

American-type art criticism

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Review of:

Art Criticism and Modernism in the United States by Stephen Moonie, Routledge, 2022, 206pp. 10 colour and 30 b. & w. illus. ISBN: 9780367565411, £120.

Histories of Art Criticism

However mythical and ideological the notion of ‘the triumph of American painting’—a phrase coined by Irving Sandler in response to the Cold War hegemony of Abstract Expressionism—undoubtedly is, it should not blind us from recognizing and acknowledging the sophistication and productiveness of the art criticism written in the USA during and immediately after that period. Important to mention here straightaway is that such criticism established its value and reputation often largely through a complex dialogue with Abstract Expressionism and the debates encircling it. The tenor of that dialogue, what characterizes its complexity, is that the criticism of the time seldom amounted either to cut-and-dried renunciation or endorsement of the various painters and positions marshalled as evidence of America’s cultural ‘triumph’. Even when utterly opposed to figures like Clement Greenberg, for instance, there nonetheless remains the pervasive sense that opposition was essentially a matter of dialectical negation. At bottom, arguably, this is because for nearly all those involved modernism constituted a commitment, albeit one that was less determined by a dogma with clear principles than a shared disagreement.

American art criticism, especially since the 1960s, is perhaps something we might legitimately feel to have an almost subliminal deep understanding of. Those of us who went to art school in the late 1990s, such as myself, were educated in a framework that pretty much charted a trajectory in which a number of postmodern art critics—it is possible to list names like Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, Craig Owens, Hal Foster; in other words, the *October* journal but others can be mentioned—broke away from leading modernist writers like Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg by translating French phenomenology and (post)structuralism into a set of terms for art criticism. That education goes far beyond the confines of art school; indeed, it has permeated throughout contemporary art history as well as our engagements with past tendencies in art like Cubism and Surrealism. Again, it is worth mentioning that these pedagogical and historiographic engagements, no matter how deep and sustained, do not necessarily entail acquiescence to those postmodern rubrics. What is crucial here to grasp, in any case, is the degree to which the history of North American art criticism has become the foundation of a

common theoretical language across many branches of art writing that many of us speak without, however, always being certain of its etymology. Hence our subliminal understanding.

But subliminal understanding is not (yet) full comprehension; at best, it is fore-knowledge within the structure of a hermeneutic circle. Art criticism tends to be far more practiced than written about, so our histories and theoretical accounts of it exist in rather scanty number. There are solid exceptions to this situation, of course: Thomas Crow and Richard Wrigley, for example, have brilliantly surveyed the emergence of art criticism in the historical context of salon culture in pre-revolutionary France partly in relation to the development of the public sphere in a manner that builds upon the foundations laid by Jürgen Habermas and Reinhart Koselleck.¹ Yet in pointing to exceptions one is only really spotlighting a broader surfeit of academic interest which ultimately requires explanation. It is somewhat beyond the compass of this review to attempt such an explanation here; but it certainly appears that, for many, art criticism constitutes an unsuitable topic for historical and philosophical analysis because it, as a mode of writing, is somehow ontologically defined by subjectivity. Rather wonderfully, Erwin Panofsky was courageous enough to propose that a truly objective and rigorous art-historical interpretation can only begin once sixty-to-eighty years have been wedged between artwork and historian; anything less than that would lack historical distance and hence be merely subjective—it would be art criticism, in other words. Other explanations can be supplemented to the issue of subjectivity, but the core issue worth noting is that studies into the history and theory of art criticism exist in far fewer numbers than, say, scholarly discussions of the history and theory of art history.

It is only within the last few years that the paucity of scholarly research has begun to alter with considerable benefits. Patricia Bickers' *The Ends of Art Criticism*, published in 2021, provides a highly useful precis of art criticism, touching upon its Enlightenment origins and tracing its manifestations and values across a variety of mostly European contexts. And although very different in scope and approach, Jarrett Earnest's *What it Means to Write About Art* likewise offers great insight into post-Greenbergian developments within art criticism in the United States through a series of interviews. Both of these books constitute replies to James Elkins' pamphlet *What Happened to Art Criticism?*, which also garnered a follow-up, *The State of Art Criticism*, co-edited by Elkins and Michael Newman.²

¹ See Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth Century Paris*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985; Richard Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism: From the Ancien Régime to the Restoration*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989 [1962]; and Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, Oxford and New York: Berg Publishing, 1988 [1959].

² Patricia Bickers, *The Ends of Art Criticism*, London: Lund Humphries, 2021; Jarrett Earnest, *What it Means to Write About Art: Interviews with Art Critics*, New York: David Zwirner Press, 2018; and James Elkins and Michael Newman (eds.), *The State of Art Criticism*, London and

Stephen Moonie's first book, *Art Criticism and Modernism in the United States*, continues this trend and focuses upon a carefully delimited period and geographic context. Each chapter tackles a single art critic and provides a clear exegesis of several of their writings. Thus the procession of names runs as follows: Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, Harold Rosenberg, Leo Steinberg, and, finally, Lawrence Alloway. The first four names constitute something like a coherent set defined by a certain complex affiliation to Greenberg. That's clear in the cases of Fried and Krauss, both of whom were close to Greenberg in the 1960s, but probably less obvious when it comes to Michelson, who's return from France to the United States in 1965 and engagement with film theory marked her as an outsider in some respects. However, Michelson's early essay apropos the painter James Bishop—who, like her, was an American expatriate residing in France—evidences that the Greenbergian notion of medium specificity was pertinent to her sense of modernism at a certain stage of her intellectual trajectory. What renders this affiliation complex, of course, is Fried, Krauss, and Michelson would ultimately distance themselves from Greenberg's arguments. The other three names are more of a motley conjoined by an overall antipathy towards Greenberg (though that is also a rather complex matter insofar as Alloway was briefly close to Greenberg).

