CIRCA Contemporary art in Ireland

Issue 131, Part 2 • On Criticism: Responses

Our first purely online issue is now live. We selected a group of writers to tackle what is in effect Circa's core activity: **criticism and criticality**, and then we selected another group of writers to respond to that first group. The responses are here.

Sci-fi Décors have no Bookshelves

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"…What is the future of art criticism?" Circa asks me, alone online, its first time without paper. "Art criticism *in crisis*?" I say, "so common a claim, it's now a cliché." Indignant, I continue "…if artists show, I respond, and you publish; then it exists…" "But what of its future?" Circa goes silent.

Perhaps this should start as a general enquiry on the quality of contemporary art criticism. Virginia Woolf once observed a divide in literary criticism, "the critic… dealt with the past and with principles; the reviewer took the measure of new books as they fell from the press."[1] The distinction is time-based; critics spent honest time reflecting, reviewers ceaselessly produced ill-conceived and 'irresponsible' copy, serving mainly to boost or foil the novel's commercial success. Contemporary art critics who respond to the clock of fast-paced publishing are perpetually thrown between these two stools, pitching the work's art-historical precedents against its contemporaneity, often as the paint is drying, and when any broader context is not immediately clear. And, that is before published art criticism feeds, by association with its subject, into the market (in A. Warhol's words, "I don't read reviews, I weigh them."). Critiquing contemporary work is a risky business. But surely this voice, however off-pitch, remains an important cohort to the artist and chronicle of the cultural context in which they produce? Perhaps one of the most important aspect of criticism is that, in a culture of cross-quotation and quasi-intellectual counter-pointing, contemporary evaluation exists in order feed its successor, itself to be overturned.

This could be instead an account of the evolving forms of art criticism, an opportunity to stand still and reflect upon them and what they reflect. However, we risk not ever writing fast enough to catch them, for critical form and style now evolve as swiftly as the artworks at which they aim. Over the last forty years, changing registers in art have challenged criticism, perhaps purposefully; from the increasing conceptualization of art, to the growing politicization of artistic intentions, to the strategic abstraction of the image, trends that have threatened to reduce criticism to flat description.[2] Despite this, channels of critical reflection have proliferated, criticism and curating becoming demanding and occasionally reductive bedfellows, and equally their respective (and interdependent) lexicons have grown. This might be understood as an environment not saturated but improved by a range of different styles, as illustrated by the multitude of critical voices and agendas in Circa's last issue, its first online.[3]

The diversification of these critical voices is not just a literary issue, it is economic and political. We work in a (post-?) post-Fordist economy where abstract intelligence is a major productive force and social capital is currency, but while the infrastructure may change, critical quality might not suffer. Before reminiscing alongside Matt Packer about the early *Artforum* era, I remain conscious that through the flood-lands of international art publishing, *I, now* have the option to write about art, and wonder how many female, Irish critics that period produced?[4] Claims that art criticism is in crisis are common, but perhaps few are little more than reader-boosting campaigns amid the '… but will you be here next week?…' culture of public media assassination. Clever marketeering by publishers or institutions promoting a saleable product, event or conference ask us this with relish and frequency. I have no clear prognosis for the future of art criticism, but perhaps suspicion can be productively redirected at those who confidently claim its weakness.

Figuratively speaking, to place art criticism close to crisis is essential. In 1980, Maurice Blanchot wrote the essay 'The Writing of the Disaster' where, by my interpretation, he amalgamated an analysis of a literary crisis (arguably, postmodernism) with the resolution of the crisis, by identifying writing as a disaster in its most positive sense. Like Blanchot's writing, art can be the disaster, an enormous, important, obliterating and potentially alleviating force that – however it manifests – is horrific precisely because it moves the bedrock of what we know, working through and beyond it. That art criticism is close to the disaster, to this crisis, is exactly where it should be. But instead of pondering the general or metaphoric potential of art criticism's crisis, is it more useful in this instance to extrapolate two different questions: what is the future of online art publishing, and what is the future of Circa?

