

After Criticism

New Responses to Art
and Performance

Edited by Gavin Butt



After Criticism

New Interventions in Art History

Series editor: Dana Arnold, *University of Southampton*

New Interventions in Art History is a series of textbook mini-companions – published in connection with the Association of Art Historians – that aims to provide innovative approaches to, and new perspectives on, the study of art history. Each volume focuses on a specific area of the discipline of art history – here used in the broadest sense to include painting, sculpture, architecture, graphic arts, and film – and aims to identify the key factors that have shaped the artistic phenomenon under scrutiny. Particular attention is paid to the social and political context and the historiography of the artistic cultures or movements under review. In this way, the essays that comprise each volume cohere around the central theme while providing insights into the broader problematics of a given historical moment.

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Notes on Contributors

Jane Blocker is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Art History at the University of Minnesota. Her research focuses on performance and its historiography, feminism, and art since 1970. She has published articles in *Camera Obscura*, *Cultural Studies*, and *Performing Arts Journal*. Her book on Cuban-American performance artist Ana Mendieta, called *Where is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile*, was published in 1999 by Duke University Press. She is also author of *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance Art* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

Gavin Butt teaches in the Unit of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He writes about performance and performativity in the visual arts, and queer theory, queer cultures and their histories. His book *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the American Art World 1948–1963* is forthcoming from Duke University Press.

Jennifer Doyle is an Assistant Professor at the University of California, Riverside. She is co-editor of *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, and is working on the manuscript for her first book *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire*. She is a scholar of American literature and visual culture, and teaches in the English department.

Matthew Goulish, performer and writer, has collaborated on the creation of eight performance works and several writing projects with the group Goat Island. Routledge published his *39 Microlectures – in Proximity of Performance* in 2000. He teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Kate Love is an artist/writer and Senior Lecturer in Historical and Theoretical Studies in Fine Art at Central St. Martins College of Art and Design in London. In 1999 she organized an international conference at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London entitled *Understanding Experience* and has published widely on the theme of experience in the contexts of art and literature.

José Esteban Muñoz is the author of *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minnesota University Press, 1999). He currently teaches Performance Studies at Tisch School of Art, New York University. He is also currently completing two books, tentatively titled “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity, Affect and Performance” and “Cruising Utopia: Performing Queer Futurity.” He is series editor of *Sexual Cultures: New Directions in Gay and Lesbian Studies* for NYU Press.

Niru Ratnam is gallery director of STORE and has written for a number of publications including *The Face*, *Arena Homme Plus*, *Art Monthly*, *frieze*, and *Third Text*.

Irit Rogoff holds a University Chair in Art History/Visual Culture at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Rogoff writes extensively on the conjunctions of contemporary art with critical theory with particular reference to issues of colonialism, cultural difference, and performativity. She is author of *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (2000), editor of *The Divided Heritage: Themes and Problems in German Modernism* (1991), and co-editor, with Daniel Sherman, of *Museum Culture: Histories, Theories, Spectacles* (1994). Rogoff is director of an international AHRB research project “Cross Cultural Contemporary Arts,” housed at Goldsmiths College.

Rebecca Schneider teaches performance studies at Brown University where she is Associate Professor and Head of the MA and Ph.D. programs in Theatre and Performance Studies. She is the author of *The Explicit Body in Performance* (Routledge, 1997), co-editor of *Re:Direction: A Theoretical and Practical Guide* (Routledge, 2001), and author of numerous essays.

John Seth is an artist/writer and Curriculum Leader for Fine Art at Middlesex University, London. Since 1993 Seth has worked with the artist Anne Tallentire in the collaborative project work-seth/tallentire. Their collaboration also provides a space from which they pursue individual projects

and interests. Seth's practice includes installation, performance, photography, video, and writing. Recent exhibitions by work-seth/tallentire include: *Yes, Let's Go* (2002) for the live art series *The Sum of the Parts* at the South London Gallery, *Manifesto* (2001) in the group exhibition *Preditor* at KX-Kampnagel, Hamburg, and *Dispersal* (2000), a commission for the Orchard Gallery, Derry, Northern Ireland.

