

Special Issue: 'Reconsidering the State(s) of Criticism'

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The 'crisis' of criticism has recurred intermittently since the late 1960s, in which we encounter challenges to supposed authority—or, even, to its very credibility. One might point more specifically to a succession of roundtables and symposia, such as Brandeis University's 'Art Criticism in the Sixties' (Rose et al. 1967), which featured contributions from *Artforum* critics Michael Fried, Max Kozloff, Barbara Rose, and Sidney Tillim (Rose et al. 1967). In 2002, *October* marked the anniversary of its 100th issue with a symposium: 'The Present Conditions of Criticism' (Baker et al. 2002). The 2008 anthology *The State of Criticism*, edited by James Elkins and Michael Newman, which initiated this Special Issue, was closely preceded by Raphael Rubinstein's *Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of their Practice* (Rubinstein 2007). Since then, there have been conferences in the United States, such as 'The Future of Art Criticism', held in Atlanta, Georgia in 2015; 'Superscript: arts journalism and criticism in the digital age' at the Walker Arts Centre in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2015; and in Europe, 'Judgment Practices in the Artistic Field', held in Lüneburg, Germany in 2017. The proliferation of these conferences not only suggests that arguments about criticism are ongoing, but also that there is a more complicated, underlying set of problems. A related debate may also be found in literary studies, where we might point to Paul de Man's 1967 essay 'The Crisis of Contemporary Criticism' (De Man 1983) as contemporaneous with the Brandeis symposium. More recently, the notion of 'post-criticism' has been proposed by scholars such as Felski (2015). Although this may appear to be a claim that criticism is no longer possible (or even desirable), Felski's argument pertains to debates in literary method: she advocates for 'surface reading' instead of 'digging' into the text in order to 'demystify' its latent meaning(s).

The example of Felski indicates one of the ways in which criticism is prone to misunderstanding, i.e., that one might conflate the specific debates on modes of reading and literary method with criticism of visual art, which has its own particular problems and histories. This is made more complicated still by criticism's multifarious nature, which lacks clear disciplinary boundaries. It has never occupied its own distinct academic field within universities, although the idea was proposed in the first Elkins and Newman roundtable (Elkins and Newman 2008, pp. 143–52). The earliest modern critics, such as Denis Diderot and, later, Charles Baudelaire and John Ruskin, were often poets, artists, or—in the case of Diderot and Ruskin—polymaths. If one were to compile an anthology of art criticism through the ages, it might include texts by artists, poets, philosophers, newspaper columnists, academic art historians and theorists—not to mention outraged members of the public writing letters to the editor. We might also include passages from literature: for example, Vermeer's *View of Delft* (1659–61), which features in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1871–1922). The critic Dave Hickey claimed, in the second Elkins and Newman roundtable, that an early historical record of criticism could include Quintillian, Seneca and Vitruvius, adding that his own forebears might include William Hazlitt and Thomas de Quincey (Elkins and Newman 2008, pp. 216–17). (In 2012, Hickey announced his 'retirement' from the art world, although he continues to write) (Gallagher and Helmore 2012). And if this were not complex enough, artists, too, might contribute to critical practice, as the contributions by Matthew Bowman and Alexander Gawronski claim in this issue.



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Perhaps the primary problem regarding criticism is the issue of judgment. As Elkins has not only referred to in his succinct *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Elkins 2003), but also in *The State of Criticism* in 2008, he likes to draw attention to a report from 2002 by Columbia University that showed a majority of art critics no longer regarded judgment as their primary motivation when writing criticism (Szántó 2002). Whatever we might extrapolate from those results, they speak to a broader sense that criticism no longer possesses authority; they also speak to a sense that a pluralistic tolerance predominates in contemporary art. However, this view assumes that the critic ought to be laying down the law, and the figure who comes to mind is usually Clement Greenberg. We must be careful not to align the crisis of criticism with nostalgia for Greenberg's perceived authority. And, as the 'crisis' of the 1960s demonstrated, shifts in the nature of artistic practice, allied with an increasing acknowledgement of the contingency of the category of art, rendered futile any attempt at firm and abiding standards: this was one of the reasons for the breakdown of 'high' modernist criticism. Despite this, critics may still offer judgments, and as Bowman has recently argued, it is not by any means evident that critics have given up on judgement altogether (Bowman 2021, p. 10). Indeed, it is a fallacy to assume that pluralism entails an absence of judgement. A good example might be the rock critic Robert Christgau, whose tastes, honed over fifty years of writing record reviews, are remarkably Catholic. Nonetheless, his dense, elliptical capsule reviews, written largely for the *Village Voice*, leave the reader in no doubt as to his views. In visual art, Lawrence Alloway, although a proponent of pluralism, could be withering in his estimation of artists.