Circa's online-only status was perhaps premature but it will not be alone for long: sci-fi décors have no bookshelves. And anyway, the most interesting current example of art publishing is not the magazines that exist in print and online, but online only. *E-flux Journal* was built on the foundations of its advertising mailing list, rather than amassing its mailing list from the strength of its journal. That said, it has now consolidated the familiarity of its brand into a following of many readers due to its editors' consistently commissioning high-quality, far-reaching criticism and by providing, rather than competing with, links to fifteen other popular international titles. Abandoning the notion that the Internet allows for the democratization and proliferation of news provision, readers are now even more dependent on familiar mediators as agents. Success, in the e-flux model, was achieved by promoting the title as visible and trustworthy, symbiotic qualities, and by using joined-up thinking about diversification and maximization of its resources (e-flux often produce public-facing live events and even started a New York public art library).

Circa cannot copy this model because it is starting in a different position, but in relinquishing some of the practicalities of printing and distributing paper copies, it has time to self-reflect; what is its critical agenda and scope? Which elements can remain and which might usefully change? Critically, Circa's copy has always been of high standard. But I disagree with Fite-Wassilak that user-generated content is the most

exciting prospect of its new online status, I think it might be the most destructive.[5] Circa should think seriously about space it offers users to generate uncensored comments, and the purpose of that space it offers it. That a website might be considered 'accessible' on the basis of providing word-bins to throw uncensored material in is too literal to really validate. Which is not to suggest that critics should be granted immunity, but that any counter-argument provoked by a reader might be more beneficially articulated in full, edited, and then published alongside and not below the criticism that has incited it. This is how art criticism regenerates itself and how new critical voices are given the confidence and support to emerge. That the editorial process be accessible is perhaps more important that the webpages themselves. Because here, now, projected onto a screen, with two open browsers with five competing tabs apiece and three and half rolling documents, there is even more Google-brained competition for every word and inch. And the webpage, Circa, is now your only home.

Which brings me to content. That Circa fosters native writing talent is long established and remains necessary but that it identifies and invites critical voices from elsewhere is now vitally important. Having had a largely rewarding stint as guest editor in 2009 alongside some four non-Irish collaborators, we were left both confused and redundant by Circa's significant bias to reviewing Irish art, however expansive that category might be. Sarah Tuck suggests that "it might be interesting to ask what an artist from Indonesia resident in Ireland would encounter in their first serious interview in an artists publication…" and in doing so "disrupting the axiomatics of the arts, art criticism and globalization."[6] However, surely this risks reducing art to reflectors of local politics and I would ask in return, why would this artist need to be in Ireland for their view to be relevant or interesting to a reader, Irish or otherwise? If Circa's critical focus is on contemporary art, rather than contemporary Ireland, then its commissioning and content should reflect that. And this might pay dividends, not only conceptually. Circa's paperlessness must be attributed in part to the downturn of the Irish economy. However, if Irish art does not depend on its native economy – being viewed, acquired and reviewed in an international system of exchange – why did the magazine? Fielding diverse critics, expanding the scope of coverage and clearly reevaluating the editorial line is something the magazine has to look forward to within this new format.

And when Circa addresses not only what makes it good, but what makes it contemporary, it might also use the techno-potentials of its new format to challenge itself as an ongoing and re-definable entity. It need not sacrifice on content to be a useful collaborator to organizations and agencies around the country whose ongoing endeavor is to support contemporary art, and make a significant critical exchange with readers everywhere, at home, abroad, online. And so, with optimism, perhaps the real answer to the question the magazine has asked me, is that Circa itself is the springboard on which the future of art criticism really depends.

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1. Virginia Woolf, 'Reviewing', first published in the Hogarth Sixpenny Pamphlet Series, November 1939, republished in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life, Selected Essays: Volume Two*, Penguin London, 1993.

2. George Baker suggests that criticism has failed to go beyond the mere cataloguing of these developments in search of a 'social explanation', because "the social forces subtending this shift have become increasingly unrepresentable." *October* 104, pp. 71 – 96.

3. For that reason, I cannot imagine the benefits of defining a style to guide Circa into the future, despite enjoying Declan Long's articulation of the 'affirmative mode', *Circa* 131, p. 8.

