

## ABSTRACT

Just over a decade-and-a-half ago, a roundtable discussion published in the pages of *October* worried that the periodic renewal of critical discourses had slowed to a standstill and that art criticism was faced with obsolescence. Such an obsolescence should be understood in a broadly Hegelian manner: the danger is not that art criticism would disappear from the cultural field, but that it will continue—although drained of its previous necessity.

Such fears perhaps run the risk of exaggeration, yet this paper shall suggest that there seems a sense in which the field of art criticism has *contracted* in recent years. Self-reflexivity in art and the popularization of “para-curatorial” approaches, for instance, often underpin the artwork discursively before the arrival of art criticism upon the scene. To be sure, such circumstances are viewable positively as interdisciplinary dialogical opportunities, but the negative flipside here is that art criticism’s potential contribution becomes increasingly minimized. From another angle, critics such as Isabelle Graw have contended that the economic-cultural regime of post-Fordism, with its attention on intellectual labor and knowledge production, might actually hold possibilities for the contemporary art critic—but even here, I shall argue, art criticism becomes contracted, albeit in the other meaning of the word.

### Keywords

Art criticism. Post-fordism. *October*. Curating. Immaterial labour. *Texte zur Kunst*. Para-curating. Judgment. Crisis.

## Art Criticism in the Contracted Field<sup>1</sup>

### I

It is perhaps not remarked often enough that art, or visual practice more generally, is surrounded by a constellation of discursive categories. “Art history,” is the most prominent instance and sits alongside—sometimes rather uncomfortably—other forms of writing on the visual such as art criticism, art theory, aesthetics, visual culture studies, art biography, etc. The list is by no means exhaustive nor are its items mutually exclusive—art theory, for instance, can often be in or manifest itself as art history and art criticism—and it seems plausible enough to propose that personal statements by artists can be added to it as even can art market reports. Meanwhile, the last few years has seen an exponential growth in curating as a subject of historical and theoretical reflexive analysis which has come to engender what Paul O’Neill has designated “para-curating”; such a discourse, manifested both as exhibitions and as texts that examine exhibitionary structures, arguably stands alongside art history, art criticism, *etcetera*, as another semi-distinct category. Indicative of the rise of a distinctly curatorial discourse, it no longer seems possible to ask, as Peter Vergo once did, “When . . . will the exhibition-maker or ‘guest curator’ write about the underlying aim of the exhibition itself . . . ?” (1994, 159). Yet if the number of “methodologies” relating the visual to the verbal shows evidence of ongoing expansion, then such expansion appears rather patchy. Art history itself arguably remains fairly stable, art theory continues to be more or less everywhere, aesthetics has had something of a resurgence, and para-curating becomes increasingly fashionable. Art criticism, on the other hand, is routinely presented as a discourse in decline; the expanding field of art writing looks to be in correlation with

criticism's gradual diminishment in that field. However, it is important to ask whether the purported decline of art *criticism* is to be squarely identified with the decline of art *critics*. Leaving open that question, it is useful to acknowledge from the outset a differentiation between critics and criticism, especially as this will weigh upon the degree to which art criticism, or critics, might be viewed as a field in decline.

Such a decline has been the topic of various roundtable discussions. For example, in a roundtable published in the 100th issue of the influential art-critical journal *October*, the speakers involved—mostly critics, but also curators and artists—were drawn towards criticism's potential obsolescence rather than celebrating a landmark occasion. Early on in the conversation, Rosalind Krauss, whose career since the 1960s has tracked, participated in, and engendered significant transformations within the field of criticism comments:

Dealers, I think, used to feel that the work of art didn't exist in a discursive vacuum, that it was given its existence in part by critical discourse, and therefore there was a need for catalogs with serious essays by critics. That perceived need, on the part of both the artist and the dealer, seems to have diminished in the last ten years, to the point where the institution of those catalogs has for the most part disappeared (Baker et al, 2002, 202).

Benjamin Buchloh, likewise, remarks:

The judgment of the critic is voided by the curator's organizational access to the apparatus of the culture industry (e.g., the international biennials and group shows)

or by the collector's immediate access to the object in the market or at auction. Now, all you have to have is the competence of quality judgments and the high-level connoisseurship that serves as investment expertise. My exaggeration—and admittedly it is an exaggeration—serves to say that you don't need criticism for an investment structure, you need experts. You don't have criticism of blue chip stocks either (Baker et al, 2002, 202).

Note here how the threat to art criticism is situated on two fronts: on the one hand, the art market is arraigned as one force against criticism insofar as the latter's evaluations may interfere with the former's. The relationship between art criticism and the market has been a longstanding problem, especially when their respective judgments don't coincide. Such judgments, importantly, are differently structured and thereby appertain to alternative facets of the artwork such as its commercial and "symbolic" values—this is something I will return to further along. On the other hand, curating and curatorial discourse also poses a risk to art criticism. In the same roundtable, Buchloh's worry is re-articulated by Helen Molesworth who comments: "The contemporary curator is now someone who seeks out 'new talent,' not someone who waits to receive that information from elsewhere. I wonder if part of the anxiety felt here on the part of critics . . . that the voice of the critic is no longer heard in the space of the museum in the same way" (Baker et al, 2002, 219). Later on in the roundtable, George Baker returns to Molesworth's remark in a seemingly more anxious register: "I don't know about curators; we probably can't affect them. Today, they make all of us obsolete. . . . it is the curator who has displaced criticism and the power and function of the critic" (Baker et al, 2002, 226). Little wonder, then, that curator Robert

Storr is subjected to some friction from the critics during the course of the roundtable discussion.

