*Folio Series*

# Judgment and Contemporary Art Criticism

*Sven Lütticken*

# A Tale of Two Criticisms

Modern art criticism is twice born, having been shaped by the mutual influence of two opposed yet interwoven critical traditions. One lineage is that of Enlightenment criticism, instigated when a certain Étienne La Font de Saint-Yenne arrogated himself the right to judge the French Salon in the name of the Public with his 1747 pamphlet *Réflexions sur quelques causes de l'état present de la peinture en France*.[1] The other is that of Romantic criticism, for which we do not have quite such a clear and convenient beginning. What Romantic criticism is, or could be, is scattered across the early writings of Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, and others in their circle, around 1800.

The different natures of these beginnings, their differing degrees of publicness, are themselves significant. In La Font's time, the idea of a general public for which, and in whose name, one writes was still new and subversive. To claim that one had the right to judge the productions of French painters was an attack on the absolutist state and its king (an academy patron); to find the art sponsored by him severely wanting was also to suggest, however implicitly, that the system that produced such art was lacking. Soon, Johann Joachim Winckelmann would draw complex analogies between the nature of Greek art and the political freedom enjoyed by the classical Athenians; such reasoning was by no means uncommon. Small wonder that Denis Diderot, who would become the most important Enlightenment critic of art, published his Salon reviews not in print, but in the hand-copied *Correspondance littéraire*, which was sent to select subscribers or "correspondents."

Enlightenment criticism passed judgments in the name of a public that it had to posit, or forge, in the first place,

and such judgment had a moral dimension that was not always implicit: Diderot attacked François Boucher as a man whose conception of art could be only lowly, his imagination having been dragged down by the cheap prostitutes in whose company he spent his time.[2] Romantic criticism radically reconceptualized the work of art. Far from having to obey "eternal" rules posited by the critic in the name of the public—rules that regulate the representation of suitable subjects in a manner that is morally edifying and ennobling—the work of art is now seen as establishing its own shaky rules, which the critic tries to reconstruct. In Jacques Rancière's words, the era of early Romanticism marks the moment when the work of art comes to be seen as an "object of thought"—not merely in the passive sense, but as an object that is itself a manifestation of mute thinking, of intuitive theory. Positing an incommensurable rationale of its own accord, the work of art confronts the viewer with a tangled knot of reason and its other, of *logos* with *mythos*.[3] This means that the relationship between the critic and the work is stood on its head: struggling to do justice to the work of art, which, if successful, is a law onto itself, the Romantic critic himself becomes the object of an implicit judgment by the work of art. Will he (at first, the critic was, of course, almost always a "he") do justice to its inner workings, or fail the test and have recourse to irrelevant criteria? While the risk of failure is thus a very real one, the Romantic critic also aims higher than his Enlightenment counterpart: at its most ambitious, Romantic criticism not only sought to do justice to the work of art's inner workings, but also to raise its idiosyncratic logic to a plane of greater self-awareness.

In his famous dissertation on *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (1920), Walter Benjamin argued that the task of art criticism as conceived by the early German Romantics is to elevate the work of art to a higher plane of reflection; Friedrich Schlegel referred to his own essay on Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* as the *Übermeister*.[4] Yet we are not dealing with a linear Hegelian process in which the obtuse manifestations of Spirit in the work of art are liberated from their sensuous shackling by being raised to the sphere of pure reason; instead, we are dealing with an ironic, endless dialectic—an endless series of reflections. This is criticism as critique: *"Criticism," in its Enlightenment sense, consists in recounting to someone what is awry with their situation, from an external, perhaps "transcendental" vantage-point. "Critique" is that form of discourse which seeks to inhabit the experience of the subject from the inside, in order to elicit those 'valid' features of that experience which point beyond the subject's present condition*.[5]



A crucial example of the Romantic criticism of visual art is Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim's 1810 text on Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea*, *Verschiedene Empfindungen vor einer Seelandschaft von Friedrich, worauf ein Kapuziner*, which takes the theatrical form of a series of written sketches of scenes in which visitors to an exhibition comment on the work in ways that, above all, emphasize their education and worldly preoccupations—and say preciously little about the work, except for the myriad of different approaches it seems to generate and to frustrate.[6] When Heinrich von Kleist radically reworked the text's introduction for his newspaper *Berliner Abendblätter*, he wrote that looking at the painting, with its unprecedented emptiness and *Uferlosigkeit* (unboundedness), made him feel like his eyelids had been cut off.[7] While this might suggests the possibility that the painting is at fault—that the artist has pushed things too far, beyond the bounds of what can be called art—it is telling that Kleist, like Brentano and von Arnim, resisted the temptation to jump to conclusions.

After all, a painting's apparent deficiencies may be unknown qualities, and the critic needs to be on his guard.

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These two opposing concepts and practices (for in each case we are dealing with a concept that is put into practice, or a practice that generates a concept) have largely dominated art criticism for more than two centuries. This is not to deny many crucial changes that have taken place. In fact, understanding modern art criticism in terms of a dialectic of Enlightenment and Romantic criticism can benefit the analysis of such transformations—and enable us to see some aspects of the contemporary situation with greater clarity.

One crucial transformation of Romantic criticism was its historicization and politicization. Romantic criticism was always latently historical; after all, modern art is a problematical object of thought precisely because it has lost its self-evident, conventional status. However, in the later 1920s, Benjamin concluded that Romantic critique had given way to a reductivist and ahistorical form of "immanent" criticism, and in order to counter this he proposed a Marxist notion of strategic criticism. This dialectical criticism shares with the immanent approach "the refusal to judge work according to given criteria," since "there is no position from outside the work from which the critic may judge it," as Howard Caygill put it. *The critic must find the moments of externality within the work—those moments where it exceeds itself, where it abuts on experience—and to use them as the basis for discriminative judgment. Strategic critique moves between the work and its own externality, situating the work in the context of experience, and being in its turn situated by it.*[8] Radicalizing Romantic criticism, this



kind of dialectical critique sees the work of art as incomplete insofar as it can never fully resolve the historical contradictions it articulates more or less successfully.

It is worth recalling that Clement Greenberg's art criticism emerged in the context of the Marxist critical project that was the *Partisan Review* of the late 1930s. However, in Greenberg's case the project of thinking through art's contradictions under industrial capitalism soon morphed into something else—into the justification of one kind of modern art as superior. In concluding his 1940s essay "Towards a Newer Laocoon," Greenberg stated: *I find that I have offered no other explanation for the present superiority of abstract art than its historical justification. So what I have written has turned out to be an historical apology for abstract art. To argue from any other basis would require more space than is at my disposal, and would involve an entrance into the politics of taste—to use Venturi's phrase—from which there is no exit—on paper. My own experience of art has forced me to accept most of the standards of taste from which abstract art has derived, but I do not maintain that they are the only valid ones through eternity. They are simply the most valid ones at this given moment.*[9]

The tensions running through this dense passage would never be resolved by Greenberg; if anything, the circularity of his reasoning became ever more pronounced. On the one hand, he deferred to History—to a reductivist, closed version of the historical dialectic. On the other hand, his specific value judgments were increasingly justified with summary references to his superior eye, his experience; supposedly the outcome of the same historical process that created the art he judged, Greenberg's personal taste was thus supposedly attuned to history and to art, and in that sense immanent. However, in the course of the 1960s, as Greenberg increasingly rejected much of the more interesting new art, he came

to look more and more like an old Enlightenment critic, passing judgment in the name of laws that had little to do with the art. In the early 1960s, Greenberg's historical model had appealed to young critics, many of whom wrote for *Artforum*, but by the end of the decade the more ambitious of these critics saw the limitations of Greenbergian formalism quite clearly. Rosalind Krauss documented this process in a number of texts, including "A View of Modernism," in the September 1972 issue of *Artforum*.

Greenberg was frustrated by development that art criticism took in 1970s and 1980s; he faulted critics for replacing the question "Is it good?" with the more neutral one of "What does it mean?"[10] Of course, Greenberg had extremely limited definitions of both "quality" and "meaning"; whereas for Greenberg these are different, the younger critics followed Benjamin in practicing a form of criticism that sought to judge not *ex cathedra*, but by thinking through a work's inner logic in its historical context, and if necessary beyond its limitations. The journal *October*, founded in 1976, was the most important medium for this project; its title signaled a return to an avant-garde model that had first been obscured by Greenbergian Modernism and that faced further threats from the market-driven pluralism that emerged in the 1970s, leading critics such as Rosalind Krauss to abandon *Artforum* in favor of a project dedicated to a new version of "strategic criticism"—one dedicated to Benjaminian "discriminative judgments" rather than Greenberg-style pronouncements on "great art" and "minor art."