4. Matt Packer, *Critical Fantasies*, *Circa* 131, pp. 20 – 22.

5. Chris Fite-Wassilak, *The Hope for an Open Wound, Circa* 131, pp 13 – 15.

6. Sarah Tuck, *Art Criticism: Disrupting or Creating Consensus*, Circa 131, p. 16.

Not Utopia, just its possibility

Michaële Cutaya

"Whoever seizes the greatest unreality will shape the greatest reality"[1]

There is no art in Utopia. In the perfect society, everything and everyone are as they should be, in their appointed place: art and life have fused into one organic whole and there is no longer need for art as a separate activity – from Plato to Moore, utopists have generally been weary of art, as are totalitarian systems. In 1548 Titian painted a seated portrait of Charles V – the emperor on whose domains it was said, the sun never sets. His feet are resting on a bright red rug, an almost pure patch of red paint in an overall picture of subdued tones, drawing the eye like a magnet. All official painter that he might have been, what Titian really cared about was paint and his painting not so much reinforces the ruling emperor as opens up the possibility of a world where red rugs – or red paint – are more important.

If on nothing else, all the views on art criticism seem to agree that "the nature of criticism is as divergent as flora and fauna, or as chaotic as a field of weeds,"[2] as Sally O'Reilly puts it; that there are about as many ways to write about art as there are writers or, put slightly differently, as there are views on what art is / does, or is supposed to be / do. My personal favorite is that art makes us free. Something along Kant's line that the indeterminacy of the aesthetic experience frees us from necessity or, phrased by Rancière:

> From the very beginning, the autonomy of aesthetic experience was taken as the principle of a new form of collective life, precisely because it was a place where the usual hierarchies which framed everyday life were withdrawn.[3]

Now art criticism or art writing, while it partakes of its object's projected aim, does so with its own means, in parallel. In *Stanzas*, Giorgio Agamben drew attention to the first use of the term 'criticism': "when the term 'criticism' appears in the vocabulary of Western philosophy, it signifies rather inquiry at the limit of knowledge about precisely that which can be neither posed nor grasped."[4]

> Like all authentic quests, the quest of criticism consists not in discovering its object but in assuring the conditions of its inaccessibility.[5]

It echoes the ever elusive articulation between the art object and the written word: the "making visible" in Declan Long's text, to "induce," to "cajole the art object to speak" as Maria Fusco has it, the failure and inadequacy of words in Imelda Barnard's text. But this inadequacy is also acknowledged as the

richest potential of art writing when it abandons its claim of being an academic discipline as Pablo Lafuente in *Notes on Art Criticism as a Practice*, quoted in Barnard's text, pointed out. As practice, art writing reclaims its creative power and its capacity to unleash imaginations, as was developed by Bernardo Ortiz Campo in *Criticism and Experience*:

> Understood as an exercise that reclaims the role of imagination in the act of knowing, criticism is a creative process in itself. Its medium is language, as well as all the mediations that occur within it, the variety of media through which language flows. One could say, therefore, that criticism is a productive act. In other words, a transformation of reality.[6]

It is in the understanding of this act of transformation that we see that there is no such thing as a straightforward description, which could be separated from interpretation or argumentation. All writings on art are, at some level, a transformation, a production of the art object – of reality – the most apparently neutral all the more so as they are ideology presented as fact (any parallel with the current 'necessary' budget's adjustments is not coincidental). Art criticism, just as much as art, has to keep high its claim to imagination and potential to effect change. Even if it cannot ever know its object, it must keep trying, neither philosophy nor poetry:

> Yet. If criticism, insofar as it traces the limits of truth, offers a glance of "truth's homeland" like "an island nature has enclosed within immutable boundaries," it must also remain open to the fascination of the "wide and storm-tossed sea" that draws "the sailor incessantly toward adventures he knows not how to refuse yet may never bring to an end."[7]

That such adventures are still being embarked upon is all the more important when supposedly inevitable 'economic facts' are determining our collective fate and alternatives seem at an all time low. So that it may still be possible that red rugs – or is it red paint? – are more important than ruling emperors.

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[1] Robert Musil quoted by Giorgio Agamben in *Stanzas, Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. R.L. Martinez, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. XIX.