A corresponding dynamic between criticism, market, and curating occurs in two roundtable discussions organized by James Elkins in 2005. Indeed, it's a striking feature of both those roundtables how quickly the conversation sharply turns towards curating. Offering his speakers the chance to speak about how they conceive the evermore "blurry boundaries" between art criticism and curating, Stephen Melville for instance replies with a melancholic anecdote that is illustrative:

I went to a symposium called "The State of American Art Now"; in it, curators and critics, including Arthur Danto, talked for six hours about the state of American art in fairly predictable ways—but they managed to do so without using the word "criticism" once. I thought that was kind of extraordinary, so I asked them if criticism was simply out of it. And they all, including Arthur Danto, agreed that criticism was simply out of it (Elkins and Newman 2008, 208-209).

These shifts in conversation indicate the extent to which if criticism now occupies a contracted position in the field of art discourse, then the underlying reason for that contraction is ascribed to developments in curating and the emergence of "para-curating." Paul O'Neill's 2007 essay "The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse" usefully contextualizes curatorial practice during the 1960s and after as a transition toward "a form of curatorial criticism in which the space of the exhibition was given critical precedence over that of the objects of art" (O'Neill 2007, 13). Here O'Neill has in mind major

curatorial figures such as Seth Siegelaub, Lucy Lippard, and, in a rather different manner, Harald Szeemann who all, in response to the new possibilities afforded by Conceptualism and post-Minimalism, as well as their attendant challenges to the traditional material and object qualities of art, were led to reconsider exhibition formats. It is worth highlighting, too, that the 1960s witnessed a new generation of artists producing critical writing upon their own work and upon others, thereby adding a higher level of discursivity running parallel to or imbricated with art practice (Owens 1979). This fact is also addressed by Buchloh in the round table as another direct cause for the “withering of criticism”:

But I would like to return to my earlier point about the withering away of criticism. This was partially initiated in the context of Conceptual art. I could flip the entire logic of what I said earlier by focusing on the fact that it is from within the purview of the most radical artistic practices of the sixties and their subsequent developments that not only the commodity-status of the work of art or its institutional frame are targeted—one of the targets of this work was also the secondary discursive text that attached itself to artistic practice. Criticism and all secondary discourse were vehemently attacked (Baker et al, 2002, 205).

These developments within Conceptual art and institutional critique are the prelude to the emergence of new curatorial approaches, occasionally spoken of as “New Institutionalism” (a term that has more or less fallen out of fashion, but the practice remains and can be associated with curators such as Charles Esche, Maria Lind, and Hans Ulrich

Obrist) and “para-curating” in which the exhibition has become increasingly participatory, self-reflexive, open-ended, discursive, and the functional demarcation between artist and curator strikingly blurred. O’Neill argues that this transformation evinces a ‘neo-critical’ turn within curating. As he writes:

The ascendancy of the curatorial gesture in the 1990s also began to establish curating as a potential nexus for discussion, critique and debate, where the evacuated role of the critic in parallel cultural discourse was usurped by the neo-critical space of curating. During this period, curators and artists have reacted to and engaged with this “neo-criticality” by extending the parameters of the exhibition form to incorporate more discursive, conversational and geo-political discussion, centred within the ambit of the exhibition (O’Neill 2007, 13).

Very clearly, then, O’Neill conjoins the rise of neo-criticality in curating with the “evacuation” of the critic presumably on the grounds that because the curatorial process itself is *already* engaging a (self-)critical activity, then there is no need for the critic to come *afterwards* and perform their task. There is a different temporal ordering at stake here, to that degree, insofar as the art critic’s judgment happens—or is meant to happen—in reaction to specific artworks. When criticism is transferred from the critic to the curator and the artist, then the art critic is condemned apparently to arrive on the scene too late, when their services are no longer required. Moreover, this transference ostensibly allows the curator and artist to reconcile momentarily the old divide between theory and practice.

All in all, discursive operations became less readily associable with the specialist critic and therefore criticism's specific position within the field of art becomes contracted. Speaking to this problematic, and particularly the growth of critical and theoretical writings by artist, Stanley Cavell pertinently noted "The issue is simply this: we know that criticism ought to come only after the fact of art, but we cannot *insure* that it will come only after the fact" (2002, 209). And, writing in dialogue with Cavell, Michael Fried opens his 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" by stating "The enterprise known variously as Minimal Art, ABC Art, Primary Structures, and Specific Objects is largely ideological. It seeks to declare and occupy a position—one that can be formulated in words and in fact has been so formulated by some of its leading practitioners" (1998, 148).

At its best, this "neo-critical" element within contemporary curating aligns with its increased self-reflexivity, the growth of exhibition history as a legitimate subject of academic study, and the considerable expansion of curatorial courses. The number of books and journal publications examining the post-war history of curating has risen sharply in recent years (see, for example, O'Neill 2012) and there has been a notable emergence of what might be tentatively named "ghost exhibitions" in which important exhibitions from the past have been restaged as closely to the original as possible—for instance, *When Attitudes Become Form* in Vencie during 2013. Moreover, there has been something like the rise of the superstar curator operating on a global circuit, deftly juggling Kunsthalle and large-scale biennial, and so at its worst the emphasis upon the neo-critical serves to self-promote the supposed prestige of the newly super-dynamic curator. Obrist, Lind, and Esche are names that have already been mentioned. And to that list we can also add Okui Enwezor, Daniel Birnbaum, and Nicolas Bourriaud—in the background for these figures

is, of course, the influential and exuberant Swiss curator Harald Szeemann. If Szeemann is the curatorial model followed by later generations and the forerunner of the current valorization of the curator, then Daniel Buren's worry voiced during Documenta 5 that artists have become the *medium* used by the powerful curator-creator (Szeemann, of course, who curated the fifth Documenta) bears reiteration here (Buren 1972). Where once the art curator might have been a specialist engaged with (to the point of being rooted in) particular collections, one foot in the archive and the other occasionally out in public, these contemporary curators are much more fashionable figures and culturally well-connected. This, to be sure, is an exaggeration in many aspects. While hugely important, the curatorial personages just mentioned represent a small and unusually successful examples within their profession. There might even be an aspect of double projection occurring here: curators projecting themselves as culturally central to the artworld, thereby securing their sense of self-identity; and critics projecting themselves as maligned by curators, thereby identifying themselves as an oppositional and hence still critical faction within the artworld.