One of the main factors behind the apparent turn against judgement is not simply a backlash against Greenberg, but the expansion of art and its increasing heterogeneity. The scale of the contemporary art world—its global reach, and the diversity of practices—exceeds the scope of any one critic to provide an overarching view. Diversity, however, has been characteristic throughout the modern period: ever since Hegel, in fact, when artworks proliferated in the commercial markets of the early 19th century. The writings of 20th century critics like Alloway and Arthur Danto, who are among the most notable proponents of pluralism, drew attention not merely to the fact that the contemporary art world was increasingly diverse, but also (Alloway especially) to the history of modernism itself as a phenomenon that is not monolithic. Diversity is not, however, an argument against criticism: not least because it rests upon a mistaken view that critics previously occupied a position of unassailable authority. The question around diversity is also deeply connected to the new voices that emerged in the 1960s. In this issue, Katy Deepwell argues that feminism remains a serious theoretical challenge to many assumptions around art criticism, where the loss of the 'authority' in question is heavily gendered. The challenge of diversity is also related to the art market, another factor that is often adduced as barrier to criticism's credibility. As Bowman and Gawronski explore here, the market—and, in particular, the form that it takes under our current 'Post-Fordist' conditions, which have prevailed in the West since the 1970s—tends to militate against any kind of negativity: or against disruption to the flow of goods and capital. Art criticism's relation to the market has always been one of contention, with critics' relationships with dealers and/or artists suggesting conflicts of interest. But the relationship cannot be reduced to criticism as a mere function of, or servant to, the market.

As contributors noted in the responses to Elkins' roundtables, there is a tendency for art historians to write of criticism's complicity as if they were themselves 'outside' of the market. For instance, Benjamin Buchloh claimed in 2002, with respect to art investment portfolios, that 'you don't need criticism for an investment structure, you need experts' (Baker et al. 2002, p. 202). However, as Lane Relyea has noted, academics often fail to recognise their own position when they admonish critics for dirtying their hands with the market: as if academia were not ruthlessly competitive (Elkins and Newman 2008, pp. 256–57). Furthermore—in the U.K. at least—since the 2012 Higher Education Bill, universities now operate in a market competing for students, while academics compete amongst each other for external research funding. Following Relyea, it is difficult to

sustain a clear distinction between art historians as ‘distanced’ and ‘objective’ against ‘compromised’ critics writing for magazines or for museum catalogues. Julian Stallabrass and András Szántó drew attention to this in the responses to Elkins’ seminars, noting that the alleged aversion to judgment amongst critics was shared by art historians, bringing the two into closer alignment than the art historians seemed to think (Elkins and Newman 2008, pp. 235–37, 334).

This relation between art criticism and art history was of especial concern, and as the post-roundtable assessments demonstrated, the relationship between art history and art criticism took on a particular slant during the discussions. It appeared that the primary concern of Elkins and several of his co-panellists was how art criticism might be incorporated or disciplined by art history. This point was made most pungently by Olu Oguibe, but also by Relyea and, to a lesser extent, by Kim Levin and Róisín Kennedy (Elkins and Newman 2008, pp. 255–59; 280–89; 325–27). Oguibe argued that criticism cannot and should not be institutionalised. Furthermore, he contended that at the heart of both roundtables was an anxiety about art history, which formed part of a broader legitimisation crisis in the humanities. Oguibe argued that the humanities display a need for ‘invented crises’, which he compared to the scandals of declining Royal houses eager to keep their public image favourable (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 288). Today’s academics in the UK, who recently went on strike over stagnant wages and proposed reductions in the value of their pensions, might bridle at comparisons with royalty. Furthermore, Oguibe also risks romanticising criticism as ‘outside’ the institutional structures of academia.