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*October*'s historiographical and theoretical achievements can hardly be overstated, but how successful was this project as strategic, dialectical criticism? After all, such



criticism does not conceive of itself as existing in a vacuum; it is part of the historical process. In the case of *October*, the journal's revolutionary (Eisensteinian) title sits in an odd contrast with its status as an academic journal. If strategic criticism survived in *October*, it is perhaps largely as a potentiality rather than as an actuality.

Meanwhile, most art magazines publish a debased version of Romantic critique. The Romantic "completion" of the work of art is turned into a theoretical virtuoso performance that above all seems to aim at strengthening the author's position on the market. The specialist criticism published in magazines and catalogues functions as market-driven romanticism that uses infinite reflection to avoid arriving at some sort of judgment; it finds its counterpart in the increasingly beleaguered reviews in newspapers and other mass media, which often amount to a debased Enlightenment criticism that offers judgments without reflection. When art magazines publish top tens and "best of" lists, it would appear that what matters is less what is being said, and more that something (of whatever nature) is being said about a certain artist or show—by a certain critic or curator. And is the same not true of newspapers? While the space allotted to reviews has been decreasing over the past ten to fifteen years, papers have increasingly taken to "translating" the content of a review into three or four out of five stars and publishing lists of "shows worth seeing." In the latter case in particular, judgment has been reduced to the mere act of mentioning.[11]

One might conclude, as Boris Groys has done, that "yes/no" or "plus/minus" judgments are anachronistic and ineffective.[12] The only form of judgment that still functions, Groys argues, is "one/zero" criticism; the judgment lies in the decision to write about an artist or show, or not. In a way, this has been the modus operandi of Romantic

criticism all along; after all, all only a good work of art demands and deserves textual "completion." But one/zero criticism is hardly the triumph of Romanticism; if anything, it signifies the entropic collapse of both historical models. In Romantic criticism, the one/zero form of critical judgment was largely a side effect; what really mattered was to engage with those works that seemed to demand it. Now, however, the one/zero judgment has moved from the margin to the center, in the process transforming not only Romantic criticism but also Enlightenment criticism: critics may still pass yes/no judgments, but these could now be seen as surface phenomena that distract attention from the real judgment. The "no" of every negative review is negated by the fact that the review was published at all—by the fact that it is a "one."[13]

To observe the features of the current textual landscape is a beginning, but it is not enough. That all forces seem to be aligned in favour of this form of criticism does not mean, as Groys seems to suggest, that there is no room for interventions in this critical regime. A fundamental problem of the current form of one/zero criticism is that its judgments remain implicit and thereby unquestionable. Surely discourse would be impoverished if none of us were prepared to criticize an artist or project outright and put our own criteria to the test—to risk opening ourselves up to the criticism that we have not been attentive enough to an artwork's complex logic, that we might have failed dismally to produce an *Übermeister*. However, I would argue that to continue the inherent and implicit work of reflection in a critical text is also to be attuned to the work's contradictions and aporias, which may be more or less serious and detrimental to this work's success. To practice "completionist" criticism, then, does not preclude value judgments, but these will be rather different from those



of Enlightenment criticism with its apparently fixed criteria. Especially in its historicized and politicized form, as Benjaminian strategic criticism, the practice of Romantic critique does indeed arrive at judgments—but these spring from taking the work of art's logic (faulty as it may be) to a point where it goes beyond and against the work's limitations, where it is confronted with other logics operating in its cultural and historical context.

Following Andrea Fraser's suggestion that art criticism should be practiced as a site-specific activity, it seems to me that part of the job for a critic writing for art-world publications that tend to neutralize debate (magazines, catalogues) is to try to push reflection to the point of site specificity.[14] This can also mean writing about artists one has serious doubts about—even if it may contribute to their status and increase their symbolic capital. This is a price that has to be paid for breaking the deafening silence. If writing in art magazines and catalogues needs to push reflection to the point where its interpretations become discriminative judgments, other forms of criticism need more reflection on the *a prioris* and aporias of evaluating art. It is probably too late in the day to worry about traditional newspaper criticism; more relevant is the Web, in particular, blogs. Here, site-specific criticism would mean capitalizing on the informality of the Web in a way that goes beyond proud displays of personal preferences. Media that are not traditional platforms for criticism of visual art can also be fruitful, and in establishing connections between different media, site-specific criticism may become truly strategic. Turning against the limitations of the media in question, such criticism may momentarily open up spaces for partisan reflection amidst the ones and zeros.

1. On La Font, see Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 7–11.
2. "Et que peut avoir dans l'imagination un homme qui passé sa vie avec les prostituées du plus bas étage?" Denis Diderot, "Salon de 1765," *Salons,* vol. II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 75.
3. See, for example, Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique* (Paris: La Fabrique, 1998), 30–40.
4. Walter Benjamin, "Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik" (1919/1920), in Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, eds., *Gesammelte Schriften I.1: Abhandlungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 67.
5. Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), xiv. The distinction between criticism and critique is specific to the English language; German, for instance, knows only *kritik*.
6. See the published version, with Heinrich von Kleist's editorial changes, "Verschiedene Empfindungen vor einer Seelandschaft von Friedrich, worauf ein Kapuziner" (1810), at http://wendelberger.com/downloads/Kleist_Seelandschaft.pdf.
7. Ibid., 4.
8. Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998), 62–63. Benjamin's "Programm der literarischen Kritik" (1929–30) is in Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, eds., *Gesammelte Schriften VI: Fragmente, autobiografische Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 161–67. I am indebted to Esther Lieslie for pointing me towards this text.
9. Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940), in John O'Brian, ed., *The Collected Essays and Criticism 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1940* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 37.



10. Alice Goldfarb Marquis, *Art Czar: The Rise and Fall of Clement Greenberg* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2006), 237.
11. This development has been pronounced in the case of the so-called "quality newspapers" in the Netherlands and much less so in, for instance, Germany.
12. Groys recalls that, when he was writing for a newspaper, he *very quickly understood that people reacted only to the fact that I had written a text, that this text was published in the newspaper, had a certain length, was illustrated or not, and was or was not run on the front page of the feuilleton section. They absolutely didn't react to what I wrote, be it description or evaluation, and they absolutely couldn't distinguish between positive and negative evaluation.... I understood immediately that the code of contemporary criticism is not plus or minus; I would say it's a digital code: zero or one, mentioned or not mentioned. And that presupposes a completely different strategy, and a different politics.* "Who Do You Think You're Talking to? Boris Groys in Conversation with Brian Dillon," *frieze* no. 121 (March 2009), 126–31.
13. Confusion over this issue abounds. Recently, an artist whose work I had dared to criticize in print sent an irate letter to the editor of the magazine in question, complaining that my remarks would undermine the market for his work in the US. I highly doubt that any negative judgment in the text would outweigh the effect, such as it is, of writing and publishing the text in the first place.
14. Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Andrea Fraser, David Joselit, Rosalind Krauss, et al, "Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," *October* no. 100 (spring 2002), 223.

*William Wood*

# Notes on the Demise and Persistence of Judgment

*Some commentators have located the demise of judgment within the massive proliferation of art styles in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Others have laid the blame at the feet of such culprits as the recently inflated art market and the legacy of institutional critique.*[1]

I want to discuss the framework for the *Judgment and Contemporary Art Criticism* forum as spelled out in the organizers' printed *Supplement* and through texts selected and reprinted there.[2] Through these texts, I would like to bring in historical and contemporary references to the conditions leading to our old friend, the putative, recurring crisis in art criticism. With that crisis in mind, and before addressing the impact of proliferating art styles, the inflated art market, and the legacy of institutional critique, I want to touch on a quote which has strong implications for the matter of judgment and art.

*Art, considered in its highest vocation is and remains, for us, a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred to our ideas instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place. What is now aroused in us by works of art is not just immediate enjoyment, but our judgment also, since we subject to our intellectual consideration (i) the content of art, and (ii) the work of art's means of presentation, and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of both to one another.*[3]

The quote is from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, last delivered in 1828. I raise Hegel's reconsideration of art because, on the one hand, we can say that it engages a massive Wincklemann-like fantasy:

the fantasy of citizens of ancient Athens walking familiarly among polychrome statues, or the equally erroneous vision of the Gothic cathedral as decorated with the "bibles of the illiterate," both of which represent ideals of past art emphasized in forms of Romanticism contemporary to Hegel. Yet, in this fantasy, I want to note how Hegel's emphasis on art's belatedness encourages us to underline separation from art in our consideration of it. Meanwhile, the equally powerful desire to overcome that sense of being separate persists, whether in the revered spontaneity of Abstract Expressionist brushwork or the immediacy stressed in some accounts of conceptual art or behind a more current investment in the simulacra of community achieved through social practice or "relational aesthetics." The pain of separation and distance, encapsulated in the notion of art being "a thing of the past," which decisively divorces the present of forlorn art from its integrated past, is at least partially (maybe substantively) compensated for by endorsing and exalting judgment. As Hegel has it, art provides "not just immediate enjoyment" but calls us to judge appropriateness as well. Acknowledging that dreams of reconnection persist alongside the compensating reassurance of judgment, I wonder whether both constitute linked foundational fantasies: that is, fantasies of reconnection persist because we want always to imagine not being alienated from art, while, simultaneously, judgment—although promising finality—insists that we are, at least intellectually, constantly at a distance from art.