Does this mean, therefore, that the success ascribed to curating (and the danger faced by art criticism) is over-stated? Arguably not. The contraction experienced by critics is a real phenomenon and I would certainly agree that the critical forms incorporated by curators and artists into their practices has much to do with it.<sup>2</sup> Yet while curating's expanded self-reflexivity and historical awareness—leading to curating having an expanded position in the field of art discourse—is to be lauded, the assumption that this should render the critic unnecessary is misguided and falls into the old trap of the intentionalist fallacy. The fact that curators and artists utilize strategies of auto-critique

does not render the critic superfluous insofar as even the proper implementation of a pre-existing intention cannot foreclose the possibility of examining the cogency of that intention.

No matter how sophisticated the neo-critical work carried out by the artist or the curator, it remains arguable that critics *should* have a significant role in assessing and interpreting that work. By speaking of “work” in this context, I am gesturing both towards the artworks produced by artists as well as towards the exhibition platforms—typically at once spatial, thematic, and discursive—created by curators such as O’Neill. The problem, unfortunately, is that this *should* seems more potential than actual at present and this is the problem at the heart of the *October* roundtable discussion. In the field of art discourse, there appears to be a diminishing space for art criticism, and, in order to survive, the critic learns to occupy different positions within that field. But what about the post-Fordist socio-economic structure that underpins this field?

### *Art Criticism in the Market*

How else, though, has art criticism become increasingly contracted? Part of the answer to this question, as well as another aspect of the problem, can be found by considering where art criticism is produced and where it is consumed. Generally speaking, magazines and journals remain the most common home for art criticism and art critics can become attached to particular magazines. But the model of the essentially “free” art critic, able to make a living by being paid for each article, is now largely something of the past. Instead, if many critics today maintain one foot in the artworld, then the other foot, as Hal Foster

remarked several years ago, is “in the academy, and now he or she is often born and raised there” (Foster 2002, 121). Of course, Foster is not suggesting that universities or academies have awarded institutional legitimation by running courses on art criticism—there are very few pedagogical examples where one can study art criticism as a discrete subject; overall, art criticism still tends to figure largely within art history curriculums as useful primary and secondary forms of evidence that circumscribe the original reception of specific artworks and later reinterpretations (there is a wider issue of the actual relationship between art history and art criticism that I cannot address here but have tried to sketch briefly elsewhere). But the fact that core teaching staff—often identified as art historians in their day-to-day academic life—can also serve as art critics marks a significant transition in the history of art criticism; the situation has evidently changed in comparison to the early 1960s when art historians such as Leo Steinberg would write art criticism on the side, but in doing so feeling that they should keep this double-life almost a secret (somehow I imagine this as analogous to Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde).<sup>3</sup> In many respects, the *October* journal, which Foster co-edits has typified this almost more academic art criticism, though it’s worth noting in passing that *October* publishes far less writing on contemporary art these days in comparison to the late 1970s when it was less determined by the university system.

The entry of art criticism into the university implies the possibility that there will be a new or different audience engaging with these writings. To attain a sense of what this means, it is worth returning to Jürgen Habermas who, in his classic study *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, proposed that the emergence of criticism is historically grounded in the creation of a bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth century (Habermas 1989). One crucial question, which I shall leave aside in this present context, is

to what extent there remains a public sphere *for* and structured *by* art criticism. What we can consider here is that the critic on the university contract (often short-term) has become institutionally acknowledged as an immaterial laborer and serves very much as an economically-productive member of capitalist post-Fordist society.<sup>4</sup> As the Italian theorist Maurizio Lazzarato argues:

as regards the activity that produces the ‘cultural content’ of the commodity, immaterial labor involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as “work”—in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion. . . . [Post-Fordism has transformed] the role and function of intellectuals and their activities within society (Lazzarato 1996, 133-134).

Note how in Lazzarato’s brief list of activities the “defining and fixing” of cultural and artistic standards—in short, the work of the critic—is mentioned first. It’s not only within the university that the critic carries out this labor, of course, but also within the ambit of the wider artworld. Communicative actions, whether through critical writing in catalogues and journals, as well as public talks, in a communication society where knowledge production is commoditized, becomes the groundwork for the critic’s employability from contract to contract. While it is no doubt an exaggeration that at best reflects the career of only a few critics (and indeed curators), Simon Sheikh is perhaps on the right track when he remarks humorously “we have witnessed a growth in public discussions in art

institutions . . . being a panelist is almost a possible occupation, besides curatorial and academic work, for instance” (Sheikh 2008, 184). And to that degree, the critic appears ensnared within the structures of post-Fordism and thereby unable to obtain an oppositional standpoint. This problem is not criticism’s alone, to be sure, for if capitalism has engineered methods for profiting from discourse, knowledge, and immaterial commodities then the question in recent debates around post-Fordism is more broadly about how art and the artworld in general can maintain an anti-capitalist stance, especially as the so-called “new spirit of capitalism” seems partly indebted to the lessons it has learned from art and critique since 1968 (see Birnbaum and Graw, 2008).

This second sense of contraction, though, is arguably more dialectical than it might first appear. As Isabelle Graw has proposed, it is possible for the critic to benefit from this situation by taking advantage of various aspects linked with post-Fordism. Writing in the wake of 2009, when repercussions from the financial crisis filtered into the art market, resulting in a downturn of sales within both the primary and secondary markets, Graw argues that in troubled economic times where the monetary value of artworks become uncertain it is possible for art criticism to intercede. As she writes: “When people distrust market values, only criticism can establish artistic credibility” (Graw 2012, 204). The word “only” in that claim is probably far too strong and perhaps risks being self-serving, but the overall drift of her argument is to underscore the function of art criticism as the production of what she terms, following the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, “symbolic values” in art. By symbolic value, it is meant “the expression of an elusive charge derived from a range of factors: singularity, art-historical verdict, artist’s reputation, promise of originality, prospect of duration, claim to autonomy, intellectual acumen” (Graw 2009, 27).