Perhaps apart from Alloway and possibly Michelson, these names carry a considerable reputation and perhaps might seem, at least on first glance, less in need of explication. Yet amid the true strengths of Moonie's book is its willingness to tackle the critics it selects through a more oblique angle. This hardly evinces anything like wilful eccentricity on his part; far from it. Rather, it testifies to how their reputations has unfortunately been ossified through the interpretative actions of both their defenders and detractors without, however, quite reaching a sophisticated understanding of the deep intellectual positions taken by these critics. To give an example, Harold Rosenberg's understanding of 'Action Painting' has, for too long, been routinely misconstrued as defending a notion of immediate self-expression. Especially pertinent is Moonie's engagement with Greenberg. Enough water has now passed under the bridge, meaning we are happily a long way from the demonization of Greenberg that became *de rigueur* in the late 1960s and frequently streamlined the complexities in his writings. Writers such as Stephen Melville, Thierry de Duve, and Lisa Florman, moreover, have taught us to read Greenberg more patiently and open-mindedly, making us attentive to what he actually argues rather than the poorly constructed strawmen that have often been paraded as Greenberg's thought.³ Moonie continues this trend and brings another dimension to it.

New York: Routledge, 2008. At the risk of narcissism, I have produced reviews of the first two books: Matthew Bowman, 'Review of Patricia Bickers, *The Ends of Art Criticism*' in *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 164, no. 1426, January 2022, 95-96, and Matthew Bowman, 'Review of Jarrett Earnest, *What it Means to Write About Art*' in *Art Monthly* 425, April, 2019, 37.

³ See Stephen Melville, 'On Modernism' in *Philosophy Beside Itself: On Deconstruction and Modernism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, 3-33; Thierry de Duve, *Clement Greenberg Between the Lines: Including a Previously Unpublished Debate with Clement Greenberg*,

The Constellation of Greenberg

Central to Moonie's account of Greenberg are a cluster of essays in which, perhaps rather surprisingly, he advocates for 'a dialectical shift to a new kind of illusion which is distinct from representation' during the late 1950s.⁴ Those dialectics—as one would expect from them being dialectical—are complicated and the terms structuring them are decidedly mobile. Indicative of that complexity, as Moonie suggests, is Greenberg's labour of revision and republishing that is somewhat occluded in his collection *Art and Culture*. Two of the chapters in that book are especially noteworthy in that regard. Firstly, 'The New Sculpture' is accredited two dates, 1948 and 1958, but one should also add 1961 as well. Greenberg first published 'The New Sculpture' in *Partisan Review* in June 1949, but the essay was substantially rewritten and rethought when an updated version was included in *Arts Magazine* in June 1958 under the new title 'Sculpture in Our Time'.⁵ Its inclusion in *Art and Culture* restored the original 1949 title but mostly reused the 1958 text (I say 'mostly' insofar as the 1961 version makes a few revisions and excisions of its own that are, in themselves, quite interesting).⁶ Rather less confusing, is 'Collage' (dated to 1959) in *Art and Culture*, which revises his essay 'The Pasted-Paper Revolution' that featured on the pages of *Art News* in September 1958.⁷ However, as Lisa Florman remarks, the revisions are fairly significant.⁸ 'Collage' is longer than 'The Pasted-Paper Revolution', but also Greenberg's remarks on Juan Gris' paintings in the revised version, particularly their 'liquidation of sculptural shading', which Greenberg takes as rendering explicit and finalizing what Picasso and Braque sought to achieve via the invention of the *papier collé*. That 'liquidation' has the ultimate consequence of 'the decorative [being] transcended and transfigured'.⁹

trans. by Brian Holmes, Paris: Éditions Dis Voir, 1996 as well as his essay 'The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas' in *Kant After Duchamp*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: MIT Press, 1996, 199-279; Lisa Florman, 'The Flattening of "Collage"' in *October*, 102, Fall 2002, 59-86.

⁴ Stephen Moonie, *Art Criticism and Modernism in the United States*, New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2022, 17.

⁵ It's worth mentioning the minor inconsistency here, even though its relevance is unclear and probably not all that pertinent: namely, Greenberg dates 'The New Sculpture' to 1948 in *Art and Culture* despite it not being published until the summer of the following year. That inconsistency is perhaps the result of misremembering or alternatively means that the essay was written in 1948 but not published until the following year (which is pretty often the case in academic publishing!).

⁶ Clement Greenberg, 'The New Sculpture' (1949) reprinted in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2: *Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, ed. by John O'Brian, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 313-319; 'Sculpture in Our Time' (1958) reprinted in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4: *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. by John O'Brian, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 55-61; 'The New Sculpture' in *Arts and Culture*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1961, 139-145.

⁷ Clement Greenberg, 'The Pasted-Paper Revolution' (1959) reprinted in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4: *Modernism with a Vengeance*, 61-73; 'Collage' in *Arts and Culture*, 70-83.

⁸ Florman, 'The Flattening of Collage', 61

⁹ Greenberg, 'Collage', 82-83.