I came to Hegel's reconsideration of art through the end-of-art thesis propounded by critic and philosopher Arthur Danto. In his *After the End of Art*, the idea that the proliferation of art styles in the closing decades of the twentieth century has impact on judgment can be fairly easily associated with his discussion of what he calls a democracy of pluralism in contemporary art. Danto claims that



"there is now no special way a work of art must be," tracing this condition back to Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* of 1964, which possesses no significant distinguishing visual difference from the Brillo box found in the supermarket.[4] While Danto has much more to say about that example, his point is that Warhol's box signals the end of that notion of the "special way art must be," which he attributes to what he calls the Age of Manifestoes. Broadly coincident with the period of post-Hegelian modern art and culminating in the rise of the avant garde and the neo-avant garde, the Age of Manifestoes is marked by practices of inclusion and exclusion which dictate that certain types of art work exemplify the most significant art and that all other contemporary art is inferior, perhaps not art at all. This declaration of inclusion and exclusion is an exceptional type of judgment where discrimination takes first place. One of the most often discussed example of this sort of exclusive judgment is Michael Fried's 1967 "Art and Objecthood" (discussed mainly by Fried himself in subsequent writing). There, modernist painting and sculpture as distinct media and the theatricality of minimal art are opposed in a manner whereby, combining aesthetic with theological judgment, Fried could emphatically declare that "theatre and theatricality are at war today, not just with modernist painting... but with art as such."[5] Such exclusive judgment is presumably what critic and curator Christopher Bedford wants when he calls for a return to Clement Greenberg-style "critical criteria," a "well-organized, well-argued, and clearly explicated system of value."[6] Yet Fried's essay is remembered and expressly recalled as a bellicose swansong for a type of critical *diktat* which purported to offer exclusive judgment while actually being special pleading based on "an attack on certain artists (and critics) and a defence of others."[7] Bedford may point favourably to the richness

of the debates that ensued, but I have doubts that anyone today could find in medium specificity sufficient grounds, or fervent faith in certain artists as righteous proof, truly to emulate Fried's 1960s example—except Fried himself in his 2008 monographic paean disguised as an explanation of *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before.*[8]

In her essay "Change and Criticism: Consistency and Small Minds," also from 1967, Lucy Lippard is already preparing ground for moving away from the excluding mode when she argues that "a judgment on contemporary art is *tentatively* true, like a scientist's law and unlike a legal law."[9] This comparison of types of laws indicates something which Fried's call for medium specificity cannot tolerate, for she is encouraging looking not to a canon but to experimentation for criteria in engaging art and criticism. When Lippard goes on to say that "the critic's role is descriptive rather than prescriptive," combined with her allusion to the scientist, she points towards the oft-forgotten attraction of technocratic adventures such as communications and systems theory and the philosophy of science—as elaborated in books such as Thomas Kuhn's 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*—on contemporary thinking about the arts and culture in the 1960s. Besides indicating an expanded field beyond media specificity, one outcome of this attraction which Lippard seems to be anticipating was her own subsequent practice as a descriptive critic of the conceptual art that overtly tried to avoid or render useless the categories of painting and sculpture—not to mention aesthetic conviction and cultural privilege—which upheld the exclusionary judgment of critics like Fried, as well as her later inclusive approach to feminist and activist art projects and her concern with aspects of locale in her writing.

We can see the legacy of this move from prescriptive judgment to tentative description operating in the *October*



round table when David Joselit speaks of judging "what constitutes an object...an object of history and object of aesthetic interpretation"[10] or speaks of judging "the boundaries of a field"[11] in the context of engaging both art and visual culture. Joselit is making a double move. On the one hand, we need to judge what is an appropriate object for criticism, as when a critic passes over the phantom of the "thing in itself" to determine how the work of art is articulated and refracted through institutional framing, curatorial context, and the histories, conventions, and subjects it emerges through and calls upon. On the other, where do the bounds of aesthetic interpretation lie? Are art critics (or art historians who act as critics sometimes, like Joselit) and their competencies able to reach meaningfully to other areas? Are we (since I occupy the same field) in possession of specially pertinent tools and analyses which might be fruitfully applied to a broader range of images and objects, from popular culture, non-elite spectacle, and subcultural practices? I do not want to get caught up in this question, but want to argue that this double move means that we need to come closer to considering not the proliferation of styles but the proliferation of *objects* and the proliferation of *aspects* in the field of contemporary art and criticism. For Sven Lütticken, the issue pivots on the distinction Joseph Kosuth is credited with elaborating between "specific" and "generic" art, with generic or art-in-general being a situation where "objects nowadays exhibited as art no longer derive their legitimacy from a tradition or an artistic medium but from the very fact that their artistic status is initially dubious."[12] Such a proliferation of objects for contemporary art has a consequence that, to Lütticken, differently politicizes the sort of pluralism Danto cheers on as democratic. Since art can include most anything, it is then open in a new way to the commodity relations of spectacular society, and so the

artist has become an exemplary consumer. Meanwhile, the sort of criticism which stresses art's "potential for dissent and difference" risks being merely the "marketing slogans for art that has sabotaged such a project," promoting its consumption in a deceptive, probably repressive, but incrementally different type of pitch.

In response to this potential sabotage, Lütticken (with a nod to Boris Groys), discusses Marcel Broodthaers, seeing him as a figure whose acts of consumption amounted to "not merely a reflection *of* spectacle but a reflection on it" and further claims that this sort of "meta-consumption" can result in "decoding, deviant commodities which are more thought-provoking and productive compounds" of the "irrational rationality of the spectacle."[13] Though he appears to laud this tendency—and to link it to other scripto-visual artists like Dan Graham and Robert Smithson—Lütticken is also concerned with the way in which the "ideology of art" stipulates that the culture industry represents the big Bad Cop while the art business represents the Good Cop—the one who "is good for people, refined, complex—and critical." Aware that critical writing—whether or not it is exclusively judgmental—is part and parcel of art's privileged position as something somehow regarded as not entirely instrumentalized, Lütticken writes of the uninflected importation of contemporary cultural theory into artistic and critical discourse as often constituting unreflective consumption, what he calls a "pathetic, pathological tangle of slogans and hype."[14] Here we might also consider Julian Stallabrass's contention that a good deal of contemporary art's charm lies in the way it acts as a cipher for notions of artistic and creative freedom while simultaneously being nicely positioned as spectacle in the status stakes played out by powers who are bent on increased capital accumulation through increasing inequity.[15]



We are now up against the question of the recently inflated market and its impact on judgment. Is this really a problem? Many commentators on contemporary criticism, including Lütticken and James Elkins, write of an imperative that art must appear with some form of writing attached to it and, equally that there has recently been more publishing of commentary, gossip, blogging, publicity, and art writing than ever before. In addition, Elkins claims that most of what is produced is not read and certainly not worthy of close reading.[16] Meanwhile, in a 2008 discussion of "Art and Its Markets," Tim Griffin, editor of *Artforum*, said that the abundance of advertising in his magazine had lead him away from the market to areas where he could use the ad revenue "to do something completely counterintuitive: slow down, be late, even slightly out of sync."[17] Hence, the magazine had recently featured articles and tributes to figures seemingly extraneous to the fungibles of art dealing and collecting—philosopher Jacques Rancière, dancer Michael Clark, novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet among them. In this example, the judgment of "an object of history"—which Joselit upheld—sustains what Hal Foster calls "the archaeological function" of criticism,[18] returning the forgotten or revaluing the marginal thanks to revenue from a market whose interests it, nominally, does not represent—though here, we must recall that reviving marginal figures extends the stock available for dealing.[19] As well, dealing, whether in words or of works, can come to have reciprocal effects by generating subsequent circulation of works and in words.

I am not, like Dave Hickey, an apologist for the art market, but diffidence about the art market's relationship to questions of criticism and judgment necessitates neither an embrace of the ubiquity of market pressures nor a disavowal of those pressures. Rather, we can look to the art

market's many contradictory aspects—the lack of a clear sense of what art is worth, what it can do, how it is promoted simultaneously as token of freedom and as owned object, as luxury goods and as cultural patrimony, as things useless as instruments but viable for all sorts of speculative purposes.[20] These questions are grounded in matters of autonomy and heteronomy, the two poles which, according to Pierre Bourdieu, structure the field of cultural production, making its nineteenth-century French formation "the economic world reversed."[21] (To revise the terms for the field of contemporary art in the recent past, we might speak of the art market as representing the economic world synchronized.) It is not that the market dictates criticism—Tim Griffin wondered: "Could a publication seriously damage *anything* anymore?"[22]—but to recognize that inflation in a bubble market and especially the corrosive effects of presuming market relations to be the prevailing model for social life has taken on the character of a neoliberal monolith, resulting in the eradication of remaining vestiges of publicness while endorsing weak citizenship.