A crucial but difficult feature of her argument is the relationship she posits between art criticism and the art market. Against those who would seek to transcend the market, she proposes what might be regarded as a more pragmatic approach. This in part involves an acknowledgment that the financial value of an artwork will be in some respects a consequence of the symbolic values accorded to it by critical writing.

In terms of symbolic value, the artwork is priceless but has a price nonetheless. In other words, its symbolic value is not identical to its market value, and this in spite of the fact that it has a named asking price. This price, conversely, is justified with reference to a symbolic value that cannot be accounted for in financial terms. One might say, that the artwork's price is based on the assumption that it is priceless (Graw 2009, 27).

For Graw, the assigning of symbolic value suggests that art criticism is not out of the game—that there is still a role for art criticism. For instance, while John Currin's career has been largely very successful in market terms without the aid of critical endorsement, there nonetheless comes a time when a writer like Norman Bryson is conscripted in order to proffer that final touch of symbolic value to Currin's paintings (See Bryson 2006). (Yet there is a potential problem with this argument insofar as it identifies symbolic value creation too squarely with art criticism per se rather than examines how other discursive operations may also—or instead—establish that value.) Although often in conflict, art criticism can use its occasional contracted relationship to the art market for strategic purposes:

Here, too, we must obviously bid farewell to the notion of a polar antagonism. Not unlike artistic production, criticism is associated with market conditions and at once able to disregard them. . . . It is actively involved, in other words, and at once performs a partition. This double movement enables critique to point out how market requirements reach into critical practice while also holding on to the ideal of a criticism that distances itself and raises objections. Such a scenario assigns a double role to criticism—it becomes a partner to the market *and* its antagonist (Graw 2012, 198).

What makes Graw's argument difficult is that it's not certain how the criticality of art criticism can be maintained within the post-Fordist social field. As has been argued by sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, the pressure to form social networks and interpersonal relationships that often becomes the basis for career progress characterizes post-Fordism. As they write, "In a connexionist world, loyalty to the self looks like inflexibility; resistance to others seems like a refusal to make connections" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 451). Along these lines, Graw suggests that art criticism becomes increasingly collaborative within the social field of the artworld. This is not a bad development in itself insofar as it has often seemed a crucial function of art criticism, to my mind, that it not simply writes *about* but *alongside* artists and artworks. But the danger here, as Graw argues, means that one's willingness to collaborate with others in the artworld has become a necessary survival strategy for the art critic. And this also means

that fewer art critics are willing to draft a negative review of a given artist or exhibition. Moving from one short-term contract to the next, long-term survival is a matter of assimilation within social groups for many critics so that they may acquire more short-term contracts.

Of course, this is not a problem experienced by all art critics; for instance, those who are safely entrenched within newspapers and art publications are generally more immunized from the risks that other critics are exposed to; they might even, like Brian Sewell, attain a reputation for negative reviews which secures their prickly but thoroughly independent identity—in the eyes of their constituencies, at least—as being someone willing to inform the emperor that he is unclothed. Similarly, when the art critic has at least one foot solidly planted within the academy, as many of those associated with *October* do, they can enjoy the protective ward of being a tenured radical. Even if the artworld ostracizes them, academic publication for mostly university audiences allows them to maintain a high level of art-critical production. Care, then, must be taken in that case not to overly generalize the situation experienced by art critics under post-Fordism. Although deeply conscious of their complicity with the post-Fordist knowledge economy, they are less victim to employment instability and enforced flexibility that accompanies it. There is a world of socio-economic difference between a contract that provides a safeguard for critical activity (and may actually be extraneous, more or less, to that activity) and what is designated as a “zero hour” contract, so emblematic of post-Fordism, in the United Kingdom which is reliant upon short-term opportunities but offers no long-term protection.

Ultimately the negative review, all in all, may be more a threat to the critic’s future prospects than to the artist’s, especially for those critics who are in effect dependent upon

moving from short-term contract to short-term contract and rely upon a potentially delicate social contract between them, artists, gallerists, and publishers. Indeed, the negative review, although possibly hurtful on a personal level, might even be a matter of indifference to the artist when it comes to their professional development. Critics like Boris Groys have gone as far to argue that the real choice faced by critics is not whether to write a positive or negative review, but whether to write or not. On this matter it is worth quoting Groys at length:

The public still regards the critic as an insider, a PR agent for the art industry. . . . When a critic writes for a catalogue, it's arranged and paid for by the same people who are exhibiting the artist he's reviewing. When he writes for a journal or newspaper, he is covering an exhibition the reader already assumes is worthy of mention. The critic thus has no real chance to write about an artist if the artist isn't already established; someone else in the art world has already decided that the artist is deserving of a show. One could object that a critic can at least give a negative review . . . but it makes no difference. Through these decades of artistic revolutions, movements and countermovements, the public in this century has finally come around to a position that a negative review is no different from a positive one. What matters in a review is which artists are mentioned, where, and how long they are discussed (Groys 2008, 67).

Adapting the old adage “there is no such thing as bad publicity,” even the negative review

signals that the artist is *worth* being written about, that s/he is a person of interest. It would seem better, then, to deny the artist that one wishes to criticize the oxygen of publicity rather than write a negative review that will serve to publicize their work. This chimes with the rest of Groys' essay, in which the worry that art criticism merely provides "textual bikinis" to hide the "discursive nudity" of the artwork is manifest throughout.

Against the assumed impotence imagined by Groys, the art critic, on the other hand, is portrayed as the authoritarian spoilsport at the party; and, inasmuch as criticism appears to be occupying a diminishing space in the field of art discourse, then the likelihood of not being contracted for future writing becomes a risk too great. After all, who is going to be invited out to dinner if they are known for repeatedly complaining that the carrots are under-cooked?