[2] Sally O'Reilly, 'On Criticism', *Art Monthly* 296, May 2006, p. 8.

[3] Jacques Rancière, 'From Politics to Aesthetics', *Paragraph*, Vol 28, March 2005, p. 21.

[4] Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas, Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. R.L. Martínez, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. XV.

[5] ibid., p. XVI.

[6] Bernardo Ortiz Campo, *Criticism and Experience*, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/115

[7] The Jena group quoted in Agamben, op. cit, p. XV.

Criticism and Criteria

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Why is art still important and why are some artworks more rewarding of our attention than others? An answer to these unwieldy questions would require the establishment of some criteria. What criteria for assessing the value of artworks, exhibitions and art writing are articulated by the present *Circa* texts? Most of the seven authors broadly agree that both art and art criticism operate best in a climate of openness and indeterminacy, where, for example, an irreducible obscurity proper to art objects – their fundamental resistance to being assimilated into language – becomes the spur to creative, affirmative, even elliptical forms of writing. Some examples: "Not quite knowing what the artwork is, or quite what words to use, enables a productive failure, precisely because there are no certainties, only possibilities" (Barnard, 27[1]); "Criticism is not a single thing, but merely a medium to encourage, engage and create a polyphony of conversations and an endlessly open debate" (Fite-Wassilak, 15); "Criticism can cajole objects to speak. But, we must be prepared to accept that these very same objects may only be able to answer us in riddles, and, furthermore that we must be prepared to approach them in riddling form in order to elicit the most sophisticated or productive responses" (Fusco, 25); "I am very taken with [George] Baker's extension of an 'affirmative' critical attitude through the envisioning of a space, liberated from long-standing responsibilities, of somewhat free(er) intellectual play and production." (Long, 8)

The etymological root of the word 'criticism' is the Greek *krinein*, from *krei-*, meaning sieve, distinguish or discriminate. Related words include 'crisis', possibly 'crime', and most obviously 'criteria'. The word 'criteria' – meaning principles or standards by which a thing is judged – is mentioned by only two of the seven authors (Long, 8 and Packer, 20), and the task of working through (or towards) a coherent set of criteria is not approached in any sustained way here (the word counts are, admittedly, restrictive). Nevertheless, the relatively consistent exhortation is to open out, augment, de-stratify, affirm. To varying degrees, I felt that these priorities tended to be more assumed than argued, perhaps more doxa than deliberateness. Indeed, even Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, perhaps *the* guiding theorists in the formation of such agendas, caution that "Staying stratified – organised, signified, subjected – is not the worst thing that can happen; the worst that can happen is if you throw the strata into demented or suicidal collapse, which brings them back down on us heavier than ever."[2]

Several of the authors explicitly champion a kind of writing about art that is grounded in and responsive to an open, attentive and generous engagement with artworks. The stress is on a sympathetic comportment which seeks to foster the potentials of the artwork, so that the writing travels alongside it or even operates in a parallel creative way (Maria Fusco's essay is particularly suggestive in this respect). This constitutes a kind of phenomenological approach: a bracketing of pre-given knowledge and attitudes to enable a richer and more direct apprehension of the thing itself. This kind of sustained encounter with artworks would then hopefully encourage more nuanced, lively, subtle and

accurate descriptions, which would in turn enable new ways of perceiving and understanding what's there, drawing it into the fabric of language and opening up the perceptual encounter in energizing ways. Indeed, the work of producing better descriptions would constitute a valuable corrective to the tendency of some art writing to leap-frog the object in its hurry to secure apparently higher stakes by appealing straight away to critical theory.

But is describing enough? Clearly an implicit value judgment is made by the choice of an editor and / or writer to focus upon one exhibition and not another. However, I would argue that the critic is not doing her job if she does not set the work with a framework of understanding beyond that suggested or prescribed by the object, artist or gallery alone. That does not mean the imposition of a hostile conceptual machinery to attack the object, but rather the placement of the work into a new constellation of meanings, relations and trajectories. That new set of relations might serve to enrich our appreciation of the art under discussion, but it might also radically problematize it, brushing it against the grain.