Similarly, Mark Bauerlein’s assessment drew attention to a grave lack of consensus regarding fundamental disciplinary questions. Whitney Davis had remarked in the first roundtable that ‘in art-historical contexts it is often unclear what the object of critical or historical analysis itself is’ (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 131). Bauerlein saw this fundamental problem with the object of study as sounding an alarm bell for the discipline of art history (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 309). Impatient with reiterations of ‘theory’ and ‘criticality’, Bauerlein regarded this as a tiresome impediment to the development of the field. After all, as he noted, Nietzsche’s main works were written one hundred and fifty years ago; Michel Foucault published *Les Mots et les Choses* in 1966: so why are scholars still beating themselves up about objectivity in 2008? One can sympathise with Bauerlein’s impatience: after all, wringing one’s hands and reiterating an ill-defined problem gets us nowhere. Bauerlein, however, fails to fully acknowledge the more subtle import of Davis’ remark: that for the art historian, the art object in its historical context is not always self-evident; it may require research simply in order to elucidate it. Similarly, in art criticism, we cannot take the art object for granted; in the modern era, we have learned that anything can be art: at least potentially. This makes the problem of identification more complex in art history than in Bauerlein’s field of literary studies. One may, following poststructuralism, argue that the category of ‘text’ may elide the boundaries between literature and other ‘lesser’ forms of textual production. But, for art historians and critics, the object in question might be a 180-foot priapic chalk man on the side of a field; Donatello’s Padua altar; or Rikrit Tirivaniya cooking a curry.

There is a further complication regarding criticism’s relation to history. Since the critic’s experiential encounter with a work of art takes place in the present, Newman proposes that ‘in the classic period of art criticism, the object is fundamentally not a historical object’ (Elkins and Newman 2008, pp. 215–16). This claim raises an issue from Newman’s complex essay published in the anthology, entitled ‘On the Specificity of Criticism and its Need for Philosophy’: this is the relation between criticism and critique. Newman’s essay testifies to the immense difficulty of attempting to intertwine them. Although the terms are often considered together, critique also refers to a particular tradition of German-speaking thought, including Fichte, Hegel, Kant, and Marx. How do we reconcile this discourse of stemming from the late 18th century—with its profound implications for aesthetics, epistemology and political theory—with the practice of artists in New York in the 1960s? The complexity of Newman’s essay stems from the fundamental difficulty of reconciling what

are, in effect, distinct practices and discourses that, nonetheless, share deeper historical roots. In this issue, Daniel Neofetu's essay also considers this relation between criticism and political critique.

Recalling Davis' earlier remark, Newman writes that the act of criticism lies in the moment when one is not sure what the object *is*: or, as Stephen Melville puts it, with reference to David Letterman, 'Is this anything'? (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 197). This uncertainty marks certain cardinal moments in the history of modernism where the viewer, who may be the artist, is unsure of what is being experienced. For instance, when Kazimir Malevich painted his *Black Square* (1915) or when Barnett Newman painted *Onement* (1948), both artists wondered over what they had done: they only belatedly came to recognise that what they had made could actually count as a painting (De Antonio 1973; Harrison 1993, p. 209). But despite the broader truth that we have already noted—that the artwork is contingent—we should not lose sight of the fact that Newman's remark points to a fairly small number of historically weighted moments: it cannot be said to stand for the majority of art experiences, in which we are usually aware that what we are experiencing is art.

Likewise, Darby English goes further, noting that:

If criticism can be said always to be a record of an artwork's provocations to thought, then perhaps it is at its best when it articulates such provocations in a way that retains rather than assimilates the elements of surprise and encounter that signify a rearrangement of mind . . . has occurred (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 277).

Whereas Newman refers to a moment of ontological uncertainty, English argues that the best criticism must make that very uncertainty a feature of the writing. This is laudable, but it sets a very high bar for what can be said to count as criticism. To use the terminology of the REF (The UK's 'Research Excellence Framework'), English implies 'four star' criticism, which the REF defines as 'world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour', possessing characteristics that may be 'outstandingly novel in developing concepts, paradigms, techniques or outcomes' (Research Excellence Framework REF, p. 44). Not all instances of criticism can reach those lofty heights. And, indeed, criticism that does a solid job of writing—neither agonising over the nature of the object, nor striving for intractable difficulty—constitutes the bulk of what we would call art criticism. What English's remarks indicate is that, in the same way that we might overvalue art—a legacy of thinkers such as Hegel and of 19th century aesthetes—we can also overvalue criticism by placing too heavy a weight on what we expect from it.

The above was not intended to be a comprehensive overview of the problems involved in art criticism, but rather a way of providing an account of some of the problems involved in thinking about art criticism and its current status. The aim of this Special Issue is not to provide the last word, but rather to open up the subject of criticism for further investigation.