For my own part, I'm not certain that I want to agree so much with Groys (even if I may be viewed as deceiving myself or merely naive). Paraphrasing Edmund Burke just this once, I'm tempted to say that for bad art to prevail all it takes are for good critics to write nothing. Yet the problem Groys outlines arguably brings us to the buried nub of the debates around the so-called crisis of art criticism and the construed loss of judgment in art criticism. What makes negative judgment difficult in our contemporary situation is not so much that the critic-judge resembles an authoritarian figure, a figure unreflexive about their own relative position within the field of art and so unable to comprehend how *that* position determines but limits their judgment, thereby also rendering them blind to other perspectives. Rather, what makes negative judgment difficult is that it may either actively produce symbolic value around an artist's work despite the critic's intentions, or, alternatively, it might fail to prevent the production of symbolic value. The actual effects

of judgment have become deeply uncertain, which suggests that the art critic almost might as well focus their power of interpretative scrutiny upon artists they like while also maintaining a safe position within the social field of art. Precisely for this reason, if there has been a loss of judgment in art criticism (a claim that I would like to return to near the end), then it may look uncertain if there is much benefit in bringing it back in terms of the quotidian problem of maintaining and developing a career in the artworld.

At this juncture it is possible to thread the two senses of “contracted” running in this paper together. Arguably, at stake here in both is the notion of symbolic value and, more precisely, a competition over who possesses the right to enact that value. Because art criticism and the art market are pledged towards different categories of value—the former towards symbolic value, the latter towards financial value—there is less of an inherent competition between these two sectors (even though the two values might overlap from time to time). Art criticism and curatorial discourse, however, perceive themselves as both producers of symbolic value, and to that degree they would seem to be more in competition than collaboration. Dialectically interwoven, the fortunes of one discourse exists in inverse proportion to the fortunes of the other in terms of their relation to the artworld and culture more broadly. Both criticism and curatorial discourse have a vested interest in art, and their survival depends on being able to claim the largest share and the least mediated access to it. At present curating is undoubtedly winning; the way it bridges theory and practice gives it an advantage, making it more art-like, and art is dependent upon exhibition structures in any case. Unsurprisingly, then, there has been an explosion of curatorial courses within universities in the last decade in tandem with the correspondingly growing literature on exhibition history and conditions of display. Art criticism, meanwhile, remains largely not

an academic subject, there are few courses on art criticism, and perhaps rather peculiarly there is still little academic literature on it.

It would probably be wrong to comment that all this is tantamount to a Hegelian end of art criticism, but the specific crisis experienced by criticism over the last decade can feel very real, especially when we bring both senses of its contractedness onto the table. The critic will surely survive, although mostly by diversifying their contracts into an expanded range of activities within the artworld: sometimes a critic, other times an art historian, or a curator, or promotor, or dealer. But such a survival might ultimately only attest to criticism's diminishment in the field of art discourse, thereby rendering it a specter from the past trapped in the present that it can no longer effect. And that is surely not the art criticism we want.

### *Some positive diagnoses*

So what hope is there? This essay has struck a somewhat more melancholic tone than I am accustomed to. Both the *October* and *The State of Art Criticism* roundtables were quite some time ago now, but in the intervening years there arguably has not been an efflorescence of art criticism. Some adjustments in methodology and concerns, to be sure, but nothing that could be considered a renaissance. Plenty of strong examples of critical writing are to be found, but little that betokens the kind of transformative criticism that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s through publications such as *Artforum*, *Studio International*, *Interfunktion*, and *October*. In the final part of the essay, then, I would like to diagnose—albeit in a modest and hesitant fashion—what presently seem to my mind as

mischaracterizations of the contemporary problem so that we might keep the discussion open. Indeed, if the latest so-called crisis of criticism is burdened by any such mischaracterizations, it follows that we will not illicit substantial understanding of, or even have the hope of overcoming, the crisis until we gain a more accurate perspective; meanwhile any solutions offered might well risk unknowingly reiterating the same errors and thus might not be solutions at all.

The word “crisis” has been used several times in this paper in a manner that might seem both rather casual and consequential, so it is worth finally pinning its meaning down. Over the last few decades, especially since the 1970s and the publication of Paul de Man’s canonical essay “Criticism and Crisis”, “crisis” has been a recurring leitmotif within art criticism. Not only is art criticism construed as existing in a persistent state of crisis, but crisis is structurally immanent to criticism per se—this standpoint can be seen in the *October* roundtable (Baker et al 2002). De Man puts this thought especially strongly in the following manner:

the notion of crisis and criticism are very closely linked, so much so that one could state that all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis. To speak of a crisis of criticism is then, to some degree, redundant. In periods that are not periods of crisis, or in individuals bent on avoiding crisis at all cost, there can be all kinds of approaches to literature: historical, philological, psychological, etc., but there can be no criticism (de Man, 1983, 8).

Some of this reasoning is due to sound etymological reasons that open towards intriguing

theoretical insights (also see Koselleck 1988). But all this risks suggesting that although crisis is structurally—or ontologically—related to criticism, as a concept it is far too generalized and, furthermore, overly romanticized; not only that, but the reliance on etymology, combined with the sheer interestingness of the conjunction of criticism with crisis, has tended to forget the complexity of de Man's careful analysis. In stating that art criticism is undergoing crisis, what we surely want to know are *the specific determinants of that particular* crisis rather than be reminded of the etymological interconnection between crisis and criticism. Without analyzing such conditions in their specificity, we are unable to consider how precisely a given crisis impacts upon criticism, nor would we be positioned to demonstrate how criticism could in some measure benefit it from the crisis. In other words, in leaving the notion of crisis at too vague a conceptualization, or in being overly satisfied with ontology rather than historical examination, there is every chance that we permit a good crisis to go to waste.<sup>5</sup>

A further aspect is that often in the debates around art criticism there is an equivalence drawn between innovation and obsolescence. That is to say, art criticism's lack of innovation may result in its eventual obsolescence. Innovation and the renewal of discourses, especially in correspondence with changing contexts, is something desirable, to be sure—and there is something about the repetition of entrenched critical frameworks which is disquieting. But we should wonder if innovation and obsolescence necessarily *are*, or *ought* to be, entwined. By posing such a question I am not covertly asking for stasis or art-critical conservatism; the alleged or assumed inextricability needs interrogation and we might, furthermore, ask if the demand for innovation (in tandem with the failure to meet that demand) is in itself a capitulation to some kind of implicit capitalist or business model.