Much of the fascination and challenge provoked by these essays stems from their qualified defence of illusion conjoined with passages that explore how certain artworks almost appear to deconstruct the opposition between two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms of space and materiality. For example, Greenberg's analysis of Cubist painting and *papier collé* in 'Collage' revolves around seeking to comprehend how these works create 'the illusion of forms in bas-relief'¹⁰ and 'obtaining *sculptural* effects through nonsculptural means'.¹¹ Moreover, Greenberg claims, Picasso and Braque were trying to counterbalance the literal flatness of the canvas with a depicted or illusionary flatness secured by opticality. Without such a counterbalancing, the literal surface might result in paintings and *papier collés* becoming merely material objects, and therefore worthy of no more consideration than the quotidian objects mass-produced by industry (this is, in effect, the danger posed by 'decoration' if it is not transcended or transfigured). Moreover, Moonie plausibly contends that 'Collage' actively sought to provide a premiss of sorts for Colour-Field Painting. One of the differences between 'The Pasted-Paper Revolution' and 'Collage' is that the latter proposes a 'choice' faced by Picasso and Braque, resulting from their experiments with the *papier collé*, between representational and illusionistic valences of pictorial endeavour. In Greenberg's account, they chose representation, thereby implicitly bringing their 'revolution' to an end; Implicitly, Greenberg and Colour-Field Painting pick illusion, thereby working through the conclusion(s) of the *papier collé*.

Aspects of this argument might surprise some readers whose understanding of Greenberg is indebted to an admixture of reading his essay 'Modernist Painting' alongside the postmodern approbations he received, for Greenberg's endeavour in those essays comes willingly close to acknowledging the productivity of disparate mediums entering into dialogue with one another. Or to put the matter otherwise, if Stephen Melville has compellingly argued that the scare quotes that often encase the word 'purity' in Greenberg's writings are seriously meant, so that purity is not an achievable absolute for Greenberg and therefore cannot be disentangled from a constitutive impurity, then 'The New Sculpture' and 'Collage' might be interpreted as essays where the workings of impurity are most evident.¹² Moonie's summarizing of Greenberg's complex position is deeply helpful and provides with a real sense of why the much-derided figure of Greenberg deserves to elicit our positive interest here and there.

Having demonstrated both the complexity and productivity of this dialectic in Greenberg's criticism, Moonie charts its explicit reappearances and subtle displacements in Michael Fried's and Rosalind Krauss' early essays. Fried's

¹⁰ Ibid., 75.

¹¹ Ibid., 71.

¹² For a discussion, see Melville, 'On Modernism'. This aspect gets somewhat hidden in the 1961 revision of 'The New Sculpture'. In the 1958 version of the essay, Greenberg writes: 'Of course, "purity" is an unattainable ideal. Outside music, no attempt at a "pure" work of art has ever succeeded in being more than an approximation and a compromise (least of all in literature).' Greenberg, 'Sculpture in our Time', 61. That passage, however, was deleted from the essay when it was included in *Art and Culture* (which also means that O'Brian is not exactly right when he states that it was unrevised).

demarcation between literal and depicted shape in Frank Stella's paintings, for instance, is partly a renewal of the division between literal and illusionary flatness. And the attack on Minimalist objecthood is partially a reprise of the worry about decoration voiced in 'Collage'. Writing contra to Donald Judd's intentions, Krauss highlighted a curious illusionism subtending his works—a 'lived illusionism' rather than a 'pictorial illusionism'—which, to her mind, dovetailed with their 'extraordinary beauty'.¹³ While David Raskin has usefully tracked the numerous divergences and sharp disagreements between Krauss and Judd over the course of her career, because Moonie demonstrates how complex the issue of illusion became for Greenberg in the late 1950s, we are now better positioned to recognize that what Krauss meant by illusion and what Judd (as well as Judd's protégé Fred Sandback) took her to mean do not fully marry up.¹⁴ But as Moonie also shows, in one way or another, Krauss was puzzling through this particular aspect of Greenberg in her subsequent essays on Willem de Kooning, Kenneth Noland, and David Smith. It is as if there was something insatiably niggling at the heart of Greenberg's criticism that Krauss could not quite put her finger upon.

Those essays by Fried and Krauss were, as is well known, mostly written while the two rapidly emerging critics were viewed as Greenberg's acolytes, as what Judd derisively referred to them as being 'Greenbergers'.¹⁵ But whatever social and intellectual proximity they had to Greenberg, this was also a period in which they were beginning to mark quite thoroughly their difference from him. It was not so much the case that Fried and Krauss were instigating any straightforwardly anti-Greenbergian position as they were working through their erstwhile mentor's art criticism.¹⁶ Yet this was happening in a period that Greenberg seemed to be quietly retreating—perhaps in the face of monochrome—from the theoretical complexities he was tackling in the late 1950s.¹⁷ In an intriguing reversal, the problem was no longer of distinguishing between art and non-art, which was partly the concern that animated 'Collage', but rather that anything has become 'readable as art—including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper'.¹⁸ As Greenberg's pronouncements increasingly manifested his criticism becoming unfortunately streamlined and

¹³ Rosalind Krauss, 'Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd', 1966, reprinted in *Perpetual Inventory*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 2010, 91-100.

¹⁴ Raskin discusses the 'debate' apropos illusion and illusionism between Krauss and Judd in his 'The Shiny Illusionism of Krauss and Judd' in *Art Journal*, vol 65, n. 1, Spring 2006, 6-21. He finds very much in Judd's favour, ultimately, but does not consider the roots of Krauss' references to illusion in 'lived illusion'.

¹⁵ See Donald Judd, 'Complaints: Part One' (1969) reprinted in *The Complete Writings, 1959-1975*, Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975, 197-199.

¹⁶ In light of this, it is worth mentioning how young Krauss and Fried were. Born 30 November 1940, Krauss was twenty-five when she published 'Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd'. Fried is slightly older, having been born in April 1939. For reference: Harold Rosenberg was born in February 1906, Clement Greenberg in January 1909, Leo Steinberg in July 1920, Annette Michelson in November 1922, and Lawrence Alloway in September 1926.

¹⁷ Thierry de Duve discusses this brilliantly in his essay 'The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas'.