Matthew Bowman's 'The Work of Art Criticism: Collaboration, Communication, Community' seeks to resituate art criticism not as a redundant appendage, but rather as a function situated in a more complex place between practice and theory: what he terms 'a dialogical space' between artist and critic (Bowman 2020, p. 3). In order to conceive of such a space, Bowman's concern is with criticism rather than critics as individuals. Bowman argues that criticism can take the form of artistic practice; it can take the form of artistic research or operate within the spaces of curatorial practice, where an exhibition might mount an 'argument' through its careful curation of objects. For Bowman, the place of criticism was displaced by the artistic changes of the 1960s: those that were theorised by the emergent group of writers based around the journal *October* in the late 1970s and early 1980s.¹ But those displacements were also wrought by the broader socio-economic changes of Post-Fordism theorised by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005). In this new, networked society, where resistance to, or judgment of, others means social death, the artworld and its operations come to mimic these operations with questions regarding the continued role

¹ Bowman has written of this elsewhere. See (Bowman 2015).

of critique. But, as Bowman argues, Kant's notion of the *sensus communis* undergirds the aesthetic and the cognate notion of the public sphere. This need not, as Bowman argues, entail 'a suppression of difference between social agents or the forcing of one viewpoint upon others' (Bowman 2020, p. 12). However much the notion of a coherent public has been displaced, Bowman argues that such a notion of community and its possibilities must be kept open for criticism and for society more broadly.

The notion of the public is also raised towards the close of Daniel Neofetu's 'Political Art Criticism and the Need for Theory'. Rather than despairing at the fragmentation of the contemporary public, criticism must call forth new publics by articulating relationships based upon 'somatic or affective assimilation' (Neofetu 2021, p. 13). This claim is built upon Theodore Adorno's essay 'Commitment': specifically, his argument for autonomous art, which, Adorno argued, in its very indifference to existing structures, evaded the problem of replicating those very structures, or worse, of offering a simple take-away 'message' (Adorno 2007, p. 189). Neofetu argues that Adorno's argument for the latent political valence of autonomous art finds its contemporary echo in criticism of political art practices such as the collective Forensic Architecture. As Neofetu argues, art criticism of this acclaimed collective is frequently framed in terms of its 'content': the graphs, data and other ways in which they compile damning dossiers and installations of various human rights abuses across the world. But, as Neofetu argues, this focus rarely raises the question of the efficacy of the way the work might function as art rather than as political activism, however worthy or however urgent that may be. Through recourse to Adorno, Neofetu argues for the continued pertinence of critical theory and opens up the complex question of what criticism that goes beyond a mere synoptic overview of Forensic Architecture's work might be like.

Alexander Gawronski's 'Art as Critique under Neoliberalism: Negativity Undoing Economic Naturalism' explores issues that dovetail with Bowman and Neofetu. As Gawronski argues at length, critique, whether conceived as such or as it operates within 'critical' art, has been subject to assault as a consequence of the hegemony of neoliberalism. Under such a regime, where contemporary art seems to be an endless 'now', unmoored from history, one strives to be 'liked', to cultivate the self and avail oneself of opportunities to advance one's career. In such a context, the 'negativity' of critique seems to be a drag. Artists, operating within a nexus of museums, galleries and other cultural institutions, cannot extricate themselves from this broader condition, often choosing instead to internalise neoliberalism's imperative of 'the entrepreneurialism of the self' (Foucault 2011). As Gawronski argues, even artists who adopt the language or aesthetics of this world often do so in a way that is ambivalent or simply exudes an 'aura' of critique. The way in which contemporary art is imbricated in the wider inequalities of financialised capitalism often renders redundant any such attempt at critique. Therefore, what are the opportunities for an art that aims to avoid complicity?

One possible alternative, Gawronski argues, is for a 'self-annulling' practice, a term derived from Giorgio Agamben (Gawronski 2021, p. 13). The term is applied to collectives such as *L'Isola della Arte*, who occupied a block of flats in Milan subject to gentrification; to Caleb Larsen's self-auctioning black cube; or to Núria Güell and Levi Orta's setting up of a tax haven for Catalan artists. More radical still, Gawronski argues for an art of 'un-doing' (Gawronski 2021, p. 19). This could take the form of an art strike, a withdrawal from the artworld's activities, or simply a 'refusal to do anything whatever at any time, all the time, out of competition and for fear of lost opportunities and an imagined diminishment of "status"' (Gawronski 2021, p. 23). In this sense, the artist finds an echo in Robert Smithson's proposition of 'an actor who refuses to act' (Smithson 1996, p. 336).