Yes, innovation is important in the face of changing art practices and political conjunctures, but what should its tempo be? And what should innovation be caused by and directed towards? Indeed, if we momentarily return to Paul de Man, it is the semblance or actuality of rapid innovation—the obsession with the new—that is one of the “outward symptoms” in which “the crisis-aspect of the situation becomes apparent” (de Man 1983, 3).

To some extent, though, it might also be a misunderstanding to search for innovation *within* art criticism per se. One notable feature of the history of art criticism—especially during the twentieth century, it seems to me—is that much innovation has derived from its tendency to appropriate and reformat from philosophy and other related discursive fields. At the risk of simplifying to the point of parody, it is tempting to rehearse art-critical development since the early 1960s as a transition from Immanuel Kant (Greenberg, of course), to Maurice Merleau-Ponty with or without added Stanley Cavell (with: Fried; without: Robert Morris, Annette Michelson), and thence onto the cluster of figures generally placed under the flag of “poststructuralism” such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault (critics like Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, Craig Owens, and Hal Foster come to mind—the *October* journal, in other words). After Derrida’s death in 2004, there has seemed to be a relatively rapid turnover from Jean-Luc Nancy to Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou as the art world’s preferred French philosopher *du jour*. To be sure, this is far too schematic an account, focusing as it does on French theory in Anglo-American criticism since the 1960s and misses the continued presence of writers like Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, but the overall drift seems illustrative. Judging by conference advertisements, I guess there is a considerable interest in something like the Object-Orientated-Philosophy associated with Graham Harman or Speculative Realism;

however, it is not clear to me how that is panning out just yet (although, *Texte zur Kunst* has published an issue of their journal on this theme, and *Art Monthly* has an essay written by JJ Charlesworth and James Heartfield also addressing this matter).<sup>6</sup> None of this is to bemoan the ongoing centrality of philosophy within art criticism—far from it. Philosophy has long been central to art criticism and may be essential for it; to sever criticism from philosophy is surely tantamount to cutting criticism from itself. Rather, it is simply to suggest the problem of innovation *within* art criticism might be largely *external* to it.

Yet another popular explanation for the decline of art criticism is that critics are less willing to exercise their own power of judgment. Along these lines, a much-cited 2002 survey conducted by the Columbia University National Arts Journalism Program indicates that judgment has become one of the least desired activities in art criticism, while description was listed as the highest (Szántó 2002, 27). Some of this is attributed to a need perceived by some to refuse the strong, authoritative, frequently masculine voice associated with earlier generations of art critics (as ever, Greenberg tends to be the recurring *exemplum* here). A related perspective holds that the sidelining of judgment is expressive of the central tenets of postmodernism pluralism—for example, its refutation of the traditional hierarchal division between “High” and “Low” art, or its rejection of the tendency to marginalize non-Western cultural forms through “exoticizing” or “primitivizing” them. Self-reflexivity largely became one of the norms of art criticism during the postmodern 1980s, and the focus of its scrutiny was consistently upon the methods of art criticism rather than its judgments day-to-day. At its most extreme, those judgments were replaced with a concern for art-critical methodology. For example, in the introduction to her collection of essays, Rosalind Krauss writes:

Can it be argued that the interest of critical writing lies almost entirely in its method? Can it be held that the content of any given evaluative judgment—“this is good, important,” “this is bad, trivial”—is not what serious criticism is, seriously, read for? But rather, that such criticism is understood through the forms of its arguments, through the way that its method, in the process of constituting the object of its criticism, exposes to view those choices that precede and predetermine any act of judgment? (Krauss 1986, 1)

Krauss’s statement, provocatively located at the very beginning of the book, reflected the fascination with French structuralist and poststructuralist theory in the 1980s, especially within North American art. None of this is to bemoan the concentration upon theory (much of it provided a necessary corrective to late-modernist criticism and responded to developments internal to art practice), only to indicate how judgment became sidelined.

And yet, for all that, it is arguably harder to quantify this alleged erosion of art-critical judgment in the wider scheme of things than it is to decry it. Perhaps merely reporting my own reading habits rather than serving as an adequate survey of a disparate field, it does seem to me that judgment is largely alive and kicking in art criticism and I struggle to locate any definitive evidence that proves that there has been a wholesale loss of judgment. While this may indeed be self-selecting, the art critics I have valued and engaged with over the years have all been avowedly judgmental, making tightly argued discriminations between different types of artistic practice which one can choose to agree or disagree with. For example, scrutiny and value judgments are abundant in writers such as Hal Foster,

Benjamin Buchloh, JJ. Charlesworth, Matthew Collings, Julian Stallabrass—to mention just a few prominent names at random.

To judge or not to judge—that is the question. Returning to the 2002 survey, it bears remarking that although description is preferred over judgment as the goal of art-critical writing, this in fact says nothing about the actual presence of judgment in the essays produced by the critics polled, and so we need to take the evidence offered by the survey with due caution. We can judge, after all, without meaning to or without making it our first priority; indeed, as remarked earlier, it is Groys' contention that the decision to write is *already* a judgment. And we can very well describe an artwork at the same as consciously judging it. Of course, there are definitional problems with the notion of judgment, too—for instance, it would be obviously incorrect to apprehend critical judgment as tantamount to a negative or rejecting standpoint; that is to say, criticism has not much to do with what we typically refer to in everyday speech as criticizing someone or something. On the contrary, to assert the strengths of a given artwork is as much judgment as a denigration of an artwork's weaknesses. Both are judgments and perhaps the most that could be asked for is a level of nuance that outlines strengths and weaknesses within the artwork. To a degree, it might even be wondered if claims regarding the wholesale loss of judgment are in fact an exaggerated and possibly rather strategic in character, unconsciously—if we are being generous, and undoubtedly there is a fair chance of it being entirely conscious—designed to promote the claimant's own presumed heightened criticality, and that our own nodding assent to that claim is likewise to manifest our own criticality thereby demarcating ourselves from the herd. Having said this, it would also appear that the claim art criticism has declined due to its refusal to be judgmental does not square easily—if at all—with the

alternative claim that it is art criticism's very judgmentalness that renders it detrimental to, and thus undesired by, the art market. This is not to sideline the important discussion on the role judgment plays within art criticism; instead it is a matter of being alert to the position and tenability of these claims.<sup>7</sup>