¹⁸ Clement Greenberg, 'Recentness of Sculpture' (1967) reprinted in *Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, 253.

ossified, holding onto what was once of great merit in his writings impelled Fried and Krauss to supplement Greenberg's 'American-Type Criticism' with intellectual positions developing in Europe. We can clearly witness this at work quite plainly in Krauss's essay on Judd: the gestalt switch between frontal and side views of his sculpture was not only an incessant back-and-forth between an illusionary flatness available to 'vision alone' against a quasi-tactile apprehension experienceable through the body, it was also obviously a duck-rabbit gestalt switch between Greenberg and Merleau-Ponty. Incessant as it was, a choice had to be made at some point and the irrelevancy of Greenberg's late writings perhaps made it not entirely difficult.

Unsurprisingly and justifiably, then, Greenberg is the brightest star in the firmament mapped by Moonie, gravitationally anchoring and shaping much of the constellation it belongs to. His name appears, going by *Art Criticism and Modernism in the United States* index, on fifty-three pages; that is almost a third of the book's pages and twice as often as Rosenberg, Steinberg, and Alloway. While I can imagine some worrying the preponderance of his name reinforces a Greenberg-centric view of art criticism's history, this state of affairs is surely correct. Greenberg's influence is perceptible less as the maintaining of art-critical approaches than as resistance. Although the metaphor that opened this paragraph may seem over-poetic, it nonetheless captures some of the relationship between distance and inter-determination that defines art-criticism in the USA and as evident in Moonie's book.

Rosenberg, as Greenberg's closest contemporary, was perhaps the critic who most nearly managed to carve out a relatively autonomous procedure. Indeed, if it was not for the fact that Rosenberg positioned himself as one of the leading defenders of Abstract Expressionism, there would be little demand to consider him Greenberg's rival. But Rosenberg did position himself in just that way, and a choice seemed to have had to be made by artists and critics emergent in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Greenberg appealed to many as a more plausible figure—his brand of art criticism offered close analysis and appeared to have verifiability on its side—and Rosenberg subsequently was denigrated by those who viewed his criticism through a basically Greenbergian lens. Such was the power of the Greenbergian critique that even postmodernists, who delineated their arguments through strenuous opposition to Greenberg, nonetheless regurgitated in essence and supported Greenberg's rejection of Rosenberg. Ultimately, Rosenberg's influence waned more quickly than Greenberg's. To some degree, while Greenberg was a problem that needed overcoming, Rosenberg had the unfortunate fate of becoming more or less irrelevant to the art of the 1960s. Despite this, Moonie recovers enough of Rosenberg's criticism to indicate why it should not be dismissed overly hastily.

The Problem of Philosophy

Because of its exegetical approach, the strength of Moonie's book depends crucially upon the cogency and even the productivity of his explications of particular essays. Overall—and probably already evident—Moonie is a strong guide through the myriad complexities that underpin many of the essays discussed. There are occasions, naturally, where one might quibble with or outrightly disagree with an interpretation or a specific point. For instance, Fried's notion of 'presentness', a key

concept operative in 'Art and Objecthood' but left undefined, has been pervasively read in terms of a specifically temporal understanding—or, more accurately, *atemporal*—and therefore as symptomatic of a broader 'chronophobic' disposition in 1960s art.¹⁹ Moonie rightly links Fried's 'presentness' to Stanley Cavell's invocation of 'continuous presentness' in his celebrated essay on *King Lear*, but overly asserts the difference between experiencing a painting—existing all at once even if perceiving its variegated elements takes time—on a wall and watching a play unfold on stage.²⁰ Yet the construal of a difference here posited according to a medium-specific discourse deriving, at bottom, from Lessing does not really capture what is intended by presentness in either Fried's or Cavell's usage. Rather than ascribing a (a)temporal understanding to presentness, it is important to grasp that for both Fried and Cavell presentness should be comprehended as a trying to be present to and for another. More could be said on this matter, but for our own purposes it is enough to note that presentness is not strictly synonymous with 'instantaneousness' and therefore serving as a contrast to 'duration' (both keywords in Fried's essay), nor is it isomorphic with notions of immediacy. Instead, presentness is better thought as coinciding with notions of exposure and openness, which is why its most pertinent oppositions within Fried's argument are the conjoined issues of theatricality and the hiddenness of anthropomorphism.

My own reading of 'Art and Objecthood', and the judgments I assign to that essay's constellation of terms, is obviously open to extensive debate.²¹ That Fried's essay is open in just this way—the sheer fact that his essay, because of its complexity, proves challenging for readers and generates a plethora of interpretations and misinterpretations—tells us something about the increasingly transformed position art criticism was discovering itself to be in late-modernism. Indeed, 'Art and Objecthood' is not only a fierce rebuke to Minimalism, but also a sustained meditation upon art criticism in the 1960s—that is to say, in a conjuncture that was becoming recognizably post-Greenbergian. The overall shape and effects of that emergent conjuncture are highly heterogeneous and complex, yet it is worth noting a few elements in a brief manner. The erosion of Greenberg's position amid the hierarchy of critics, the way in which his modernist criticism and its orientation towards medium specificity became less hegemonic, was also confirmation of that elevated position. In seeking to go beyond Greenberg, it was necessary to work through his arguments, locate blindspots, and identify new systems of thought.

¹⁹ Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' (1967) is reprinted in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 148-172. Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 60s*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: MIT Press, 2004. As will become clear, diagnosing the notion of presentness in terms of a chronophobic disposition strikes me as inaccurate.

²⁰ Stanley Cavell, 'The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*' in *Must We Mean What We Say?* Updated Edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 [1969], 322.

²¹ We both have viewed Fried's essay quite differently for an extended period of time. Melville's teaching was a formative influence upon me (he lectured at the University of Essex 2002-2003), and he kindled whatever interest I have in Heidegger. Moonie follows a happily different track. See Moonie, *Art Criticism and Modernism in the United States*, acknowledgements and 54.

