize a creative utopia, or even participate in more than a marginal way in revolutionary political events casts a shadow over the development of future movements... belief in even the possibility of avant-garde opposition is evacuated in advance”; 6. The avant-garde has no political effects and dies from shame or embarrassment.

The death of the avant-garde is so pervasive in theory that it cannot be denied, and it effectively constitutes what it describes. “The obituaries are not merely reports but performatives, sites on which death occurs... the avant-garde dies in discourse, as discourse, perhaps all discourse on the avant-garde is its death.” Mann proceeds to clarify his point, “theory-death is strictly a death in theory; the forms of artistic production once called avant-garde continue but the language responsible for processing them can no longer manage; old categories have worn out and new ones have to be invented.” Mann is content to reveal the paradox: “the avant-garde needs its death in order to go on living... we have already seen that some sort of recurrence is endemic to the obituaries; indeed obituaries and claims for survival are often amount to the same thing.”

Mann twice quotes Hans Haacke’s phrase, “Nothing escapes eventual absorption,” because Mann’s study is really a study of recuperation. He is concerned with how oppositional art becomes mainstream, how everything new becomes passe, how “the young Turk must with grinding inevitability become old guard.” Recuperation, Mann argues, is a special strategy of late capitalist culture; in late capitalism the margin is not ostracized, it is disingenuously engaged. Mann offers a five-stage history of the avant-garde which is a history of its recuperation. Stage one: 1870-1916, Nouveau esprit, experiment, cultural optimism, play, cubism, Marinetti, etc.; Stage two: 1916-1939, anti-art, Jarry and futurism, dada and surrealism posed against bourgeois institutions. The next three stages occur after 1945. Stage three: consolidation and recuperation of anti-art. The attack on the institution of art becomes institutional, conformity to the market economy, the Americanization of the avant-garde (Guilbaut); Stage four: The crises of recuperation, the death of the avant-garde; Stage five: decentering, post-modernism, pluralist, eclectic, deconstructive. Mann’s thesis is that the avant-garde is not the victim of recuperation but its agent, its proper technology. As he says, “the seeds of recuperation are lodged in the avant-garde work from the outset.”

The subjects “theory-death” and recuperation conjoin in a brief but brilliant chapter entitled “Post” in which Mann describes postmodernism as the afterlife of the avant-garde. Postmodern resistance is characterized as an anti-aesthetic attack on the institution of art; a critique of dominant forms of ideological representation. It manipulates mass media techniques; following Jameson, there is no critical distance for postmodern art, so it occupies an internal rather than autonomous site; it involves a search for strategies of empowerment. Mann particularly notes that postmodern art is characterized above all by increasing reflection on recuperation itself. A detailed discussion of Hans Haacke clarifies Mann’s approach. Although most critics portray Haacke as a kind of outlaw with few major works shown and few major shows, Mann argues that the work is already recuperated: “What occurs in Haacke’s work is not simply the transmission of political information but its reification... it is already a commodity.” Critical distance is abolished and internal subversive infiltration replaces it. “The last refuge from recuperation is recuperation itself.” Postmodernism reverses a dynamic seen in the avant-garde. In the avant-garde resistance gives way to collusion; in postmodernism recuperation sponsors simulations of resistance. The postmodern artist par excellence is Andy Warhol, who so thoroughly turned the means of recuperation into the very substance of his work. “One could say that Warhol became the most critical artist of his age by demonstrating without any alibi the absolute infinity of art and commerce.”

To some extent Mann’s “theory-death” also marks the death of theory, or at the very least art criticism, which is viewed as nothing less than an agent of recuperation. Early in the study Mann says, “Although the essay never digresses from its study of the avant-garde, it is criticism as such that is its real subject.” Mann proceeds to clarify his point, “But if the avant-garde artists cannot resist recuperation... why would the case be any different for theory? Why would the critical reflection of the attack be any less recuperable than an attack in art? Does not criticism too become an arena for false satisfactions?” Like postmodern art, art criticism achieves no critical distance, no autonomy. Most contemporary critics, according to Mann, are unwittingly complicitous with the very system of representation the work and its discourse presume to attack.

The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde is the most important book on the avant-garde since Bürger’s Theory of the Avant-Garde, and more recently Huysen’s After the Great Divide. With unfailing brilliance, Mann addresses all the important questions raised by his subject. The contradictions of the avant-garde are not solved so much as revealed in this study, and the subject emerges in all of its manifold complexity.