One final point bears remarking, namely the slippage between art critics and art criticism. The two terms are frequently as being more or less identical, however, in making such assumptions we miss the presence of art criticism in other arenas. We have already mentioned the so-called "neo-criticality" taken by Paul O'Neill as a defining feature of the "para-curatorial" and exhibition making since the latter 1960s. By the same token, numerous artists have proved to be brilliant critics. Along these lines we can include names such as Allan Sekula, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Andrea Fraser, and many more. It is surely productive, then, to set aside the classic division of artworld labor—less a division of people than of disciplines—implied here and instead seek to construe how artworks participate in activities that might be described as art-critical. For instance, there is a thread in Craig Owens's early writings, such as his essays "Earthwords" and the two-part "The Allegorical Impulse", which takes form as an exploration of the "discursivity" or "textuality" of the artwork, the way that artworks since the late 1960s come to reject the medium-specific separation of text and image in order to produce hybrid pieces (see Owens 1979 and 1980). Following this thread allowed Owens to refigure how he understood the relationship between artist and critic; rather than writing *about* artists, he considers it important that he writes *alongside* them, to which he concludes: "There was an exchange there, and one's criticism was conducting the same work in a different arena and in a different way" (Stephanson 1992, 307).

As with the case of para-curating discussed earlier in this essay, the fact that artworks might themselves possess an art-critical element does not obviate the need for further art criticism. Far from it. Instead, it suggests that artworks operate in dialogical relation—in art-critical conversation—with the art and criticism that both precedes it and that which will soon enough follow it. Perhaps, then, we could offer a more positive note: if the field has contracted for art critics, making them less certain of their place and continued existence in that field, nonetheless it appears reasonable to suggest that art criticism overall constitutes an expanded field.

## Conclusion

In several respects, I have allowed a certain elision between the figure of the art critic and the discursive practice of art criticism while also asserting the need to distinguish between these categories. Whilst this runs the risk of contradiction, admittedly, it is nonetheless arguably permissible to allow a degree of slippage—at least in a carefully calibrated manner—insofar as art criticism is not a disembodied art of judgment but often rooted in how the critic gives “voice” to a reflective judgment, thereby publicly testing and owning their experience. Art criticism would appear to be bound, then, to notions of subjectivity that should not, however, be reduced to the merely subjective. For this reason, there is a possibility that the increasingly contracted field for art critics can have repercussions upon art criticism in general inasmuch as the latter becomes tailored towards the insecure livelihoods of the former within the context of post-Fordism. Rather than maintaining the full potential of its analytical power, criticism would instead partake in and reproduce a culture of affirmation.

Earlier I remarked that art criticism is not solely practiced by art critics, but is also produced by curators and artists, whether as straightforward texts or less straightforwardly in the medium of exhibitions and artworks, and this raises the question of why the voice of the critic is to be privileged at all. Moreover, the expansion of art criticism into curating and art practice is surely beneficial as long as such criticism demonstrates itself capable of evincing an authentically critical function. But it seems to me that the role of the art critic is something worth holding onto rather than allowing to pass. As a figure simultaneously imbricated with the artworld and occupying a standpoint at a slight remove from it insofar as part of their task is to interpret and judge what is happening with that world, the art critic's criticism is potentially more distanced than any such analogous criticism produced by curators and artists.

However, I do not wish to conclude by weighing up the strengths and weaknesses of art criticism hailing from differently situated producers within the artworld and assigning priority to one group rather than another. Recently Hal Foster (2020) has worried that art criticism's quasi-Barthesian of demystification has virtually run aground in the face of a hypercapitalist public sphere not only typified by posttruth politics but also by a "postshame" climate; here, again, it is the very efficacy of art criticism's judgments that appears to be uncertain. If Foster's contention is more or less on target, it is perhaps less a question of whose roles become expanded or contracted in relation to art criticism than of art criticism's viability and survival.

## REFERENCES

Amin, Ash, editor, 1994. *Post-Fordism: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Baker, George et al, 2002. "Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism." In *October* 100, 200-228. Spring.
- Birnbaum, Daniel and Graw, Isabelle, editors, 2008a. *Under Pressure: Pictures, Subjects, and the New Spirit of Capitalism*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- , editors, 2008b. *Canvases and Careers Today: Criticism and its Markets*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Eve, 2005. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliot. New York: Verso.
- Bowman, Matthew, 2008. "The New Critical Historians of Art?" In *The State of Art Criticism*, edited by James Elkins and Michael Newman, 289-295. New York: Routledge.
- Bryson, Norman, 2006. "Maudit: John Currin and Morphology." In *John Currin: New Paintings* by Norman Bryson, Alison M. Gringeras, and Dave Eggers, 14-31, New York: Rizzoli.
- Buren, Daniel, 1972. "Exhibitions of an Exhibition." Available here: [http://projects.e-flux.com/next\\_doc/d\\_buren\\_printable.html](http://projects.e-flux.com/next_doc/d_buren_printable.html)
- Carroll, Noël, 2009. *On Criticism*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Cavell, Stanley, 2002, "Music Discomposed." In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Updated Edition, 180-212. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Charlesworth, JJ and Heartfield, James, 2014 "Subjects versus Objects" in *Art Monthly*, March. Also available at <http://blog.jjcharlesworth.com/2014/06/24/subjects-v-objects/>
- De Man, Paul, 1983. *Blindness and Insight: Essays on the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, revised. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Elkins, James, and Newman, Michael, eds., 2008. *The State of Art Criticism*. New York: Routledge.
- Foster, Hal, 2002. *Design and Crime and Other Diatribes*. New York: Verso.
- , 2015. *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*. New York: Verso.
- , 2020. *What Comes After Farce? Art and Criticism at a Time of Debacle*. New York: Verso.
- Fried, Michael, 1998. "Art and Objecthood." In *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 148-172. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Graw, Isabelle, 2009. *High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture*, trans. Nicholas Grindell. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Graw, Isabelle, 2012. "In the Grip of the Market? On the Relative Heteronomy of Art, the Art World, and Art Criticism." In *Contemporary Art and its Commercial Markets: A Report on Current Conditions and Future Scenarios*, edited by Maria Lind and Olav Velthuis 183-205. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 2003, *Truth and Method*, revised 2<sup>nd</sup> edition trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. New York: Continuum.
- Gould, Timothy, 1982. "The Audience of Originality." In *Essays on Kant's Aesthetics*, edited by Paul Guyer and Ted Cohen, 179-193. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- , 1998. *Hearing Things: Voice and Method in the Writing of Stanley Cavell*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