Such an activity involved art critics engaging in a particular heightened form of reflexivity, but it was not restricted to art critics alone as it was also taken by artists. The traditional division of labour that mostly demarcated art critic and artist, then, was collapsing, and, because of that art practice and art criticism were correspondingly interwove in new but uncertain ways. Thinking in dialogue with Stanley Cavell, Fried's 'Art and Objecthood' was amid numerous other texts and artworks trying to take cognizance of this situation.²²

Moonie's focus is generally upon how the arguments of the art critics he discusses are marshalled in response to specific artworks; to that degree, while some of these wider frameworks are not always explicit in his analysis, they undergird what Moonie has to say about this particular period of art criticism and prove why it is important to examine. 'Art and Objecthood' was published in *Artforum*, and both Krauss and Michelson were also major contributors as well. Part of *Artforum's* rise to dominance in the 1960s was very much because it was simultaneously the place where art criticism was being practiced and also the place where it was being worked out. Or, put differently, *Artforum's* significance to the art of the 1960s is that it was symptomatic of the crisis of criticism and a laboratory where that crisis could be worked through, experimented upon. For that reason, *Artforum* is not the immediate precursor to *October* merely insofar as a couple of its leading writers, Krauss and Michelson, departed the former and founded the latter; rather it is because *Artforum's* concerted willingness to reflect upon and revolutionize art criticism by incorporating theoretical perspectives that promised stronger intellectual understanding of contemporary art was genetically carried over pell-mell into *October*.²³

One of the biggest questions that haunts the pages of Moonie's book, then, is the nature of the relationship between art criticism and the various established philosophies—phenomenology, for example—it often appropriates. Phrasing things in this manner ultimately, of course, announces or admits a basic distinction between art criticism, on one side of the medal, and philosophy, on the other. But equally, it augers that art criticism has not inconsistently found it inviting or just plainly necessary somehow to take cognizance of specific arguments made by philosophy. And that means that art criticism's recurrent usage of philosophy's arguments and ideas beg important questions when it comes to assessing such criticism. Not everything just stated, to be sure, is not quite in the right tenor or will

²² In light of that, it is well worth mentioning that, amongst other issues, the final five chapters of Stanley Cavell's *Must We Mean What We Say?* constitute a protracted reflection upon critical writing in the situation of modernism. Cavell telegraphs that the issue matters to him in the introduction to the book, of course, but one should look at how it becomes fundamental in what first appears to be a sudden transition in the chapter on Kierkegaard's *The Book of Adler*. In reading those chapters, one gets a strong indication of the dialogue between Fried and Cavell and how it informed their sense of the significance of art criticism.

²³ For insightful brief considerations highlighting *Artforum's* distinctiveness, see Thomas Crow 'Art Criticism in the Age of Incommensurate Values: On the Thirtieth Anniversary of *Artforum*' in *Modern Art in Common Culture*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996, 85-93, and also Hal Foster, 'Art Critics in Extremis' in *Design and Crime and Other Diatribes*, London and New York: Verso, 2002, 104-122.

satisfy, and some modifications might be desirable: art criticism does not simply use 'philosophy's arguments and ideas' (as if they belong in an almost contractually exclusive way to a circumscribed discipline called Philosophy) so much as use *philosophical arguments* and ideas (in which case, issues of proprietorship recede somewhat). And it is worth emphasising that to speak of a relation between art criticism and philosophy is not to presume co-dependency or interrelation per se; it is not churlish or paranoid to suspect that art criticism is typically more interested in philosophy than philosophy is in criticism—with strong notable exceptions, of course.

At first blush, it might appear that Moonie rather short-circuits or marginalises discussion of art criticism's relation to philosophy. Early in the book, he writes:

. . . the difficulty . . . is that by delving into the cognate fields of philosophy and theory, one loses the specific texture of those critic's writings; that art critical writings are not mere instantiations of a generalised theory. . . . When we align critics with philosophy, we find ourselves in difficulty rather quickly, as these writers were not always applying theory in any systematic or coherent fashion.²⁴

Moonie is not wrong to proffer this claim, to my mind, and Michael Newman has performed a brilliant job in showing the complex relationship between art criticism and philosophy as a matter that haunts criticism from the outset.²⁵ And one suspects that when there is a strong proximity between art-critical judgment to philosophical specialism the consequence is overly cut-and-dried that, ultimately, becomes rather implausible to our experience.

Moreover, when philosophy is marshalled in art criticism, it generally is done so in a piecemeal and, perhaps, opportunistic register. Art criticism tends not to reproduce the rigor of philosophical exposition to the letter or obey any strict demarcations between philosophical systems or schools of thought. Krauss, for instance, throughout her career has been brilliantly adept in utilising both phenomenology *and* structuralism as interpretative tools; and her deployment of phenomenology is routinely in opposition to existentialism, two frameworks that are commonly linked intellectually and historically. Perhaps one of the corollaries of Moonie's remark—indeed, possibly amongst its motivations—is to shield art criticism from being judged according to protocols fundamental to philosophy in general. After all, the worry becomes that criticism would be denigrated as philosophically inconsistent, slapdash, or superficial—in other words, bad or pseudo-philosophy at best. Art criticism's tendency, moreover, to speak of 'theory' in preference to 'philosophy' is perhaps testament to its unwillingness to being caught and adjudged within the latter's domain. But arguably more fundamental is that art criticism, especially from the 1970s onwards, translated and relayed a constellation of French theories that specified themselves as theory rather than

²⁴ Moonie, *Art Criticism and Modernism in the United States*, 4.