Series Editor's Preface

New Interventions in Art History was established to provide a forum for innovative approaches to, and perspectives on, the study of art history in all its complexities. Here attention is focused on key developments that have taken place in the past decade in the work of selected art historians, performance studies scholars, writers on visual culture, artists, and art critics. *After Criticism* explores the blurring of the boundaries between theoretical interpretation and artistic practice in a bid to take seriously the consequences for a critical writing implicated within the space of the artwork itself. Many of the essays experiment with poetic, autobiographical, performative, and other writerly modes in the belief that the embodied conditions of interpretation are best explored through the production of novel narratives of viewer response rather than subsumed within already extant theoretical structures of interpretation.

This innovative and challenging approach offers new ways of thinking about the relationship between the bodily experience of art, whether understood in physical, social and/or psychic terms, and the production of critical narratives. Debate focuses on the consequences of immersion of the spectator within the space of the work and whether this prompts a dissolution of critical judgment or in fact encourages a productive opening out of critical subjectivity to its sensual, psychic, and embodied conditions. These issues are addressed in relation to a range of examples, including the creative activities of gallery visitors; of audience members at a performance event; and of the critic as he/she writes.

The chapters combine to form an original and provocative interrogation of how we think about and experience art. This book is, then, genuinely, a

prompt for future research and debate that will take contemporary art studies in new directions. As such the concerns of *After Criticism* are germane to *New Interventions* and this volume is a very pleasing addition to this series.

Dana Arnold
London, 2004

Introduction: The Paradoxes of Criticism

Gavin Butt

Recently it has become apparent that criticism is in trouble. Certain time-honored ideas about the role and form of criticism within culture – ones which have habitually and variously underwritten the practices of artists and critics for centuries – have been shaken by the shifting cultural priorities of a changing world. The unease around such ideas has been made manifest not by any sustained analysis or treatise on the state of criticism today, but rather through varying instances and registers which, taken together, might indicate more deep-seated changes in contemporary attitudes toward criticism – and to its place and importance within art and culture.

The voicing of such transformations in the critical field has come in part from well-established and respected art critics themselves. In a roundtable discussion published in 2002 in *October* – a magazine named in honor of revolutionary critique – criticism is taken to be both on the wane, and increasingly difficult to define.¹ Artists appear less and less interested, say a number of the contributors, in the kind of critical discourse developed in the pages of *October* magazine over the last quarter of a century or so, whilst other contributors suggest that the “crisis” of contemporary criticism would perhaps be better understood as residing in the competing claims made *for* it by differing generations of artists and writers. One of the most established figures involved in the discussion, however – Benjamin Buchloh – sees the problem as less bound up with the presumed failure of any consensus about what criticism is (if indeed there ever was one) but rather that the space for criticality of *any kind* has withered away in late twentieth-century capitalist culture. This he takes to be a direct consequence of the

encroachment of corporate power into the realm of avant-garde aesthetic production and display.² In the context of the co-option of radical art practice to the commodified logic of capitalism, witnessed by the burgeoning power of the corporate sponsor in international exhibitions and the synergistic relations between artists and businessmen – e.g. Matthew Barney meets Hugo Boss – Buchloh points to a scenario in which the very idea of criticism looks precariously drawn. For what of critical culture if it comes increasingly and narrowly to serve the interests of the market? What happens to the traditional image of the critic as arbiter of judgment as he or she is reduced to a mere consumer advocate – advising us only where, or even *whether*, to spend our money?