In front of the Richard Serra-like monolith, we might turn away from the art market towards the question of funding and governance of public institutions like museums. As Andrea Fraser points out in the 2002 *October* round table on "The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," the privatization and corporatization of museums and galleries is the result of "a historical shift" since the 1970s where: "The progressive ambition of building audiences for art museums... [whereby] museums began to recognize that they had publics and public responsibilities, as did artists and critics and curators" came to be "seen through the prism of professional and institutional needs."[23] As she concludes: "So art for art's sake was replaced by growth for art's sake—which was often seems a thin cover for



growth for growth's sake." This is somewhat related to an argument brought forth by Benjamin Buchloh concerning how one "target" of conceptual art's thorough criticism of the field of contemporary art in the 1960s and 1970s was "the secondary discursive text that attached itself to artistic practice." As he further states, "readers' competence and spectatorial competence had reached a level where the meddling of the critic was historically defied and denounced."[24] What interests me here is the trend to revise the relatively recent past regarding the encouragement of "democratization and decentralization"—in the progressive bureaucratic language of the day—in postwar cultural organizations and individual reception. That is, to see how laudable aims that pointed away, again, from exclusive judgment and inherited privilege, need to be understood as plays in a field where every part is active and unforeseen consequences need to be exposed and subject to analysis. If, in the museum, opening up the institution to more publically sensitive accountability also advanced administrators' adoption of corporate methods and standards, so the redirected energies of the empowered viewer/reader of conceptual art could also be seen to contribute to the quelling of the exclusionist critic as well as a harbinger of intensified heteronymous, inclusive forms of art writing—like gossip, blogging, and publicity. A further implication is that, just as the corporate methods of the museum stress attendance numbers and fundraising goals, so inclusive modes of art writing remove barriers to publication along with the residual conscientiousness of the professional critic.

This brings me to the legacy of institutional critique inasmuch as Buchloh is credited with its initial analysis and Fraser is surely one of its most articulate practitioners. Indeed, Fraser offers perhaps one usable definition of criticism: "I define criticism as an ethical practice of

self-reflective evaluation of the ways in which we participate in the reproduction of relations of domination, which include for me the exploitation of competence and other forms of institutional authority."[25] It is through "self-reflective evaluation" that institutional critique causes problems for judgment since critique and reflective thought demand questioning of the authority of those who present themselves fit to judge. Taking this definition into consideration leads Fraser to recommend a "site-specific" type of art criticism that means "not misrecognising your readership as the other of your discourse but as the actual people who are probably going to be picking up the magazine and looking through its pages."[26] Sven Lütticken comes to a similar conclusion when he writes of the possibility that the "ideology of art" which sponsors Good Cop/Bad Cop notions can also permit "fragile alliances between institutions and individuals in the art world."[27] This, to me, is a large part of the legacy of institutional critique because Lütticken and Fraser not only recognize the importance of critique and contextualization but they also display an abiding involvement in the institutions they subject to critique. Such investment has always marked the strongest manifestations of the critique of institutions—the ethically sound conviction that Hans Haacke held that his 1971 real time social system, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings*, would be shown at the Guggenheim Museum because officials would recognize its public importance. In the end, of course, they did not: Director Thomas Messer enacted and excited subsequent critique by cancelling the exhibition, proving the limits of tolerance within the notionally liberal establishment. In this example, the legacy of institutional critique prompts judgment of matters of exclusion and inclusion in cultural life and questions those "relations of domination" we all participate in by venturing that the



description or re-description of institutional conditions leads towards attempts to fulfill repressed and latent potentials otherwise not considered.

Having discussed the three factors leads me to propose some tentative conclusions:

1. If we move from regarding the proliferation of styles to considering the proliferation of objects or the proliferation of aspects in the field of contemporary art, we realize that the actual difference is that we no longer judge works but assess or analyze projects or practices. Partly this is an effect of a shift in the way artists produce work; artists no longer make works but prepare exhibitions—they make shows. Again, although one can trace this back to the decline of state and private commissions and the ascendance of the commercial gallery in the late-nineteenth century, the most obvious example is the "post-studio" condition of the 1960s when artists like Carl Andre or Dan Flavin had component parts delivered to the gallery and assembled the show there. One might go further and, recalling that a Flavin requires a certificate to distinguish it from directly store-bought fluorescent fixtures, agree with Boris Groys when he argues that much of what we approach as contemporary art in galleries and museums is not art work but art documentation that depends on art being "no longer present and immediately visible but rather absent and hidden."[28] This means that we may personally *prefer* certain examples but we can no longer faithfully argue that this video is better than that photograph on secure, pseudo-connoisseurial grounds.

2. The recently inflated market is an aspect, maybe an extremely volatile aspect, of the relations of domination whereby art and culture are part of the "dominated dominant" portion of social life. The feints and moves of all the agents in the field affect judgment not by dominating it

in the literal sense of dictation, but by inciting all manner of play between autonomous and heteronomous positions and dispositions. This is not meant to be comforting but it does offer, though critique and analysis, the possibility of plotting the players and comprehending their moves in relation to each other. Once we cease judging by appeal to an impossible autonomy and recognize the inevitability of heteronomy, we see that it takes ingenuity rather than faith to manoeuvre in the field.

3. The legacy of institutional critique is best understood as an unrelenting ethical imperative, as Fraser put it, speaking of her own practice, "to perform the inseparability of freedom and determination; to perform that contradiction without distancing it in facile irony or collapsing it in cynicism."[29] With talk of freedom and determination, we can return back to the quote from Hegel and note something latent in his writing which might be more explicit in my description of the replacement of exclusive judgment with the judgment of objects of interpretation and of aspects of the field of contemporary art. Namely, that art is not now in pursuit of its highest vocation but the memory of that vocation and the idealism it entails persists in rumours and fantasies that art has become alive again under new circumstances. Though the idea is tantalizing in many ways, I hope we can also see that it is tremendously unlikely to be so.



1. *Supplement for Judgment and Contemporary Art Criticism* (Vancouver: Artspeak and Fillip, 2009), 5. This booklet included reprints of texts by Lucy Lippard, Sven Lütticken, Christopher Bedford, and James Elkins, as well as "Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," *October* no. 100 (spring 2002).
2. The *Judgment and Contemporary Art Criticism* forum was accompanied by a reading room/gallery installation and a brochure publication, both put together by Fillip and Artspeak. Besides mapping the overlapping territory that prompted the collaboration leading to the forum, these coordinated opportunities to read the texts and handle the products of criticism also offered the speakers and the audience selected writings and provided the hint of a history to consider prior to and following the two days of papers and discussion. For a list of texts included in the *Supplement*, see Bibliography, page 169.
3. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 11.
4. Arthur C. Danto, "Three Decades After the End of Art," *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 35.
5. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (summer 1967), 12–23, as reprinted in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 163.
6. Christopher Bedford, "Art Without Criticism," *X-tra* 10, no. 2 (winter 2008). I could add that one can say that Greenberg had a "clearly explicated system of value" only if you forget about the various and often conflicting attempts to sort out his position by critics and historians such as T. J. Clark, Thierry de Duve, Charles Harrison, Caroline Jones, Rosalind Krauss, and Barbara Reise.
7. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 167.

8. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
9. Lucy Lippard, "Change and Criticism: Consistency and Small Minds," in *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), 24.
10. Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Andrea Fraser, David Joselit, Rosalind Krauss, et al, "Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," *October* no. 100 (spring 2002), 209.
11. Ibid., 217.
12. Sven Lütticken, *Secret Publicity: Essays on Contemporary Culture* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2006), 8.
13. Ibid., 14–15.
14. Ibid., 14.
15. Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
16. James Elkins and Michael Newman, eds., *The State of Art Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 72–74.
17. "Art and Its Markets: A Roundtable Discussion," *Artforum* 46, no. 8 (April 2008), 300.
18. "Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," 220.
19. Along with the "Art and Its Markets" roundtable, the April 2008 issue of *Artforum* has a discussion of how a sizeable posthumous market for the work of Lee Lozano has been generated through a "circle of belief" consisting of fellow artists, critics, curators, dealers, and collectors. See Katy Siegel, "Market Index: Lee Lozano," *Artforum* 46, no. 8 (April 2008), 330, 390.
20. For a study of at least one aspect of this complex and contradictory diffidence, the pricing of works of contemporary art, see Olav Velthius, *Talking Prices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
21. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic Field Reversed," *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 29–73, 273–79.