- Groys, Boris, 2008. "Critical Reflections." In *The State of Art Criticism*, edited by James Elkins and Michael Newman, 61-69. New York: Routledge.
- Habermas, Jürgen, 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger. Cambridge: Polity.
- Heidegger, Martin, 2010, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, revised and foreword by Dennis J. Schmidt. New York: SUNY Press
- Holert, Tom, 2020. *Knowledge Beside Itself: Contemporary Art's Epistemic Politics*. Berlin: Sternberg Press
- Khonsary, Jeff and O'Brian, Melanie, editors, 2010. *Judgment and Contemporary Criticism*. Vancouver: Phillip/Artspeak.
- Koselleck, Reinhart, 1988. *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*. New York: Berg Press.
- Krauss, Rosalind, 1986. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Lazzarato, Maurizio, 1996. "Immaterial Labour." In *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, trans. Maurizia Boscagli et al, edited by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, 142-157. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- O'Neill, Paul, 2007. "The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse." In *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, edited by Judith Rugg and Michèle Sedgwick, 13-28. Bristol: Intellect.
- O'Neill, Paul, 2012. *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press).
- Owens, Craig, 1979. "Earthwords." In *October* 10. Fall, 120-130.
- Owens, Craig, 1980. "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism." In *October* 12. Spring, 67-86.
- Sheikh, Simon, 2008. "Talk Value: Cultural Industry and the Knowledge Economy." In *On Knowledge Production: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, edited by Maria Hlavajova, Jill Winder, and Binna Choi, 182-197. Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst.
- Steinberg, Leo, 2007. *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stephanson, Anders, 1992. "Interview with Craig Owens." In *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, by Craig Owens, edited by Scott Bryson et al, introduction by Simon Watney, 298-315. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Szántó, András, editor, 2002. *The Visual Art Critic*. New York: National Arts Journalism Program, Columbia University.  
<http://www.cpanda.org/data/a00052/Visual%20Art%20Critic%20Report.pdf>
- Vergo, Peter. 1994. "The Rhetoric of Display." In *Towards the Museum of the Future: New European Perspectives*, edited by R.S. Miles and Lauro Zavala, 149-159. New York: Routledge.
- Virno, Paolo, 2004. *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Virno, Paolo, and Hardt, Michael, editors, 1996, *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, trans. Maurizia Boscagli et al. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota

Press.

Vidokle, Anton, 2010. "Art without Artists." In *e-flux Journal* 16. Available at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-without-artists/>.

---

<sup>1</sup> The title of this essay perhaps merits a little preliminary explication. It of course plays on Rosalind Krauss's classic 1979 essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," but uses "contracted" in a double sense: firstly as in reduced or shrunk, therefore as an antonym to "expanded" and secondly as in being bound to something or someone. While the latter sense may suggest security, one of the themes in the second part of this essay are the challenges posed to art criticism by the growing prevalence of short-term contracts and employment precarity in post-Fordism.

<sup>2</sup> A pertinent issue that exists in parallel to the situation I am describing is to what extent contemporary artists feel sidelined by the growth of curating. Updating Buren's argument is Anton Vidokle, "Art without Artists" in *e-flux Journal* 16, May 2010. Available at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-without-artists/>.

<sup>3</sup> Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007 [1972]).

<sup>4</sup> The literature on post-Fordism is extensive. Useful starting points include Amin, 2008; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Virno, 2004; Virno and Hardt (1996). In terms of art and post-Fordism, Birnbaum and Graw 2008a and 2008b are very helpful introductions. Holert, 2020 is a strong recent interrogation of post-Fordism and art.

<sup>5</sup> In referring to the difference between ontological and historical analysis when it comes to diagnosing a given crisis, it is not my intention to cast these two terms as opposing and irreconcilable methodological options. Rather, in this case, it is more about supporting ontology through the specificities of historical and social examination. On balancing ontological and historical investigation, see Martin Heidegger, 2010, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, revised and foreword by Dennis J. Schmidt. New York: SUNY Press and Hans-Georg Gadamer, 2003, *Truth and Method*, revised 2<sup>nd</sup> edition trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. New York: Continuum.

<sup>6</sup> JJ Charlesworth and James Heartfield, "Subjects versus Objects" in *Art Monthly*, March 2014. Also available at <http://blog.jjcharlesworth.com/2014/06/24/subjects-v-objects/>

<sup>7</sup> For an interesting set of essays engaging these issues, see Jeff Khonsary and Melanie O'Brian (ed.), *Judgment and Contemporary Criticism* (Vancouver: Fillip/Artspeak, 2010). Also see Noël Carroll, *On Criticism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).