Such worries about the capitalist co-option of criticism and critical culture are echoed by the growing unease in the academy about the ossification of critical *theory*, particularly within the arts and humanities. Though we may scoff whilst reading the above at a generation of experienced authors bemoaning the unpopularity of their theoretical writings amongst younger artists and writers, we would do well, I think, to reflect upon the issue of “theory” in criticism on a much broader contemporary stage than that afforded us by the perspectives of a handful of art critics. Questions have recently begun to be asked beyond the pages of *October* – from literary studies to the emergent academic field of visual culture – about whether or not the theoretical register remains a fertile ground for opening up critical perspectives on art and culture or whether it, in itself, has become part of criticism’s dilemma, serving to delimit *what* can be said and *how* it is that one might say it.³ That the answers to such questions don’t appear to be so readily forthcoming only goes to underscore the degree to which we currently find ourselves in the midst of such a predicament: has art indeed *passed through* the moment of its encounter with theory, and should we be looking for novel, less overtly theoretical, ways of writing about it and producing it? Or are we simply struggling with the leaden baggage of one particular body of theoretical ideas as we await the liberatory emergence of something new?

Such questions have necessarily had an impact upon the ways in which artists and academics have begun to think of themselves, and their role as critics within society. For some cultural commentators the very Enlightenment idea of the critic as a discriminating authority on matters of art and culture is what has come to look increasingly problematic: a number of writers, including ones collected here in this volume, have come to question their role as specialized analysts of culture in favor of repositioning

academic inquiry as a kind of cultural participation in its own right. That is to say that the theorist, rather than being remote from that which he or she surveys, is – in the production of books, articles, conference papers, etc. – enmeshed in the very, perhaps even “creative,” production of the cultural fabric itself. Similarly some recent artists, like the much-hyped “Young British Artists” of the 1990s, have all but abandoned any idea of the artist as critical commentator in embracing a practice of making that celebrates the unassimilated vagaries and affects of individual subjective existence: all of this without feeling the need to somehow comment upon it from any avowedly “critical” vantage point.⁴ Taken together these examples signal the degree to which one of the key features of critical culture – critical distance – has come to look increasingly prone to collapse in recent years, as critics in their various professional guises have abandoned their claims to speak from any form of privileged or “authoritative” viewpoint.

Of course this, in many ways, is nothing new. The transcendental figure of the Enlightenment critic – one placed at a special remove from society, from the object of criticism – has had its obituary read before at the height of postmodernism in the 1980s. The traditional authority of the critic, and his special dispensation to discriminate in the name of universal human values, was gladly bidden goodbye by postmodernists concerned to pay heed to cultural difference: Marxists and feminists critiqued it as an ideological form of class and gender privilege whilst post-structuralists deconstructed it as logocentric fiction. In the wake of such critiques of criticism then, postmodernists – particularly of the post-structuralist persuasion – quickly set about abandoning any absolutist statements of judgment in favor of reading artistic and literary texts *deconstructively*: to reveal the ways in which power might be seen as working both within and against them. Thus the deconstructive critic – if indeed he or she could be understood as a critic at all⁵ – did not take up a position outside of the text (after all, “there is no outside to the text” as Jacques Derrida once famously remarked), but they *read it from within*, against the grain of any intended or apparent meaning. There was thus no critical “position” as such to occupy, no anterior vantage point set apart from criticism’s object from which the task of critique could be launched: the postmodernist critic found herself always already imbricated in the warp and weft of the cultural text.

But even though the collapse of critical distance has been entertained before in the postmodernism of the 1980s, I think the mode of unease with

criticism *today* is of a different order. It is, I feel, less rooted in a resistance to traditional forms of criticism – less a re-run of the 1980s – and more a skeptical approach to the heritage of criticism *left to us by postmodernism itself*. This is particularly evident if we consider further the problematic relationships between theory and criticism in the contemporary academy. When referring to “theory” in this shorthand manner we usually invoke a *mélange* of theoretical paradigms and perspectives which have now come to be dominant in the Western humanities: semiotics, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and post-structuralism. But the problem seems to arise when such hermeneutic tools – originally deployed to critique various forms of power and authority within cultural and artistic representations – have come to be credited with a kind of authority *of their own*. The final paradoxical twist comes about when a body of work renowned for its deconstruction of authorial value comes to be accredited with precisely such forms of authority. What does the undergraduate student do in order to substantiate his argument about, for example, the representation of masculinity in contemporary art? Answer: he cites the proper name Derrida (or similar), and the authority of his body (of work), in order to underwrite his analysis of masculinity’s rhetoric of “presence.” It is precisely in this way that post-structural theory (perhaps above all) has come to operate both as criticism’s chief discursive enabler whilst simultaneously marking its limit point: operating as an authorizing meta-discourse for contemporary critical maneuvers, whilst simultaneously working to constrain the production of new concepts and/or methods of critical procedure.