²⁵ Michael Newman, 'The Specificity of Criticism and its Need for Philosophy' in Elkins and Newman, *The State of Art Criticism*, 29-60.

philosophy. Summarizing the distinction, Fredric Jameson proposes that philosophy is 'always haunted by the dream of some fool proof self-sufficient system' and theory is premised upon possessing 'no vested interests in as much as it never lays claim to an absolute system'.²⁶

All in all, then, there is much to agree with here and it crucially underscores the specificity of art criticism. Yet there remains the abiding sense that questions concerning art criticism's and philosophy's relationship ought not to be put aside too quickly. This becomes especially important when several of the art critics discussed are significantly invested in philosophy or, to say the least, select coordinates from philosophical discourse upon which they can map their own alignments with artworks. Annette Michelson raises this very issue in the January 1967 issue of *Artforum* when considering the *10x10* exhibition that showed at the Dwan Gallery during October 1966. Intrigued by the challenge that Minimalist artworks pose to art-critical activity and the integrity of one's experience, she remarks that *10x10* 'evokes two matters of central interest in the situation of art just now: a current crisis of criticism and the increasing inter-involvement of artistic and critical activity'.²⁷ Noting that several of the artists were producing critical writing of significant import more than tinged by philosophical interests, she argues overcoming that 'current crisis' — partly defined by an inability to comprehend Minimalism — involves admitting 'the increasingly urgent necessity of some conceptual or philosophical framework within which criticism can propose a comprehension of the dynamics of art history and of art making'.²⁸ Although she compliments formalism on the basis of its 'vigor and precision' alongside its 'respect for the integrity of the object', its dependency upon empiricism has made it rather slow to incorporate more speculative and conceptually-driven modes of thought. It is not that Michelson believes formalism to be incapable of philosophical speculation, but that criticism in the USA has largely not yet succeeded loosening its empiricist shackles and aligning formalism with philosophy. *10x10*, then, presents itself as an opportunity for engaging in what she calls 'honorable speculation' that will leave 'the critic free to come to terms with the object, itself, as "thing" or as that ambiguous phenomenon, "a thing of the mind"'.²⁹

Although Moonie does not mention this review, I have lingered upon it as a strong example of art criticism, prompted by art practices that challenge its protocols, finding it compulsory to utilize philosophy or conceptual frameworks. And it does so, on Michelson's account, partially because philosophy or conceptual frameworks are already operating within the art object, that it is a manifestation of "concrete reasonableness." However, it is worth observing the rather ambiguous

²⁶ Frederic Jameson, 'First Impressions', *London Review of Books*, 28:17, 7th September 2006. For more on this matter, see Kamini Vellodi's insightful essay charting art history's shifting relationship to philosophy and theory: 'On the Question of a Philosophical Art History: Philosophy, Theory and Thought' in *Journal of Art Historiography*, issue 27, December 2022.

²⁷ Annette Michelson, '10x10: "Concrete Reasonableness"' in *Artforum*, vol. 5, n. 5, January 1967, 31.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

inclusiveness of Michelson's references to "philosophy or conceptual frameworks." Does that designation distinguish between two separate modes of intellectual activity? If it does, then is "conceptual frameworks" an early appearance of what soon came to be popularly known as "theory"? Or, perhaps alternatively, by speaking of "philosophy or conceptual frameworks," is it Michelson's intention to create some wriggle room to preclude art and criticism being judged on the exactness of its philosophical articulation—in other words, art and criticism instantiate conceptual frameworks influenced by philosophy but not reducible to it and therefore not to be assessed by it. Whichever route we take in summarizing and adjudicating Michelson's arguments, it seems evident that the growing interrelation between art and critical judgment, on the one hand, and the felt need for philosophical/conceptual frameworks, on the other, may be characteristic of momentous transformations in mid-1960s art, but for all that it is not to be taken lightly or as unproblematic. Those interrelations are fundamental, but the nature and quality of those interrelations needs to be analysed carefully. Indeed, Michelson's lengthy, sometimes abstruse, but often brilliant 1969 catalogue essay 'Robert Morris—An Aesthetics of Transgression' is a thorough working through, and working out, of those interrelations.³⁰

The chapter on Leo Steinberg is especially crucial in respect of these issues. Although writing art criticism amounted to a rather surreptitious sideline for Steinberg, as Moonie comments, his essays and lectures on Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg alongside his self-understanding that experience is utterly central to any discursive account of art—whether it belong to his own historical conjuncture or past societies, such as the renaissance—is worth dealing with at some degree of length because it not only matters for Moonie's book but also weighs upon informed discussions apropos art criticism more generally. Moonie right emphasizes that close looking was absolutely crucial for Steinberg, the manner in which his perceptual experience of the artwork in all its specificity alloyed with the words relaying that experience. Yet caution must be exercised to prevent too strong an opposition between experience, on the one hand, and philosophy or theory (however firmly this is construed), on the other. In a passing remark, Moonie rather downplays Lisa Florman's suggestion that Steinberg's classic essay on Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. 1911)* was overdetermined by ideas borrowed from Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*.³¹ For Moonie, there is a risk of paying too much attention to Steinberg's knowledge of Nietzsche at the expense of missing the 'scrupulousness' through which he visually examines and interprets Picasso's

³⁰ Annette Michelson, 'Robert Morris—An Aesthetics of Transgression' (1969) reprinted in Julia Bryan-Wilson (ed.), *Robert Morris*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 2013, 7-49. Curiously, Moonie leaves this essay out of his discussion, preferring instead to discuss her writings on film in that period. There are pros and cons to that decision: it makes the chapter on Michelson something of an exception within the book and it neglects the formative role Minimalism had on art criticism at the time. But it does help to highlight and discuss a critic who has been somehow massively influential and under-discussed.