— Jessica Prioz
Letter

To the editors:

Let me first thank Mira Schor for her review in MEANING #10 of my book, Painting as Model, and of my essay in the Ad Reinhardt catalogue of the 1991 MoMA/MOCA show. So far, with very few exceptions, both have been either ignored or attacked (in a cursory manner: needless to say, her serious consideration was welcomed. But there are a few comments in her essay that I’d like to discuss, and I thank you for giving me the opportunity to do so.

The first point I want to make, actually, divides into two seemingly contradictory ones. On the one hand, I cannot understand why visual pleasure should be almost exclusively related to spatial illusion (as when Schor writes “despite Reinhardt’s effort to eliminate any illusion of figure/ground by using the most matte paint surface possible, the paintings do provide visual pleasure.”). What if some other approaches to thick paint or thick surfaces, prefers raw matter to transcendence? Call it a “fetishism of the material” if you wish (Lissitzky’s characterization of Tatlin’s dream), but could one not perceive in the attention to “the specificity of the medium” that a good part of the modernist’s dream entails a certain, historically defined, mode of pleasure? (Very schematically, this would be historically defined in that, as was argued by Strzeminski and Kohro but also by Meyer Schapiro, it can be read as a side effect of the capitalist division of labor — both a transformation of the old 18th-century connoisseurship that readily accepts division of labor as a condition of modernity and a reaction against the commodification such a division engendered.)

On the other hand, I do not think I ever stated that anti-illusion is the only possible position of modernism, although in Painting as Model I do concentrate on painters for whom such was the case (albeit each time differently). In the Reinhardt essay, for example, I do allude, certainly too briefly, to the illusionistic nature of his work (what could be more illusionistic — to the point of alchemy — than transforming darkness into light?). Which does not mean that I would agree with a “religious” reading of his work (on that I wish to remain rather blunt, as a matter of principle).

The essays in Painting as Model and most of my work have to do with a re-reading of some of the “foundational” experiences of modernism, something which is necessitated by the fact that these experiences are too often caricatured in the flood of discourse surrounding the so-called “post-modernist” art practices.

In many ways today, “modernism” functions as a kind of ad hoc repoussoir, in part because the extremely limited version Clement Greenberg provided of it is taken for granted, and thus easily discarded. I do feel that a lot of what is said today about modernism (in the name of “post-modernism”) is fraudulent, but also that it is programmed, so to speak, by the dogmatism of the canonical modernist discourse of legitimation. Hence my return to a certain kind of formalism: in order to question a dominant discourse (a good part of what is written in defense of “post-modernism”) which functions mainly by reaction towards an ex-dominant discourse (“Greenberg’s formalism”), one has to reshuffle the cards. Not necessarily by concentrating all one’s energy on reexamining the ex-dominant discourse in question (although I often find myself obliged to devote some time to that, for example, in my Reinhardt essay), but simply to free “modernism” from such a mortgage. After all, I like the works of Picasso, Matisse, and Mondrian (but I could have added Pollock, Le Corbusier, or Kelly, or a host of other artists), and I do not think that the discussion their work might elicit within the current (“post-modernist”) art discourse is grounded. Moreover, despite all that I can learn from it, I also feel that most revisionist versions of modernism (from a social history point of view or a feminist one, for example) are bound to fail as long as they refuse to begin at the beginning, that is, by grabbing the issues at stake at a formal level. As long as any kind of revision elucidates in front of the object and leaves the analysis of its specificity untouched, abandons it in the hand of the old canonical formalist type of discourse, it will not be able to replace this discourse in any fundamental way. An example here: I’m extremely impressed by Tim Clark’s recent essay on Pollock, which raises extremely important points, but I feel that since he begins to suppress it or at least to suspend it. The monochrome, the grid, or glorification of the ground but about the recognition of the opposition that defines it (on the contrary, I tend to see it as a historical construct, its recurrence within the modernist era being a symptom of its centrality for this era). But, according to Schor, my allowance for painting would be that of a straightjacket (“'1/8th of an inch maximum depth possible”). It is true that for most painters whose work I analyze in Painting as Model, “flatness” was an unescapable condition of painting, which has to do with the originary questions they were raising in their work. Perceptual space was not the “most repressed element in twentieth-century painting,” but it was certainly the most fought against because it is one of the most, perhaps the most, efficient mode of spatial illusion (i.e., of the visual annihilation of the materiality of the picture plane). The importance of the figure/ground opposition is directly related to the new paradigm of originarity raised by modern art, especially after the advent of abstraction. Most artists I deal with in this book seem to have thought: if the figure/ground opposition is the horizon of human perception and at the same time of any pictorial enterprise (which thus has necessarily to do with illusion), then our task is to put it in crisis, to see the way in which we can push it to the limit, almost eradicate it. I differ from Schor’s analysis in “Figure/Ground,” MEANING #6, in that I think that modernism was not about the unilateral glorification of the ground but about the recognition of the opposition that defines it and the desire to suppress it or at least to suspend it. The monochrome, the grid, or the “single image” are emblematic devices aiming at such a suppression.