This, then, is the condition of theory as it becomes institutionalized within the postmodern academy. The routinization of certain theoretical maneuvers in critical work can, as the editors of the book *Post-Theory* (1999) put it rather bleakly, lead to a “sclerosis of theoretical writing, the hardening of [its] lexical and syntactic arteries. The words and phrases which are combined in over-familiar ways and thereby banalised, degraded, wielded like a fetish . . . in order to semaphore that ‘Theory’ is taking place are the surest sign that anything worthwhile *is not*.”⁶ That the “body” of theory invoked here is “diseased” suggests it is seen as being in danger of withering away, of no longer being capable of doing what was once presumed to be its life purpose. “We are perhaps at a stage,” the editors of *Post-Theory* go on, “where [theory’s] very pre-eminence has opened up real concerns about how it wants to proceed. . . . Theory has itself become doxa, the very state it set out to subvert.”⁷ This I find very

interesting and very germane to the problem of criticism as I want to characterize it here.

For criticism, understood in at least two of its guises, was always *paradoxical* in its mode of operation. Firstly, in the sense that it depended for its definition on departing from commonly understood beliefs and values. Even the unreconstructed figure of the modern disinterested critic – much derided by postmodernists – distinguished himself by seeking to pronounce on the (aesthetic) value of that which had hitherto not been recognized as such, either by other members of the intelligentsia or by society at large. That the modern critic's judgment of quality may have subsequently both transformed, and then passed into, a received set of values of a particular class or group within society – thereby *becoming doxa* – should not detract us from criticism's important role in initially striking out *from* it. Similarly, in thinking of social and political critique, it is clear that criticism's mode of operation can be viewed as paradoxical in the sense that it has sometimes proffered what, by the standards of received opinion, might count as absurd or even ridiculous propositions. One can imagine, for instance, how Marx and Engels' analysis of ideological consciousness may have struck some readers of *The German Ideology* as highly bizarre, particularly bearing in mind their assertion that the world as we know it in its everyday sense is not the "real" world at all, but a representation of it turned upside down "as in a camera-obscura".⁸

This book considers criticism, then, in a defining relation to the paradoxical. Not paradox as in the strict sense of being logically contradictory (though, as we shall see, in some cases it does indeed proceed by such conflictual maneuvers). Rather that criticism, in order that it *remain* criticism, of necessity has to situate itself *para* – against and/or beside – the *doxa* of received wisdom. Moreover, since it is postmodernist criticism itself, replete with its theoretical orthodoxies, which I take to be in danger of hardening into *doxa*, this book explores how criticism today may find itself turning away from some of the established procedures of critical practice *precisely in order that it remain critical*. That is, in order to continue to operate *critically*, criticism has to find a mode of working which frees it from the protocols of institutionalized forms of thought; a way which – returning to the disease metaphor momentarily – might prevent any further seizure, or even the eventual loss of its very life force.

This brings us to the vexed question of critical *agency* which resides at the heart of this project: from whence, then, does contemporary criticism derive its power and authority to speak? If we have dismissed the superior

sensitivity of the critic as an elitist fiction, and if criticism's theoretical resources risk turning into doxa, from where else might the critic draw his or her "right" to speak? Of course, one might imagine in this context the confident reassertion of the guiding agency of a pseudo-Kantian critical *intuition* in the face of the deadening hand of "sclerotic" theory. But I, for one, am not interested in such a reanimation here. Rather, what this book pursues are the ways in which we may rediscover criticism and its agency *within the very mode of critical address itself*. It is by focusing attention on the *performativity* of critical response, then, and the ways in which such responses might deviate from established modes of critical procedure, that this book seeks to consider a critical practice situated, paradoxically, *after* criticism (after, that is, a criticism deadened by the hand of capital and the academy).