22. "Art and Its Markets," 300.
23. "Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," 213.
24. Ibid., 205.
25. Ibid., 214.
26. Ibid., 223.
27. Lütticken, 16.
28. Boris Groys, "Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation," *Art Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2008), 53. On the subject of Flavin's certificates, see James Meyer, "The Minimalist Unconscious," *October* no. 130 (fall 2009), 143–76.
29. Andrea Fraser, "Performance Anxiety," *Artforum* 14, no. 6 (February 2003), 103.

*Diedrich Diederichsen*

# Judgment, Objecthood, Temporality

Some time ago, I began playing a game with myself: whenever a gallery opening threatened to be boring, I compared every art object at hand with *The Simpsons* episode that aired the same afternoon. I probably don't need to tell you that, in most cases, the cultural industrial product of three scriptwriters, three hundred Korean draughtsmen and women, several actors, and many other people was not only more intelligent, funny, and entertaining than its counterpart, it also succeeded on the home turf of fine art: a self-reflexive discussion of its own means in order to achieve a specific aesthetic goal: justification of that goal.

This game interrupts high art's dream to live in a perfect world in which human production is not measured and debated on the grounds of normative ideas and criteria. This dreamworld—in which art exists outside of the rules of cultural industrial production—is not pleasant. It is a hellish, petit-bourgeois dystopia in which people play games without winners and the idea that anything is preferable to anything else is grinned away by zombies who avoid conflict by any means.

Judgments, especially negative judgments of value, have increasingly bad press. Opinions are supposed to be relative, debates open, and results postponed. The widespread attitude among artists and curators these days is that recipients (many single people) would rather interact than judge. Theoreticians seem to agree. Complaining about this is similarly widespread. Here, I agree with Tirdad Zolghadr's remark that complaining about the lack of judgment is as widespread as judgments are absent.

But to support the notion of judgment is not necessarily

to call for a return to order, as Zolghadr suggested in his keynote address. It may as well be a leap forward, a re-definition of disagreement on the basis of argument instead of taste; a re-rationalization of distinction against its naturalization. Only the ironicist, who observes discourses not for their argumentative, transitive value, but for their object value (beauty, rarity, newness, complexity)—an almost a hegemonic intellectual type these days—will refuse this possibility. He or she avoids right/wrong alternatives by all possible—and often dandyistic—means. I have certain sympathy for this attitude based on historical merits that date back to the days of a hopelessly deadlocked but still hegemonic critical discourse. But I disagree in the contemporary situation, in which an avoidance of judgment is not only held to be natural, it is also politicized in a semi-heroic rhetoric. These were the programmatic and normatively anti-normative statements of the 2006 Viennese conference *Kritik* on the state of the art of criticism: *What is critique? It is certainly not simply a practice of judging, much less of condemning. It may be that these kinds of reactive, abbreviated forms of "critique" charged with resentment are still being preached from the pulpits of academic teaching and announced from within the bunkers of art criticism, a practice that is perhaps even stronger than ever. In a contemporary concept of critique, however, it can no longer be a matter of a more or less rigorous yes or no to a certain object.*[1]

I would indeed agree that it is reductivist to limit critique or criticism exclusively to judgment; one could say, for example, that this would identify the process with the result. But certain things in these programmatic sentences irritated me: "Condemning" and "negative judgment" are "stronger than ever"? Where? In which "bunkers of art criticism," and where in the discourse of "academic teaching"? Where are you living? If there is one thing you never read anywhere nowadays, it is a negative judgment against any show, project, book, or catalogue by anyone involved in the fine art world—this simply does not exist any more. The reason is that, in all likeliness, producing negative criticism results in social death. Writers would need the support of other structures, outside of the art market, to achieve the social power to negate any object or project within it. But, on the other hand, to adequately address contemporary art, one needs so much insider knowledge that criticism from outside is hardly possible and not even desirable.



There is a similar situation in newspaper journalism and in many specialist discourses such as film criticism. The only exceptions, at least in the European situation, are theatre and classical music. Here, at least in some old-school bourgeois newspapers—which nobody takes seriously anyway—the editors keep up a traditional form of review culture in which negation is still possible. This often leads to a widespread misunderstanding: judgmental criticism is possible only within traditional fields. In today's complex contemporary art world, you can only guess the value of art in general. But if traditional rules don't apply within contemporary art criticism, the social rules that make certain art beautiful for specific people are based on judgments and their defence. Every conversation about contemporary art progresses through disagreements, exposure of criteria, and so on. The unexplained absence of these discursive habits in written art criticism fulfils even the easiest criteria for some kind of false consciousness or ideology —that is what a certain discourse hides and that it is hiding it.

I want to support a practice of criticism that eventually produces judgments—of course not final, holy judgments, but judgments of value. Eventually, I hope to come up with some ideas for a certain practice of judging that I will find defendable, as opposed to the pseudo-noble withdrawal

from judgment. But first I want to discuss an antagonistic constellation that I found in one of the texts of another Viennese symposium on critique and criticism, organized by the same European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies that was responsible for *Kritik* in 2006. In his introductory lecture for the conference *The Art of Critique* (2008), Gerald Raunig refers to distinctions based on Foucault's text "What is Critique?" and a reading of Foucault by Judith Butler.[2] In this discussion, Raunig makes a distinction between critique as an open process—a general perspective towards the world—and a narrow-minded notion of critique as a practical and useful instrument that helps you get through the world—or rather, helps you decide between consumer options.[3] Raunig quotes Butler as having argued that critique in the first sense is the very process that suspends judgment.

By the way: I found my fellow panellists at the *Judgment and Contemporary Art Criticism* forum well dressed. I like Jeff's jacket, I like Maria's jacket, I like my jacket.

This idea of critique as a process-oriented attitude gravitates towards the description of people, their personal mindset, their self-image, their morality. In other words, it develops a tendency which drives the practice of this process-oriented critique-as-way-of-life towards focussing on issues of the self, a self which is not completely free of petit-bourgeois notions of the value of a self. It does not prescribe the discursive side of a discursive practice, but the personal, psychological, habitual side of it. This critique might still be a discourse, a discursive practice, but in order to conceive of it in that way—as a suspension of judgment—it must be thought of as a discursive activity involving living people, not just critical or theoretical production. This suspension of judgment can make sense only as a quasi-aesthetic and/or ethical practice that organizes



itself around the life of thought, its infinity and physicality. It is by no means the asymmetrical activity of people vis-à-vis objects or vis-à-vis the world, which one might associate with critical practice in the first place. Instead it describes people vis-à-vis themselves, how they grow, develop, avoid, play and maybe even produce—but all from a position of sovereignty, self-control, and even narcissism. Maybe this is a deeper reason for the strategies of avoidance and fluffiness that Zolghadr mentioned in his opening lecture. You shy away from judgment because you feel that, in this post-Fordist world, objects, especially art objects, are people or are very close to people. That means that when you judge, you insult someone, not just on a professional level, but on a personal level. We are all far too well educated to do that.

Here is a very different idea of critique or criticism, involving value judgments: I am talking about value judgment and criticism in the discourses of "emergent people"—young, recently immigrated or arrived, recently allowed to speak, and so on—vis-à-vis an already finished world of objects. This position can be found amongst non-emergent populations as well. In Gerald Raunig's introduction, he makes reference to Raymond Williams, via Butler, who argues that one should think of critique as open-ended practice instead of a teleological activity leading to judgments. But it is exactly the possibility of arriving at judgments that makes this particular critical activity an unstoppable one, because it articulates seemingly final decisions all the time. It has to continue forever; it has to permanently rediscuss what it has seemingly been decided for good. Only because a sentence has the seriousness of a final decision and an eternal damnation will it be discussed over and over again.

Of course the subtext of Foucault's, Williams's, and Butler's privileging of a critical attitude, a critical project,

over critical judgment is the ethics of politicization, the ethics of political activity or even activism, be it in a revolutionary sense referring to some normative idea of turning your life around, turning it into a responsible revolutionary one, or in a democratic sense, as a normative idea of participation and involvedness, permanent questioning of and constant skepticism toward official truths. It owes its idea of a criticality that reaches the entire body of the critical subject to ideas and lifestyles of the 1960s and after, which are based on the idea that everyone should change their life and live holistically, dedicated to their own ideas, and not by an old, bourgeois double standard. I have to say, anticipating slightly arguments I want to come back to later, that while I grew up in solidarity with these ideas and still hold them dear, I feel I must note at this point that the investment of your whole life, the ethics of a holistic existence, the exploitation not of labour but of life force, is exactly the motor contemporary forms of capitalism are driven by.