³¹ These issues are discussed in Lisa Florman, 'The Difference Experience Makes in 'The Philosophical Brothel'' in *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 85, n. 4, December 2003, 769-783.

painting as well as the sketches that preceded it. From my perspective it matters barely at all if Florman or Moonie is right here, and I'm in no position to adjudge the issue, but what is striking here is the supposition that there is a debate to be had at all.

While this does not quite pertain to Moonie's concerns, the worry undergirding this is that *something*—a philosophy, a theory, a method—rigidly imposes itself upon, and even overcomes, one's brute experience of the artwork; that, moreover, suggests an alien conceptual framework has been illegitimately thrust over that work. In other words, either or both artwork and the distinctiveness of one's experience have been mutually betrayed. But in casting an opposition between experience and philosophical accounting, one falls into danger of what Wilfred Sellars famously referred to the 'myth of the given', namely that the contents of our experience are apparent and objectively valid to ourselves prior to and irrespective of whatever cultural or intellectual frameworks we accede to.³² Such worries are comprehensible: indeed, Steinberg felt that Greenberg's formalism was less a concrete focus upon an artwork's particulars than the enforcement of an ossified and unyielding readymade system. Even though Steinberg sought to address this question more positively by asserting the validity of subjective experience in the manifestly considered interpretation of artworks, as Moonie discusses, an assertion that he took forth into his studies of Renaissance pieces, there nonetheless remains the impression that too much philosophy or theory can undermine the art object and our personal experience of its specificity.

The problem here, though, is that philosophy and discursivity has been assumed to be temporally *after* experience, thereby distinguishable and somehow otherwise from it. Assumptions of this type, and their interrogation, are far from new to philosophical accounting, in which case we should not perhaps get overly bogged-down by them in this review. Indeed, the issue of the relationship—whether phrased in terms of isomorphism or alternatively as a constitutive attachment—has been a perennial topic within art discourse, thereby excusing the point for not being belaboured.³³ But, for the sake of brevity, it's worth remarking in a hermeneutic quick-off-the-draw-way that what we take to be our basic pre-discursive experience of an artwork is always already formatively prejudiced by certain dispositions that are either already simply implicitly philosophical in nature or amenable to post-facto philosophical reflection. Mediation seems, from this perspective, inevitable; it would be difficult to construe experience and discursivity (or philosophy) as hard counterpoints.

It is worth, however, not taking Steinberg's resistance to Greenberg too much at his word on this issue. Part of Moonie's analysis here demonstrates that Steinberg's brilliant descriptions of specific artworks indicates a certain acceptance

³² Wilfred Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, introduction by Richard Rorty, supplement by Robert B. Brandon, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997.

³³ There are numerous sources to consult here. One of the fullest examinations is Whitney Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. For a helpful introduction, see Jason Gaiger, *Aesthetics and Painting*, London: Continuum, 2008.

of formalism that places him within the orbit of Greenberg and Fried, the former of the two of the critics he strenuously resisted by advocating for 'other criteria'. But Steinberg arguably less resisted formalism *per se* than Greenberg's frequent tendency to reify a particular mode of formalism into inflexible evaluative criteria. Greenberg, to be sure, was actually undecided on this matter overall, but the sense that he had a prewritten checklist through which winners and losers can be allotted their logical place within art history has much to do with the powerful resistance his criticism encountered from the 1960s onwards. We must be cautious, though, in assuming that his formalism ultimately muddled the apparently separate regions of experience and discursivity, enforcing the latter upon the former, insofar as such an assumption reiterates the presumption that experience and discursivity are crucially distinct.

Steinberg, of course, strongly disagreed with Greenberg's evaluative judgments. But he perhaps misrecognized the ground upon which that disagreement was sustained. Or, put another way, it is possibly us who risk instantiating such misrecognitions. After all, Steinberg's essay 'The Philosophical Brothel' derives much of its significance through inspection of the drawings Picasso made in preparation for *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*; formalism, if it is a component here, therefore exhibits itself through its careful refusal of the famous painting as a *singular object* given over absolutely to formal description and instead argues that those drawings—typically absent in our moment of viewing the canvas, unavailable, and thus deemed extrinsic—are contextually and experientially required. That emplacement of an artwork in a wider context of other artworks not immediately admitted as belonging to it is, obviously, hardly new; but it is interesting to remark here that it is very much what Greenberg does in his essay 'Collage'. Arguably, though, Steinberg is more reflexive when it comes to acknowledging the conjunction of experience (formalism) and a wider system of discursive, philosophical, and contextual issues, which partly accounts for why he would become a key figure for Rosalind Krauss.

On that score, it's pertinent that the opposition Moonie perceives amid Steinberg and Greenberg—an opposition Moonie credibly shows that is ultimately far from total—apparently extends more generally to an opposition between Steinberg and Fried. This is not altogether surprising: Greenberg was close to Fried in the early 1960s and some of the older critic's dogmatism, or reputation for it anyhow, rubbed off on him. And if there is no sign of the intellectual rift separating Fried and Krauss ever abating, then it is noticeable that Krauss has long considered Steinberg to be a crucial interlocutor. But here, again, it is productive to avoid presuming these battlelines to be hard-and-fast. As Moonie shows, Fried's early art criticism—and was Krauss'—was indebted to Greenberg's formalism, and Fried has often been understood as allied to that axis. Although Moonie only touches upon this, it should be emphasized that the publication of Fried's 'Art and Objecthood', in which he hotly contested the rise of Minimalism, also amounted to a repudiation of various tenets underpinning Greenberg's criticism. Through this partial decoupling of Fried and Greenberg, then, the usefulness and necessity of recasting the relationship between Fried and Steinberg into a less oppositional framework becomes visible.

