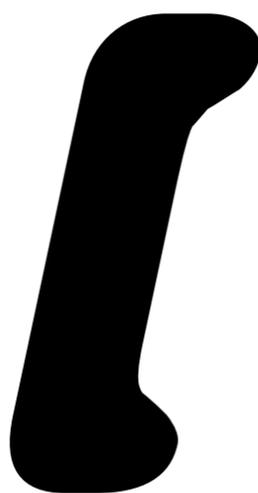


peter Suchin:

Aspects of Art Criticism



From February 1996 to the end of June 1997 I held the post of "Critic in Residence" in the visual arts department at the University of Northumbria, a temporary appointment related to the "1996 Year of the Visual Arts". The brief for the job, insofar as there was one, was to publish articles and reviews in relation to the Year: this much was clear. What wasn't in evidence, however, was any form of discussion within the department of what exactly it was that the role of a critic based in an art school might be.



Such an absence of discussion did not mean that no-one had any thoughts on the matter. On the contrary, presumptions as to what the critic should do or be were legion. Such commonsensical expectations were revealed in the manner in which artists, tutors and students (both within and outside the university) would casually but confidently ask if I would review their work or write a catalogue essay for them. There appeared to be two main ideas about the critic that were held by artists.

The first of these was that it was the critic's job to promote the artist, the former being considered as in some way subservient to the latter, existing only to support and validate their work. What never came up, unless I raised it myself, was that I might not share the artist's view that writing about their work should be one of my priorities. Nor did the realisation that if I did express an interest in writing something then the artist would have to accept that they had no control over what was actually written. To insist on being reviewed involved them taking of a risk, since I might, in writing, disagree with their account of what it was they felt they were doing or making. Furthermore, if I was critical of an artist's practice this might imply not that I didn't understand the work but that there were problems within the practice, as opposed to with my reading of it.

As for the matter of getting a review into print, artists frequently don't realise that it is magazine editors, and not critics, who decide what gets published.

Generally speaking, artists appear to consider critics as servants or attendants, an attitude alluded to in the title of Stuart Morgan's anthology 'What the Butler Saw'. Oscar Wilde's remark about the vanity of artists who "seem to imagine that the primary function of the critic is to chatter about their second-rate work" is also apposite.¹

The second stereotypical projection made by artists with respect to critics was exemplified for me when an artist involved in a group exhibition for which I had contributed a catalogue essay, uttered, upon being introduced to me, words to the effect of "oh, it's the enemy". Her remark was, I believe, intended as a joke. Nonetheless, this 'joke', uncluttered as it was by the kind of complexity I wish it had actually contained, indicated a certain way of thinking about critics, as people who are parasitic upon artists, and totally dependent upon them and (since critics supposedly know nothing about what they are writing or talking about), as generators of jargon or nonsense. A third implication of the "critic is the enemy" attitude is that visual artworks don't require any kind of textual appendage, because art is itself a "visual language". The artist is thereby someone who "speaks" through his or her visual work.

The cliché that language (in the conventional sense of that term) pollutes the allegedly rarefied air in which the fine artist dwells is a complicated, and I think insidious fantasy held by many producers and consumers of art. A number of things are usually implied when the expression "visual language" is used, including that art is a universally-legible means of communicating emotions, themselves supposedly readable across all cultural and social boundaries. Coupled to this is the belief that to think critically about works of art destroys their "magic". "Feeling", in such superficial conceptualisations, is thought to hold much more democratic franchise than "theory", as though intellectual activity was not an as explicitly human attribute as the experiencing of emotional states. The opening words of Terry Atkinson's "Phantoms of the Studio" are to the point with respect to this somewhat entrenched belief —

"No matter how much theory is disguised or repressed, there is no practice without theory. The theory that practice has nothing to do with theory is a theory, a disingenuous and naive one, but none the less a theory".²

For my own part, the position I begin from is that there is no such thing as an art practice which doesn't in some way or other involve language, in the ordinary sense of that term. Language is present at every level of the work's making and reception,

whether that of personal taste (“I really like that painting”), of the assigning of titles and other “supplementary” linguistic features, or of the acts of description and analysis carried out in magazines, catalogues, newspapers, television and radio programmes, as well as within scholarly journals and books. When artists talk with a dealer about the percentage of the sale price they think they should receive they use words, whether or not the artwork “speaks”, in their view, “for itself”.