Now, in order to go back, this existentialism of the critical position—a slightly polemic exaggeration that is a bit unfair to Foucault, who knew about the dangers of existentialism—is opposed to the seemingly apolitical consumer whose judgments of value are nothing more than judgments of exchange value, or, at best, judgments of a certain economic rationality in relation to a form of use value. They are not free judgments—that is, judgments made outside a relationship to a necessity based on the realities of life.

Aesthetic judgment, in its classical form, at least in the German tradition, is connected to an idea of judgment without relation to a worldly interest in the art object, any use value of it as a thing in daily life. Instead, it is based on a suspension of use and exchange values in favour of a general openness towards pleasure not related to instrumentality and calculable gain. The conditions for the ability or



capacity to receive and enjoy artistic objects that particular way can of course be located historically and sociologically; they can be found in a fully developed Western bourgeois culture, beginning somewhere around 1750. They were first studied and systematized by Immanuel Kant in the work that in the English-speaking world is known as the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), although its correct translation should rather be the *Critique of the Capacity of Judgment.*[4] This capacity assumes, without declaring it explicitly, of course, that whomever makes an artistic experience is carefree and socially safe enough to look at an object without desperately needing its use value. You can only enjoy the *peinture* of a still life when the food that it depicts does not make you hungry. This is what Kant calls disinterested pleasure. Bourdieu adds that, of course, only when you're not hungry are you able to remain disinterested.

Identifying this tradition of disinterested pleasure as an element of Western bourgeois culture might be a judgment too, even a condemning one, but I introduce "Western bourgeois" here at first as a technical term. There are two ways to criticize this concept. One follows Bourdieu: to be disinterested is affordable only by the ruling class. Hence whatever this experience might intrinsically be, it cannot be human or universal, since it is constituted through exclusivity. The other critique of this concept does not condemn the concept itself but the uneven distribution of its availability. Maybe there is nothing intrinsically wrong with good wine or pleasant country architecture—only its exclusivity. (This would be a rather Marxist reading of Western bourgeois aesthetic privilege; one would deny a moralist Protestant understanding of privilege.) Maybe the same is true for the disinterested pleasure at the heart of the bourgeois conception of aesthetic experience.

This disinterested affection—at least with Kant—leads

to a specific form of judgment that lies at the centre of social formations. Your highly subjective and untranslatable experience with an artwork or some other aesthetic object needs to be communicated. You want to talk about it—and you have to, in order to socialize in the bourgeois sense, based on free will, not on necessity. Maybe *disinterested* can be read as *unforced*, i.e., not driven by necessity, despair, or need. Positioned as such, aesthetic valuation could be seen as a perfectly agreeable idea, a kind of utopian break from the management of daily duties and outside forces (if only available to some less than others)—a source of socialization, and maybe the only one we know, that is based not on your needs but on your unforced subjectivity. Its historical basis on exclusion is not necessarily intrinsic to the concept, only to its historical formats—which are of course at least obsolete today if not reactionary.

But whatever our decision about the conception of critique as suspension of judgment, as in Raunig, Butler, and Foucault, I want to argue that it is also basically an extension of a bourgeois idea of aesthetic experience as essentially unconnected to necessity and instrumentality. But it is also an extension of the critical impulse from an object and result-oriented activity to one that includes any human capacity. Beyond the Kantian idea of a critical judgment as an individual's attempt to socialize a subjective experience on the basis of an encounter with an external object, judgment is meant to form an aesthetic basis for how we live. This would be the aestheticized synthesis of the two previously introduced possibilities of critique as a normative idea for a way of life and a revolutionary or democratic-participatory break. In an incorporated, fully internalized lifestyle of critique, even the decision between revolution and reform is delayed for later since the suspension of object-related judgments transforms all—including political—decisions



into the eternal postponement of critique as a way of life. The dialectic between extreme subjectivity and the confrontation of the external object tends to evaporate here.

But since this seems to be an ambivalent maneuver, because it is extending the critical impulse, which we agree about, but at the same time limiting it, by cutting off its capacity to interfere by judgment, which we disagree about, I will not pass from my side a final judgment on this discourse. Rather, I will postpone, just as the supporters of this idea tend to endlessly postpone judgment. But I promise not to do so endlessly.

So we have two groups here that I have introduced and two different forms of judging. Group one is judging enthusiastically. They are emergent participants in the market or society in question. They constitute what was once was called "youth culture." But among them you also find social climbers, recent immigrants to a different society, or those recently arrived in a different social stratum. Simon Frith describes their idea of judgment in his book *Performing Rites*: *"Good" and "Bad" or their vernacular versions ("brilliant" and "crap") are the most frequent terms in everyday cultural conversation.... Though all of us knew that what was at issue was personal taste, subjective response, we also believed passionately at times, that we were describing something objectively in the music, if only other people could hear it. Value arguments, in other words aren't simply rituals of "I like/you like." ... They are based in reason evidence, persuasion. Every music fan knows that moment of frustration, when one can only sit the person down and say (or, rather, shout) despairingly, "But just listen to her! Isn't she fantastic!"*[5]

The other group—including Raunig, Butler, Foucault, Williams and the majority of theoretical thinkers in the contemporary art world—shies away from the moment of judgment. They are mostly better-educated academics

who do not shout judgments of value at other people. This deep conviction in their education, that a judgment of value is something that you cannot force upon someone else, also shapes their idea of critique as a non-normative, non-conventional endeavour—something that cannot be played by rules because it is precisely about the questioning of rules. And yet if there are no rules, there is also no judgment. This is the program of a critical left that implicitly argues that the lesson from communist and other radical leftist history is the radicalization of a certain unpragmatic relationship towards power and its execution and thus the transformation of its moralistically depoliticized radicalism into an aesthetic position. This last bit remains, of course, implicit and is my polemic.

At this moment you might already smell a conclusion based on a certain class analysis—academic radical refusal vs. young proletarian enthusiasm.

Here, I want to look at the object of these critical positions—if it is really an object at all—and the relation between subjectivity, judgment, and value. The case Frith refers to above developed from a heated debate among music fans on a boat from Stockholm to Britain. In this story, one shouting fan, forcing his enthusiasm upon a non-believer, refers to a song and its singer. Music, although it can be stored and reproduced, altered and rearranged or remixed, has a strange object ontology. It is normally considered to be essentially immaterial and thus not objectifiable. Music fans, of course, have fetishistic relationships to records and other objects related to musical performances, a kind of shared idea of the objectivity and reality of the experience that allows for a meaningful discussion about some record or song. But the experience itself is strongly one of temporality. It is about how things are happening within a time span, which is experienced as beyond the control of



the listener or the recipient. You are placed in a time continuum that resembles the way you are situated in the time span that defines your lifetime.

How does one deal with value under these conditions? What is valuable in relation to a lifetime whose length is beyond your control but whose texture is not only not beyond your control but essentially your major obligation? If music happenings occur against time, time is made enjoyable by dividing it up in funky beats, endings are suspended by repetitions, then not, they are played with, all the elements are exposed to a dialectics of convention and surprise—all these occurrences add up to a discussion of the value of life in relation to time: in an anthropological sense as much as in a political sense. This implies that not only openness and contingency, but, more precisely, a ratio between high emotional involvement, and that has to be, to a degree, a passive one and ways out—ways to not become fully subjected to the course of the beats and the chords.

But that is already a description from outside the emotionally involved listening experience, the description of an algorithm of musical enjoyment. Rather, one has to describe the impulse to judge as the main tool, by which listeners position themselves within the continuum that forces them to be emotionally passive. A listener's tendency towards final judgments, total agreement or disagreement, does not only reflect the emotionality of the connection between all time-based-arts to the urgency and the need to decide in real time. This is a characteristic of life itself, especially within a capitalist system where you sell your workforce by the hour. Time based work also appropriates the sovereignty of finality, playing on the temporality of life and its economy. Symbolically this type of work offers the ability to intervene in this temporality to the audience, although they are the ones who are exposed to the temporality in

regular life. In a reversal of classic catharsis this is not an effect they experience later, but all the time, whereas the anti-cathartic judgment they use to intervene, to interrupt, to make themselves heard, interrupts the exposure to the domination of time.

Music, in a strict sense—that is, if we don't think of it as a commodity like scores or records—has neither use nor exchange value. It cannot be produced and then later be used like all things that have a use value. It can also not be exchanged for the same reasons. This non-value is, at the same time, its commonality with life itself, which, like music, has a huge value only when connected with a specific human body and specific individual human knowledge. The life of a person, his/her life force, his/her living energy, his/her possible future—all these are not only biopolitical items of investment, but already have represented values for many industries in pre-biopolitical days, when the attributes of liveliness or living energy were still transformed via discipline into old-fashioned labour. But from the perspective of the living being, of the recipient of music, the experience of being overwhelmed lies in the commonality with his/her own life as open and undecided, which causes euphoria or panic. That is why conventions in music are so often needed and welcomed: they anchor it in objectivity and external rules. Judgment helps at least one of its functions, to make the panic and the euphoria tolerable and translatable—to socialize it.