In thinking about the importance of the critical encounter with the object, and the agency which we might (re)discover there, I want to borrow from the writing of Jacques Derrida in referring to the "paradoxical structure of [criticism's] condition of possibility." Paradoxical because it is constituted by the critic's desire to communicate and be understood within a consensus alongside a coterminous desire to frustrate conventional understandings and received wisdom. That is, it articulates the potential *failure* of communication as a necessary condition of the critical endeavor itself. Derrida writes in his *Politics of Friendship* (1997) of the paradoxical implication of a statement often attributed to Aristotle – "O my friends, there is no friend." For how can one address another as friend, if, indeed, there are none? It is here, in this address, that Derrida glimpses the necessity of remaining open to the irreconcilable confusions of communication, to the errors and misrecognitions that it opens up. In taking the amative relation as a model of the political relation here, Derrida writes of the desirable condition of remaining open to the possibilities of communicative failure in producing "a politics to come":

But we cannot, and we must not, exclude the fact that when someone teaches, publishes, preaches, orders, promises, prophesies, informs or communicates, some force in him or her is also striving *not to* be understood, approved, accepted in consensus – not immediately, not fully, and therefore not in the immediacy and plenitude of tomorrow, etc. . . . It is enough that the paradoxical structure of the condition of possibility be taken into account . . . for me to hope to be understood beyond all dialectics of misunderstanding, etc., the possibility of failure must, in addition, not be simply an accidental edge of the condition, but its haunting.⁹

Derrida goes on to write of the nature of the decision which is made in the context of such an undecidable, unpredictable mode of address. This decision, he writes, is one which cannot be taken as being authorized by an a priori theoretical schema, for that would be to rob it of that which *makes* it a “sovereign and free decision – in a word, of what makes it a decision, if there is one.” Thus the decision “must remain heterogenous to all knowledge as such, to all theoretical or reportive determination, even if it may and must be preceded by all possible science and conscience. The latter are unable to determine the leap of decision without transforming it into the irresponsible application of a programme.” And this is where the performativity, the indeterminacies and unpredictabilities of the singular *act* of address, comes to be important in the constitution of the social and (by extension) political relation:

At this point, practical performativity is irreducible to any theorem; this is why we have stressed the performative force . . . of a sentence which in any case, in addressing another, could not count on any assurance, any purely theoretical criterion of intelligibility or accord; it *could not* count on such assurance, but above all *it had to* and *desired not to want* to count on such an assurance, which would destroy in advance the possibility of addressing the other as such.¹⁰

Thus Derrida usefully alerts us to the ways in which the outcome of the performativity of the address to the other as a friend (“O my friend”) – speaking *to* a friend rather than simply, and reportively, speaking *of* one – is particular to the *event* of the address, the “each time one single time” of the address to the other.¹¹

In the context of this book’s concerns it should be clear that I am taking Derrida’s reflections upon intimate modes of address as instructive in thinking about the performativity of the critic’s address to his or her objects, and, in particular, in thinking about the *event-ness* of the critical encounter. It is to the critical event, then, rather than to other extant bodies of theory, that this book turns in order to revivify the practices of contemporary criticism.¹² The book therefore follows Michael Hardt’s and Antonio Negri’s calls for the recognition of an “immanent,” rather than a transcendent, mode of contemporary criticality: one that is to be apprehended within – and instanced as – the *performative act* of critical engagement itself.¹³ Whereas Hardt and Negri look to the world stage for such a model of critique – and find it in the agency of “the multitude,” a form of social and

political organization born of the global power relations in the contemporary world of “Empire” – this book offers a much more modest and localized focus for its deliberations. It is to the writings of contemporary artists and theorists to which this book looks; to their attempts to produce a kind of criticism responsive to the pressures and limits of the writerly *acts* which attend the field of contemporary art, ones which foreground the performative, and paradoxical, conditions of critical address.