There is always language somewhere in, around, or close to the visual work. One might even propose that it is a function of all “interesting” work that it generates language, such documentation and exchange becoming in effect part of the work’s meaning, “mentality” and field of influence. If a piece of work is sufficiently cohesive it will be able to survive any amount of criticism, remaining at the centre of even contradictory readings of its *modus operandi*. If the work is shallow and insubstantial it will easily be pulled to pieces by critique.

I have considered the attitudes frequently held by artists towards critics. I want now to present some examples of critical positions taken by those who write about artists and their work. There are four kinds of criticism to which I will give my attention here. The first of these might be described as prescriptive or dogmatic criticism. Two examples of well-known critics who might be placed within this category are Clement Greenberg and Peter Fuller.

Greenberg’s approach involved the promotion of specific values at the expense of other concerns, something which is of course inevitable but which was, in this critic’s case, rather extreme. Emphasising “truth to the medium” as a prime requisite for artistic practice, painters were encouraged to make work in which the flatness of the canvas or other support was made clearly apparent, any illusion or representation of three-dimensionality being strictly not the order of the day. A further form of evaluation in Greenberg’s critical project involved the question of “quality”, an attribute the supposed workings of which owed much to the aesthetic theories of the philosopher Immanuel Kant. In Greenberg’s transcription of Kant the existential, retinal-related experience of the sensuous surface of painting took precedence over the cognitive to an astonishingly severe degree.³

In the case of Peter Fuller, the focus fell upon a peculiarly reductive notion of “British” art, and upon practices said to embody universally legitimate subject matter. Fuller promoted “the haptic” and the expressive, calling up birth, death, pain, anxiety and love as the only proper referential content of art. His compressed “Marxist” cravings left no room for alternative accounts of practice or of the social function of art. Anything not complying with his paradigm was ignored or forced, by deliberate distortion, to fit this too-restrictive frame (the sensuous but simultaneously “cool” surfaces of Jasper Johns’ paintings, for example).

The word “prescriptive” is appropriate because these two critics “lay down the law” for future practice, as though to say art is “this” and “this”, and cannot be anything else. Not content with describing work already in existence, a stipulation of aesthetic propriety was made, cancelling diversity and “deviation” in advance of its possible appearance.

The writers associated with the American critical theory journal *October* – Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss, amongst others – represent a more overtly theorised form of critical practice than either Greenberg or Fuller. Their writings utilise a combination of Marxist, psychoanalytical and Post-Structuralist theories to assemble a kind of criticism which reflects, as part of its project, on its own nature as criticism, as well as working to debunk or rewrite mainstream art historical accounts.⁴

In his 1963 essay “What is Criticism?”, Roland Barthes noted that it was the job of criticism to not only examine a given aesthetic object but, simultaneously, to consider its own ideological position and limitations. This is the approach of the writers associated with *October*. Foster, has suggested that theory should be considered as a toolbox of possible methods of analysis, with individual “tools” being tested against the object under examination. Any pretence at objectivity is thus abandoned, the methodology deployed being openly presented.⁵

A third model of critical practice involves the critic taking a work of art as a point of departure for a virtually autonomous act of writing. Oscar Wilde proposed this position in “The Critic as Artist”, and a contemporary example of this manner of writing can be found, according to Thomas McEvelley, in the work of Stuart Morgan.⁶ Morgan does though keep in mind the artists he’s writing in relation to, not simply abandoning his initial “trigger” point, even if he manages to gather together a wide number of tangential threads.

Writing in 1980 in her obituary of Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag describes how Barthes had appeared to be able to take anything, object, book or image, and make of it an intelligently sensuous text —

“One felt that he could generate ideas about anything. Put him in front of a cigar box and he would have one, two, many ideas — a little essay. It was not a question of knowledge (he couldn’t have known much about some of the subjects he wrote about) but of alertness, a fastidious transcription of what could be thought about something, once it swam into the stream of attention.”⁷

Although normally described as a critic or commentator, Barthes, and others like him, shift the practice of the critic into another domain. As McEvelley suggests —

“Art criticism is really its own genre of literature, not exactly following the rules of any other. By its privileged position in between art, philosophy, philology, poetry, essay-writing, society, and other things, criticism is a specially versatile area in which an individual writer can mark out his or her turf in any number of ways.”⁸



The final kind of criticism I will refer to here is the case of artists as critics. Art practice is itself, it might be argued, a form of criticism, since each practice, each work could be said to carry within itself an implicit critique of previous works of art.⁹ Then there are those artists who have explicitly worked as critics — Laurie Anderson, Patrick Heron, Donald Judd and Adrian Searle are just a few examples.¹⁰

It is of course also the case that many artists, whilst not claiming to be “critics” as such, have produced substantial bodies of written work. Some well-known twentieth century examples are Duchamp, Malevich, Mondrian, Schwitters, Smithson and Stella, but there are many others.