All the artists I discussed in the book knew the opposition could not be effaced as such, but they all devised strategies to deal with it. Either they thought that the task of modern painting was to search for such an impossible erasure, never to be attained, in an asymptotic way (Mondrian, for example, or they thought it was to explore the complexity of the issue, to problematize it beyond any possible certainty (Newman, certainly). Only Strzeminski thought he had found a solution, a definitive way to suspend the opposition, but he was too clever to keep his confidence at that for more than a brief moment. What I did not discuss in the book, it is true, is a
type of strategy that does not try to ruse with the opposition, and thus with illu-
sion, but makes it in itself an element of doubt, of crisis (and invests this cultivation
doubt, this crisis, with an ideological function). This position is best represented
by Lissitzky, for whom the axonometric projection was the Brechtian “sublation”
of perspective, the last available mode of illusion, to be replaced by yet another one
in the future. In my defense, I’d say that I am currently writing a long book on ax-
onometry and that Lissitzky is playing a major role in it.

My last comment will be about Schor’s relating my work to that of Svetlana
Alpers. As much as I admire Alpers’ book, I do not think it is possible to mix our
two enterprises, for we are both concerned with the historicity of the objects we ana-
lyze. I am not necessarily against insightful unexpected juxtapositions, but I think
that our militant attention to the specificity of the works of art we deal with makes
it particularly difficult to avoid distortions when matching our respective dis-
courses (difficult to avoid pseudomorphism and thus a kind of humanist and univer-
salist conception of history). We both ask: what made such a thing possible at a par-
ticular moment of history, and, since we work on totally different epistemises, the an-
swers are bound to be different even if they look similar they are different, for the
“same” thing in a different context is not the same “thing” anymore. I was thus
surprised to see myself depicted as “staying well within the constructs of the Ital-
ian tradition” and as “bringing to painting a ‘prior notion’ of what a painting
should be.” Renaissance tradition and “a priori” projection are directly linked, as I
mentioned in my essay on Kobro. The whole concept of composition derives from
Alberti and his reliance upon rhetoric and it presupposes the possibility of the for-
mation of an “image” prior to its inscription, a “mental image” (the idea) which can
be then “translated” onto a material ground, without much consideration for
“down-to-earth” questions like scale, color, and the like (hence the formidable im-
portance of the squaring practice in the Renaissance and in the academic tradition).
This idealist aesthetic, which Romanticism paradoxically began to question, re-
mained pervasive in the Western tradition at least until Matisse, but it is my con-
tention that one of the main courses of twentieth-century art was to struggle
against it by many different means. One could perhaps argue that Mondrian re-
mained within this idealist tradition (that’s the way van Doesburg perceived his work
when he said that there was no fundamental difference between neoplasticism
and Poussin), but my sense is that he tried all his life to get away from it (and suc-
cceeded, at the end, with the invention of the physical depth, the material weave, as a
major pictural element in his work).

Of course the question of the relationship to tradition has to be constantly
asked anew (and as far as the notion of anti-composition is concerned, I’m trying to
do it at the moment in various essays taking it directly into consideration). I am
aware of the modernist tendency of positing itself as a tabula rasa (Strzeminski had
warned his fellow artists against that trend; yet, I do think that this concern should
not override historical discontinuities. A good part of my writing has to do with my
strong resistance against a priori systems, a resistance which I perceive as central,
as well, in the work of the modernist artists I most enjoy writing about. But then, it
might be my own blindness that prevents me from seeing that which, in the objects
which I like and spend my time interpreting, remains fully ingrained in the tradition
they are programmatically foisting.

— Yve-Alain Bois

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