Because of the historical scope of his book, Moonie does not analyse developments beyond the mid 1970s which suggest Steinberg and Fried entering into closer proximity with each other in light of the issues being discussed. That said, experience and discursivity, and the complexity of their interlacing was already a keynote issue of 'Art and Objecthood'. Abbreviating a complex discussion brutally: Fried is intensely sceptical of Minimalism's concerted dependence upon written explanatory discourses—the way it posits the cart of art criticism *before* the horse of art practice—but he is also unconvinced by Tony Smith's assertive invocation of a pseudo-sublime experience irreducible and even immune to any linguistic articulation. Put simply, the former devalues the importance of art criticism as an *accounting* of (the critic's) experience while the latter reduces experience to the ineffable, thereby seeking to render null and void any such accounting from the get-go. The two problems confronted by Fried vis-à-vis Minimalism, however, are arguably not squarely balanced. Minimalism's complex usage of art criticism, on the one hand, discloses in a back-handed manner the significance and necessity of art-critical discourse, but displaces that necessity from the critic to the artist. On the other hand, Smith's refusal of discursivity ('there's no way you can frame it') not only risks defining phenomenology as the non-linguistic but also rebuts art criticism *tout court*. The former situation is ultimately construable since it is apiece with the radical problematic that modernist art, because of its difficulty, requires theoretical glossing at some point and therefore *preserves* art criticism, albeit at the possible sacrifice or irrelevance of the art critic, whilst the latter undermines art criticism whether it be produced by the critic or artist.³⁴

These remarks have been longer than intended, but they seek to render two main points. Firstly, the point is that 'Art and Objecthood' constitutes a significant reflection upon the complexly altered position occupied by criticism in the 1960s; in that regard, it prefigures Craig Owens' important essay 'Earthwords' that examines the art object decentering itself through recourse to discursivity.³⁵ Crucially, it also prefigures and constitutes the territory covered by Moonie's book. Secondly, these remarks contend—and this is what Steinberg and Fried share—that experience is fundamentally *conjoint* with linguistic articulation, the finding of specific words that correspondingly describe and interpret what is placed in front of us. Moonie mentions that Steinberg emphasized the importance of language, selecting words with great care and precision so that everything said was meant. Similarly, part of Fried's rebuke of Smith's anecdote derives from his conviction that an experience

³⁴ The former issue is a theme examined by Stanley Cavell in his essay 'Music Discomposed' in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 180-212. A chief aspect of his discussion concerns experimental composers who undertake the written work of theorization and criticism as part of, or to explain, their practices. That, of course, is directly analogous to figures like Donald Judd and Robert Morris regularly publishing their writings as well as exhibiting their artworks. Cutting a long personal thought to a minimum, it is striking to me that Fried's preferred categorical nomination for Minimalism is 'Literalism', a word that obviously bears upon the *literal* but could also—and arguably should be—be heard in relation to the 'literary'.

³⁵ Craig Owens, 'Earthwords' (1979) reprinted in *Beyond Recognition*, ed. by Scott Tilman et al, Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1992, 40-51.

has not truly happened until it has been 'framed' in language, until words have been found. Art criticism, then, seemingly is not only a heightened and self-conscious recognition of the essential complicity between experience and language; it is also fundamental to the reception of the artwork, to its unfolding.

Moonie's partial resistance towards overemphasizing the philosophical frameworks occasionally deployed by art critics is justifiable in many respects, in that case. And, possibly ironically, it might be proposed that Steinberg and Fried implicitly perceive art criticism as a mode of Kantian aesthetic judgment. Such judgments, for Kant, are predicated on them being fundamentally *reflective* rather than *determinate* judgments.³⁶ That is to say, judgments that are carried out without relying upon pre-established concepts. Aesthetic/reflective judgment might be regarded as the invention or discovery of concepts and words adequate to the artwork, but there is also no telling whether those concepts and words would be adequate in advance of them being invented or discovered. Moreover, according to this broadly Kantian picture, it is in the sharing of our judgment with others that the adequacy of our judgment is tested. Experience thus becomes alloyed with experiment. Of course, this is to underscore the centrality of philosophy to art criticism whose relationship remains a major issue within Moonie's analysis. Yet what is decisive here is that we less understand philosophy as *preceding* art criticism or as a *methodology* that can serve it. And while philosophy is not necessarily the ground of art criticism, it certainly can emerge as its *consequence*.

As I have suggested all along, it is characteristic of the strongest modernist art criticism produced between the 1940s and early 1970s that it exerted powerful philosophical and reflexive effects. In that respect, that criticism in many ways prepared the ground for the theoretically inclined postmodern criticism that followed. While critics like Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens developed their sense of postmodernism by setting forth modernism as a robust contrast, and as a paradigm to be overcome, it is now clear enough how much they were indebted to their forerunners. Hal Foster, in his important essay 'The Crux of Minimalism' has convincingly shown that artists such as Robert Morris and Donald Judd during the mid-1960s were, in retrospect, the bridge between modern and postmodern art; that thought can also be extended by adding Minimalism was also the bridge spanning modernist and postmodernist criticism.³⁷ And the fact that many of the essays discussed by Moonie, all of which are at least half-a-century old, continue to serve

³⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 [1790]. Fried perhaps implicitly signals a certain interest in Kant, via Cavell, in the fifteenth footnote of 'Art and Objecthood'. Again speaking too briefly and perhaps rather gnomically, I am tempted to suggest that Cavell's philosophy is, essentially, a working through Kantian aesthetic judgment in light of Wittgenstein. That arguably holds true for Fried, in part, though I would be tempted to say that his conception of experience resonates with Hegel's more than Wittgenstein (even if Wittgenstein was an early reference point for Fried's criticism).

³⁷ Hal Foster, 'The Crux of Minimalism' reprinted in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: MIT Press, 1996, 35-68.

amply as a testimony of what serious art criticism can achieve, demonstrates why we need books such as *Art Criticism and Modernism in the United States*.

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