But, at the same time, judgment allows the experience of being overwhelmed to be shared on another, discursive level. Here, the experience becomes manageable, in a cooler temperature, with more distance and sovereignty. It also allows establishing rules around it, building groups and gangs, constructing social scenes and social sense. The judgment of value bridges immediacy and self-organization.



It comes before any other form of reflection. It partly mimics the bureaucracy of regular culture and is one of the most passionate translations of experience into discourse imaginable: this is great/this is crap. It is in this area of tension that the birth of subcultures is situated.

Art objects, on the other hand, have their own management of time. Like music, they are also understood by their recipients in relation to an experience of temporality. But in the case of objects, this temporality is a sublimely endless period of existence. They are either old or incredibly old. They are looked at with the idea of *ars longa*, and that is even a valid idea, if we talk about ephemeral or process- or project-oriented art in the contemporary spectrum. The main idea is that we have time, because the object-related experience is based on the difference between our lifetime (and its sense of temporality) and another temporality not based in human life spans but on truths and experiences that remain to be seen or experienced in the future.

The distinction between art that works only in an immediate relation to our living here and now and art that "has something to say" in a hundred years is normally based on quality or complexity—"old-fashioned" judgments of value. By relating this distinction to the difference between object and process, assigning thus all so-called high art to objects, in a way, and all subcultural art to processes, and then basing these distinctions on the difference between two sensory practices, visual object production versus aural social temporality, we come to another basis for judgments of value that lead to the distinction between art—an investment in the future—and sound—hedonistically taken in, swallowed, gobbled, without any value at all.

Both of these categories of value transcend the Marxist distinction between use value and exchange value. Since both Marxist categories, as I have indicated earlier, rely on

the idea that an object or a tool will be used later, can be stored before usage, and can be integrated into some ecology of people and thus build an economy by starting exchange. Music, in its original format, cannot be used later. Art objects can never be properly used, because they exist forever, and forever is always after us. They can be exchanged, yes, but only in an unfinished process of speculation—different from regular speculation, because their exchange value is not based on a specific date.

It is no surprise then, that by constantly judging the first group, emergent people try to symbolically stop the nonreversible passing of their life, whereas the other group, the art historians and political philosophers, avoids judging because this would undermine the very ontology of the art object. But it does not stop there. The aesthetic experience is really endless, but only in relation to the physicality of a mortal human being; the endlessness cannot be experienced in eternity, but in time. In the same way, the total presence of living the experience can only be tolerated by erecting bureaucratic history writing, an attempt to collect experiences like you collect photos in an album. But as much as this activity tends not to develop a reflexive relation to its administration of nostalgia, the relation between speculation, history writing, and the non-objective individual remains non-reflected in many contemporary art debates.

Two historical positions have produced methodologies that might be useful in this context. One is the politicization of pop music, the other is the politicized aestheticism of the Frankfurt School. The various attempts at a politicization—in the broadest sense—of pop music, from Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* to the Gang of Four, from Red Crayola to Public Enemy, drew from a tension of antidisciplinary pleasure and the time management of Fordist



capitalism articulated in various forms of syncopated or irregular rhythmic music and integrated into a larger participatory art form based not so much on the expressionism of their protagonist but on their ability to offer territory for projections, debates, and identification—more or less progressive psychological and discursive activities—to the audience. There is no doubt that time management became the content of many of the decisive changes in pop music: massive acceleration (punk) and deceleration (reggae) could mark, at least temporarily, the same change. Gestures and practices of endlessness (improvisation/raves) would also initiate paradigm shifts. In most cases, those were attempts to break with the object ontology of music, reappropriating music as time-based practice. One of its key methods is an uninterrupted practice of judging with the adequate gesture of finality, while at the same time renegotiating every judgment.

The aesthetic position of the Frankfurt School, on the other hand, as articulated mainly by Theodor W. Adorno himself, but also by some of his followers like the writer, theorist, and composer Hans G. Helms or the musicologist Heinz Klaus Metzger, tried to relocate the work of art and the aesthetic experience with some quasi-heroic gesture completely outside of the management of everyday life. Art was positioned outside not only of use degenerated into instrumentality and exchange as the false equivalence of capitalism, but also outside the bourgeois psychological need for life after death provided by art. Thus art's claim was entirely outside the temporalities of bourgeois capitalism, and at the same time it was its product. It would have to constantly reflexively and negatively deal with these two antagonistic conditions.

Both positions are based on radical assumptions against which one can measure or judge actual results. They

produce categories that are not deduced from a pragmatic discourse of art practice but from impossibility and/or negativity. Both positions applaud a euphoric moment that can last only a few seconds, screaming in the first case, or asking for an even more increased negation in the second. Basically, these are the positions that make it possible to realize how a judgment of values relates to temporalities. In the case of the fan of pop music, it's all about the utopia of the moment; for the art or music writer influenced by critical theory, it's all about the critique of bourgeois eternity.

But in both cases, it is history that makes these two types of judgment productive: in the first case, the history of great moments, the history of suspended time, the history of syncopation and suspension of temporality. In the second case, the critique of eternity in the name of history, which might be as long, but as opposed to eternity it is not empty. History not as the narcissistic idea of magnifying life, but of objectifying it: without some necessarily complicated idea of history, judgment is not possible. Especially, the critique of the recuperation of devaluation and revaluation of certain artistic values and values of emancipation by turning them into engines of capitalist production is not possible without the comparatism that looks at the differences between historical stages. You have to be able to think progress in order to criticize regression. Everybody criticizes regression and reactionism, but today nobody acknowledges that any reactionary attack on possibilities of life in our lifetime can be perceived only if your perception is based on an alternative normativity.



1. From the editorial of the symposium *Kritik*, organized by the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, Vienna, 2006. See http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0806/editorial/de-en-es.
2. Judith Butler, "What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue," in David Ingram, ed., *The Political: Readings in Continental Philosophy* (London: Basil Blackwell, 2002).
3. Gerald Raunig, "What is Critique? Suspension and Recomposition in Textual and Social Machines," *The Art of Critique*, conference organized by the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, Vienna, 2008. See http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0808/raunig/en.
4. Many of the problems with the original (mis)translation of Kant's title have been rectified in Cambridge's 2000 edition of the text. See Paul Guyer, "Editor's Introduction," in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), xlvi–xlix.
5. Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

*Jeff Derksen*

# Times and Places of Critique

Today, at the tail end of the long moment of euphoric neoliberalism, the shape of art criticism—and more broadly, cultural critique—is both over-determined and agitated by rapid economic and cultural shifts that have yet to hit their discursive bottom. For, while neoliberalism can be understood in a similar manner to Neil Smith's description of Jürgen Habermas's diagnosis of modernism—"dead but dominant"[1]—it still holds sway as a cultural logic and as a dense force against which all cultural discussion (even if it aims outside of politics) inevitably reverberates. This is simply the historical relationship of any cultural discourse, and any making of culture, to the array of mediations that culture both takes shape within and alters through its own insistence and bursts of imagination. Yet, in the long and troubled relationship of culture to the economic, the embedding of the economic into the cultural (in intensified and perhaps even novel ways characteristic of today) has produced new dynamics.

An affective economy in which value and counter-values are continually measured alongside literal surplus value signals a more profound entangling of art and other creative practices into a world administered through a logic of ownership, a valorization of singularity, a worshipping of surplus value, and a denigration of nonconformist senses of value. While the social revolution of neoliberalism is incomplete, as Habermas said of modernity, it has created a revolution *within* culture by molding the economic into a mediation between all levels of life. In this sense, *the economic* has come to occupy the position of *culture* as the process that holds together the "relationships between elements in a whole way of life," as Raymond Williams

famously defined culture in *The Long Revolution*.[2] The economic has also opened itself, in unprecedented ways, to discursive dissection and aesthetic analysis.