As Gawronski argues, however, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has seen the 'revenge of nature' upon the financialised world that we have frequently taken for granted as 'natural'. (Gawronski 2021, p. 3). Whether this irruption will entail the progressive change that many hoped would be the consequence of the 2007–08 financial crash remains to be seen, but as Gawronski argues, one might regard nature itself here as a critical disruptor

of the otherwise seamless flow of images and commodities that we take for granted as 'natural'.

Rowan Bailey's 'Cultural Ecology and Cultural Critique' expands upon the notion of 'ecology', which, according to Gawronski, acts as a 'disruptor'. Bailey argues that the notion of 'ecology' can be understood in more conciliatory terms and, furthermore, that the notion of 'ecology' is not limited to the 'natural', but in fact describes the ecosystem of culture itself, with its complex system of interconnected actors, places and institutions providing a basis for different ways to construe the constructions of, and approaches to, the notion of 'value'. Following John Holden's report, 'The Ecology of Culture' (Holden), Bailey argues that "'ecology" presents a mode of thinking in which neither the economic nor the noneconomic takes priority but concentrates rather on the negotiation between the two' (Bailey et al. 2019, p. 5). The notion of culture as 'ecology' is not, they argue, a mere description of existing conditions, but rather a proposal to develop 'conceptual formations which problematise and/or help to stage ways and means of articulating the entanglements within an ecology' (Bailey et al. 2019, p. 7). The term 'environing' is proposed as a term that might be able to do so. Drawing upon a range of anthropological and ecological discourse, the term seeks to suggest a way to theorise our entanglement with our surrounding environment, be it natural or technological. In particular, they refer to Jakob Johann von Uexküll's notion of *Umwelten*, which describes our dynamic interaction with our surrounding environment: a term that might resonate with thinkers such as Martin Heidegger or Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The possibilities of the term are explored in relation to four diverse examples: the public art project MACAO in Milan; T.J. Demos' research centre for Creative Ecologies; Jeremy Deller's documentary on British rave and acid house culture; and the 'Temporary Contemporary' project set up in Huddersfield in 2018. Each example offers a different way to consider the more wide-ranging ways in which 'environing' might enable us to better contextualise the conditions under which cultural judgements are made (Bailey et al. 2019, p. 17).

Katy Deepwell's 'Art Criticism and the State of Feminist Art Criticism' mounts the argument that feminism remains an aporia in much of the discourse around art criticism. As Deepwell argues, the very ways in which criticism's 'crisis' is framed tends to turn back to the same male figures, and even to imply that discourses such as feminism are part of the problem, disrupting the 'proper' model of modernist hegemony. This, she argues, is at the heart of the 'mourning for [the loss of] Modernist certainties' (Deepwell 2020, p. 3). As Deepwell also argues, discussion of criticism often treats it as a form of primary reflection that is later historicised by the more serious business of art history. But this is to overlook the shift of the 1960s—reflected upon earlier by Bowman—which challenged this division of labour with the emergence of artist-writers, such as Smithson, and of critic-historians, such as Rosalind Krauss and others at *Artforum*. However, as Deepwell argues, despite the burgeoning discourse of feminist criticism since the 1970s, it has made little impact upon broader discussions such as the Elkins and Newman anthology. Furthermore, when feminism is introduced, the same texts tend to be cited, such as those by Laura Mulvey and Linda Nochlin, with a tendency to flatten out their ideas and overlook their initial contexts. As Deepwell argues, feminism is not 'a lens that can be put on and taken off like a pair of glasses to see and understand the world in a specific, eccentric or marginal fashion' (Deepwell 2020, p. 12). Instead, it is a discourse that challenges the presuppositions of much of art criticism and art history, and is of importance to the day to day living of roughly half of the population. Furthermore, it has a pressing contemporary relevance, since the COVID-19 pandemic has not only disrupted the art world, but has also exacerbated existing inequalities regarding women's caring responsibilities, threatening to reverse much of the progress of the last few decades (Walter 2021). Finally, as Deepwell argues, feminism itself is not monolithic: it is a heterodox discourse that remains a challenge, and which has been inadequately acknowledged in the discourses of art history and art criticism.

Taken together, the essays in this Special Issue demonstrate in themselves the richness of the topic of art criticism, as well as the fact that our understanding of both its current

conditions, and of its historical manifestations, is by no means exhausted. In fact, the topic remains an underexplored field that merits further enquiry.

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