If one considers the conceptual practices of the 1960s and 1970s, one sees yet again another variation on this theme, with groups of artists issuing their own small-scale (but often highly influential) publications. The Art & Language group published the first issue of *Art-Language* in 1969. There had been [many] precedents earlier in the century (e.g. *De Stijl*, *Dada*, and the *Surrealists*). Today, two of the best known artist-initiated publications are probably *Everything* magazine, based in London, and *Variant*, formed in Glasgow in the 1980s and still published there today.¹¹

I will close with a few brief remarks about the function — or functions — of the art critic. An important aspect of the critic’s job is explicatory (whether or not the audience is a lay or specialist one). It is also incumbent upon the critic to offer an analysis, or at least an informed discussion, of the work under consideration. Finding a means of doing these things may well necessitate the invention or adaptation of a vocabulary that is suited to the task at hand.

The critic may be either supportive of, or, literally, critical of a particular piece or body of work, but hopefully his or her comments will be in some way helpful to the artist. Roberta Smith, *The New York Times*’ senior visual arts critic proposes that the critic’s function might be viewed from another angle — “If you’re going to be a critic”, she says, “it’s very important to have that sense that you’re writing for viewers. You’re on the front line of the viewing audience. You’re a professional; your main job is to record your reactions as honestly as possible, not to be an advocate for artists.”¹² Such a stance is far removed from that of the artist who only looks to critics for that he or she might gain from their unswerving, blindly sympathetic attention.

notes

- 1 Stuart Morgan *What the Butler Saw*, Durian Publications, undated, but published in 1996. Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist” (1890), included in *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, G. F. Maine (Ed.), Collins, 194, p. 967
- 2 Terry Atkinson “Phantoms of the Studio”, *The Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1990, p. 49. The notion of visual language is also discussed in: Peter Suchin, “Visual Literacy: Notes on a Quaint Cliche”, *Muses*, Winter 1996 — 1997, and in Peter Suchin, “Literacy, criticism and fine art”, “Round Midnight 2” (supplement distributed with *Artists Newsletter*, December 1996)
- 3 I am aware that Greenberg’s work has been the subject of a radical reassessment in recent years. See Thierry de Duve, *Clement Greenberg Between the Lines*, *Dis Voir*, 1996
- 4 For an example of a work by Buchloh which offers an unconventional reading of the ideology of expression, see his “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression”, *October*, N. 16, Spring 1981.
- 5 Roland Barthes “What is Criticism?”, in Barthes, *Critical Essays*, Northwestern University Press, 1972. Barthes also writes perspicaciously about criticism in his “Blind and Dumb Criticism”, included in Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paladin, 1979, and in many other places throughout his voluminous writings. For Foster’s toolbox analogy see the opening pages of his *Recodings*, Bay Press, 1985, and also Billy Clark/Leigh French/Peter Suchin/Hall Foster, “Hall Foster Interview”, *Variant*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Summer 1997
- 6 Thomas McEvelley “Stuart Morgan: Earnest Wit”, in Morgan, *What the Butler Saw*
- 7 Susan Sontag “Remembering Barthes”, in Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, *Writers and Readers*, 1983, p. 169
- 8 Rthomas McEvelley op. cit., p. 14. For further observations on art criticism by this writer see Jay Murphy/Thomas McEvelley, “Interview with Thomas McEvelley”, *ArtPapers*, Vol. 20, No. 5, September/October 1996
- 9 T S Eliot has discussed this form of implicit criticism in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, included in Eliot, *Selected Prose*, Penguin, 1965
- 10 The present writer is both a critic and a painter
- 11 The catalogue for the exhibition *Life/Live*, *Musee d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris*, 1996 (2 vols) contains a section documenting current British art journals, a number of which are edited and produced by artists
- 12 Roberta Smith in Anne Barclay/Roberta Smith, “Interview with Roberta Smith”, *Art Papers*, Vol. 20, No. 4, July/August 1996, p. 18

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installation closeup

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