Yet these shifts, and the assertion of the economic as the mediating process of the relationships of everyday life, have cohered into a dynamic set of pressures on cultural critique and art criticism that are both globalized and highly localized. This global-local logic, once the defining aspect of culture within globalization, is now central to neoliberalism as a commonsense and migrating form of governance. Locally, the pressures of neoliberal transformation (in the lead up to and wake of the 2010 Olympics) in Vancouver have amalgamated a new set of expectations, contexts, and possibilities for art criticism in the city and beyond. Art criticism and critical discourse is at an extremely potent or even bloated moment in Vancouver. Even in its modest scale, art and criticality have been drawn into a war of values in Vancouver as the city looks to rebrand itself within the nexus of "creative cities" globally. This public transformation is mostly driven by private initiatives, "visions," and power configurations, and it involves the becoming "public" of art at a time characterized by the privatization of public space and goods. Yet the publicness of art is both subtly and heavily mediated through the coherence of civic and urban developers' dreams of the city—a historical configuration of urbanism in Vancouver. The transformation of the texture and "livability" of the city over the last twenty years is intensifying precisely at the moment where the public-private sphere (the public-private partnerships, or 3Ps, which both replace and overlap the public sphere) is becoming more brittle and sterile in terms of democratic processes and more remotely shaped by what Leslie Sklair calls a "transnational capitalist class."[3] In this we can also see a smoothing out of the texture of art and other cultural



production even as enticements (through funding structures) call for art to be more public and to occupy spaces produced by a complex deal with urban developers that trades off built and marketable space for public art funding. In a curious zero-sum game of space (following the myth that Vancouver has a set amount of space), space for art is produced as a by-product of another "Vancouverism," postmodern residential towers carefully placed so as not to block the view of our timeless commodity, nature.

Yet, countering the logic of privatization and the reduction of public art to in-fill building in the urban space trade-off, in Vancouver we also witness the return of older demands that were to be satisfied by the incomplete project of modernism: the demand for housing, access to the streets, more meaningful forms of democracy beyond "stake holders" consultation, and the call for the return of the imagination in a new urban revolution. It is crucial to ask how art criticism might imagine itself within this texture of Vancouver—a city with a radical imagination of social protest and civic organizing *and* a city bursting with boosterism as its own exportable model of urban success. The complex politics of the interplay between two of Henri Lefebvre's categories of space—spaces of representation *and* representations of space—provides a dynamically critical nexus for art production and art discourse in this city.

But within this new set of mediations—both global neoliberal urbanism and local rebranding of the city through culture—gone are the days when we could calmly locate culture, art, or literature as merely secondary, reflective, or even outside of the economic. Gone are the days where we could seek the belatedness, the comfort, or the potential of being merely superstructural, of being miraculously the last out of the gate and at the tip of the vanguard. But now is not the time for moping, or tail-dragging, or seeking

refuge in the "last instance" that is yet to come in its pajamas down from an apartment to the street. Instead, today is a time to assess the roles of critique and imagine modes of criticality in relation to what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello describe as "the new spirit of capitalism," particularly as this spirit is materializing locally (in whatever "local" one may be in!).

In what I'm characterizing as the post-euphoric moment of neoliberalism, forms of critique that have historically been in the wheelhouse of left critique are now brought into an out-of-kilter dialectic with capitalism itself. Boltanski and Chiapello map this dialectic in the spirited reformation of capitalism from May 1968 to today in relation to "the rhetoric of critique." They compellingly lay out a dialectical relationship between the focus of two modes of critique—social critique and artistic critique—and the ways in which capitalism has transformed itself by responding to and absorbing the very aspects of these modes of critique that were to burst us out of the reproduction of inequity and alienation. Artistic critique, as Boltanski and Chiapello outline it, is a deeply affective critique of the incompleteness of everyday life, of the stifling of the potential of life by the relations of capitalism, the sway of the state, the containment of city life and the life of the streets, and the relationships between people. The keyword for artistic critique is *alienation,* and it has historically sought to outflank new forms of such social (and soul) displacement as they cohere in the city, in the domestic sphere, and in all affective relations. At the same time, new management language and practices have adapted to dampen the effects of this critique and to *give the appearance of* new solutions to the old question of alienation within the relations of capitalist production: this, to a degree, has sought to "disarm" critique. This leads Boltanski and Chiapello to pose the



question: *Must we not instead start from different bases—that is to say, ask if the forms of capitalism which have developed over the last thirty years, while incorporating whole sections of the artistic critique and subordinating it to profit-making, have not emptied the demands for liberation and authenticity of what gave them substance, and anchored them in people's everyday experience?*[4]

Cultural critique and art criticism, then, whether they use art and art institutions or the social as their entry point, face a similar question: How to produce new publics and how to forge non-absorbable forms of critique that will allow us to take aim, take time, take space, and take collectivized pleasure in order to grab the present moment by the hand and lead it to the language of less arrogant forms of social reproduction? That is, what form of critique is forged by reflection and necessity in this dialectic of absorption, accommodation, and (ironically) non-transformation? Today we are caught in a moment desperate to reproduce itself despite its hollow slogans: "there is no such thing as society," "beneath the paving stones, real estate," or the sleep-deprived chant that "the market will correct itself." How are critique and art criticism placed within this process of reproduction?

## *Two*

In his lecture for *Judgment and Contemporary Art Criticism*, Tirdad Zolghadr outlined a relationship between criticism, critique, and criticality, with the last being an inward reflexive turn. I wonder if we can locate this inward turn as a symptom of the mediations that neoliberalism brings to bear on cultural critique and art criticism? This turn could indicate a rescaling or containment of what commentators

across the board define as a social and economic crisis to the cultural field. If this inward turn is such a containment, then, rather than an attempt to build a language of critique that can grabble with the uneven experience of the social today, we see critique caught in the swirling, yet pleasingly warm, pool of the new spirit of capitalism—accentuating individual consumptive and aesthetic experiences that spring from art situated firmly in a cultural sphere sure of itself. On the one hand, this surrenders the purpose of artistic critique in the manner that Boltanski and Chiapello define it, and on the other hand, it allows a focused examination of art criticism as a definable field and practice. But what type of literacy—if we conceive of literacy as a remaking rather than an expertise, in the manner that Richard Hoggart and Gayatri Spivak do—is art criticism making? In other words, a crisis that turns inward to locate itself—in art criticism, or in another field—risks missing the crisis outside itself. It misses being a part of the crisis by generating its own! And then it can take a detour around the central aspect of critique—the thrilling articulation of the aesthetic to the social and startling joining of the possibilities of art to the structures and mediations of life.

What possibilities do we have at hand, in our globalized-local, in our public-private neighbourhood of "the ownership society," or, conversely, what possibilities do we have in our counter-collectives or in our affective alliances of everyday life? Let me use two tendencies in the critical practices of two other participants in the forum—Maria Fusco and Diedrich Diederichsen—to frame the possibilities we have had historically and how they may crystallize as critique today. Firstly, I would identify interdisciplinarity as an operative mode, not as an institutional mode of organizing, but as a mode of thinking and writing that compounds and overlaps other possibilities of thought. Secondly, there



is an expansion of the cultural field through "art writing" or a poetics of critical engagement that extends not only into narrative modes of critique, but also into an expanded field of cultural practices focused through the eye of art writing. This approach relates to both the art object and the institution, but also the form of art criticism as an institution itself: too often taken as a formally transparent or static practice (partly due to its relationship to the promotion of art, as Sven Lütticken argues) and often unquestioned in its function to create value for artists and artworks, art criticism can calcify through a bland trust in the representational function of language.[5]

The "personism" (poet and art writer Frank O'Hara's term[6]) that is often called in to rescue the art review and give it value as an experience in itself—both de-skilling the article and adding a dollop of taste culture—continues to take the architecture of meaning for granted. Even with an expansive and compelling personism in which we may recognize our own affiliations and affections, such criticism does not yield the experience of a text in that it is not a parallel engagement with the making of meaning—the art text is never allowed to be in excess of meaning and is harnessed to a language of representation within the strictures of description and evaluation. To pick up on another point from Tirdad Zolghadr's paper, the incommensurability of the art object is only a referential aspect of the art text.

This present volume questions the limitations and temporality of criticism—that is, the time that criticism and judgment build. Much of the reflection of the critics in this volume cuts across the language of crisis within the discipline of art criticism to provide some positions within a texture of research, knowledge, necessity, and critique for the present moment. If we feel overly constricted by such a moment, or even overwhelmed by mediations that bear

down with the force of commonsense or coherent and fully armoured logics, Henri Lefebvre reminds us that "Events belie forecasts: to the extent that events are historical, they upset calculations."[7] This imagination of time and agency as event, history, and upset calculations seems to be a fertile construct for cultural criticism and art writing: historical, present, and yet overturning calculations.

1. Neil Smith, "Toxic Capitalism," *New Political Economy* 14, no. 3 (2009), 407–12.
2. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), 46.
3. Leslie Sklair, *The Transnational Capitalist Class* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).
4. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005), 420.
5. Sven Lütticken, *Secret Publicity: Essays on Contemporary Art* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2005).
6. "Personism" was a short statement on poetics that O'Hara contributed to the groundbreaking anthology *Poetics of the New American Poetry,* eds. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman (New York: Grove Press, 1973). As a poetics, "personism" was a defining feature of the New York School poets. For an extended reading of O'Hara and his relation to visual art, see Lytle Shaw, *The Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City: The University of Iowa Press, 2006).
7. Henri Lefebvre, *Explosion: Marxism and the French Revolution*, trans. Alfred Ehrenfeld (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), 7.