Performance and the Performative: Criticism after the Theatrical Turn

The focus on the event of the critical encounter as outlined above is mirrored in what follows by the attention paid to the “theatricalization” of art practice since the 1950s and 1960s. Thus the book considers not only the performativity of the critical “speech act” per se, but also how this becomes increasingly legible in the context of the turn toward *performance* in the field of artistic practice of the past half-century or so. I will now briefly review the importance of ideas of both “performativity” and “performance” with a view to making this link between the two all the more apparent.

The emphasis on performance is adopted because the meanings of contemporary art have been transformed since the fifties and sixties by the rise of performance- and installation-oriented practices. From action painting to happenings and environments; from dance and performance art to pop events like Andy Warhol’s *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*; these two decades were responsible for ushering in what I want to call a “theatrical turn” in post-war art production, one which drew the object-based practices of modernist painting and sculpture into the spatio-temporal co-ordinates of the event. Various “intermedia” practices (to use Dick Higgins’ rather apt term) emerged as a result of the cross-pollination of ideas and practices between the traditional fine arts and the performing arts (alongside poetry and film to boot). Such art forms – including Yves Klein’s actions, Yvonne Rainer’s dance, and Ray Johnson’s correspondences – form the subject of essays within this book – as do the latter-day “intermedia” practices (if I can use this term somewhat anachronistically and inappropriately) of Gabriel Orozco, Shez 360, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Anne Tallentire, and Vaginal Davis, all of which testify to the book’s interest in the disciplinary hybridity of the contemporary field of art/performance.

But what interests me particularly in the context of this present study are the challenges that such artistic developments may be taken as posing to conventional modes of critical practice as we attend to them now in the early part of the twenty-first century.

In his famous attack on the theatrical qualities of late sixties art, Michael Fried allows us to glimpse the root of this challenge by describing theatrical art as one which “virtually by definition, includes the beholder.”¹⁴ Fried castigated the ways in which minimalist art, specifically, had turned its back on the sanctity of the modernist art object in favor of an installation of “literal” objects in the space of the gallery. This had the effect, Fried argued, of making the spectator fully aware of him or herself as a “live” participant in the actual site of the work, activating the spectator’s consciousness of the whole “scene” of exhibition and display. Thus the body of minimal art’s beholder was – supposedly unlike that of the spectator of modernist painting or sculpture – already *on stage*, implicated within the theatrical space of the work. Such work was “theatrical” precisely because it depended upon the presence of the spectator in order to be complete. “For theatre has an audience,” Fried writes, “it exists for one – in a way that other arts do not; in fact this more than anything else is what modernist sensibility finds intolerable in theatre generally.”¹⁵

It will doubtless be clear that I am not interested in following Fried in denouncing this theatrical turn. On the contrary, this book fully embraces such a turn and explores its ramifications for a criticism written from the perspective of a spectator immersed in the constructed environments of artistic spectacle. Whereas painting and sculpture have often been taken by modernist critics like Fried and Clement Greenberg as underwriting a view of aesthetic experience as integral to the art object – and therefore requiring a form of disinterested and disembodied critical appraisal – the theatrical turn taken by Western art since the 1960s has highlighted the experience of art as a profoundly *embodied* experience. For those who maintain that critical agency requires some kind of transcendental remove or distance from its object, such an immersion of the spectator within the space of the work has been seen as heralding a dissolution of the very conditions of critique. Another *October* elder, Rosalind Krauss, has written recently of an “international fashion of installation and intermedia work” which, she goes on, “essentially finds itself complicit with a globalisation of the image in the service of capital.”¹⁶ But rather than go with this line of thinking I want instead to concentrate on how such a model of spectatorship might encourage a long overdue, and productive, opening