Another characteristic of a number of the *Circa* texts is that they tend not to register the pressure of history in a very powerful or explicit way. That is, the pressure that the past aspirations, achievements, failures and horizons of possibility of both art and art criticism might bring to bear on establishing a position regarding cultural production today. In connection with this, it is worth noting that there is a whole swathe of art exhibitions that seem marginal (at best) to the concerns of the *Circa* essays. That is, exhibitions and retrospectives that offer new ways of understanding major artists, movements or themes, historical or not; exhibitions for which a critic would need to do some homework, and for which the existing discursive context of the work is a vital presence. Some examples from New York's recent past are the Museum of Modern Art's *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art* from 1984, or the Guggenheim's 1979 retrospective of Joseph Beuys, or the 1992 Matisse retrospective, again at MoMA. Each of these shows received hostile but brilliant reviews, from Thomas McEvilley, Benjamin Buchloh and Lind Nochlin, respectively.[3] Each writer combined extraordinary historical insight with theoretical acumen, and each offered precise, provocative, and enabling assessments of these shows. Whatever position one may take with respect to their arguments, the expertise and conviction of these writers, as well as the coherence of their critical positions, is thrilling.

It might be worth outlining, very briefly, some of the most important critical models to have emerged since World War II. These constitute some available positions – sometimes seemingly mutually exclusive, and sometimes not – which have both a significant degree of remoteness from our moment, and also significant purchase.[4] Peter Bürger, in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), argued that the success of avant-garde art (embodied, for him, by Dada and Russian Constructivism) was wedded to the revolutionary transformation of the wider social and political spheres.[5] With the triumph of liberal capitalism in the post-War West, the avant-garde was set adrift, unanchored from such social movements to become an impotent simulacrum of these former projects, replaying their formal languages while abandoning the radical utopian agendas that provided their logic. Clement Greenberg's early writing was also characterised by a Marxian leaning, with his 1939 essay, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch,' being published in the Trotskyite journal *Partisan Review*.[6] Greenberg was later to

abandon the kind of dialectical thinking that drove this early work, but he maintained his fundamental criterion for judging the value of an artwork: aesthetic *quality*. It was crucial, for him, that the abstract paintings he championed could bear aesthetic comparison with the art of the recent past, and indeed with the Old Masters.[7]

A provocative challenge to Greenberg's model was delivered in 1965 by Donald Judd, when he insisted that "A work of art needs only to be interesting."[8] Interest over quality – the shift is significant, although surely there will also need to be criteria for what makes an artwork interesting (or not). Or one could adopt John Cage's radical de-hierarchization of aesthetic experience, whereby no qualitative discrimination is made between the world's expressions. For him, nothing is lost and everything is gained when all sounds are admitted as music.[9] Indeed, as is well known, during and after the 1960s powerful critiques of Modernist Formalism led to an extraordinary expansion of the domain of art's objects and spaces. An embrace of the Duchampian readymade, the found object, the combination of photography and text, and all manner of visual and semiotic material derived from the mass cultural sphere widened almost to infinity the kind of entity that could be considered a work of art. This of course posed profound problems for the establishment of criteria adequate to all these new art phenomena, and to the possible coherence of one's frame of reference when thinking about what it is that art can, might or should be doing.

What then of art's own 'area of competence' in the fallout from this situation? It is probably true that since the waning of Modernist paradigms, and the widespread crisis in Marxist aesthetics in the face of the rampant progress of liberal capitalism, more energy has (until recently, perhaps) gone into the dismantling of existing critical orthodoxies than into the task of re-imagining such models. Deleuze and Guattari have argued for art's specificity in its production of *affects*. Affects have to do with the intensity of the body's reaction, its capacity to affect and be affected by its encounters with the world. Artworks, 'blocs of sensation', are effective in both figuring and heightening the body's vivacity: aesthetics opposing the anaesthetic.[10] With very different priorities, Rosalind Krauss has since the late 1990s argued for the continuing relevance of the question of medium for contemporary art. Against the backdrop of the dominance of Installation, and working against the dissipative seepage of aesthetic experience into everyday life, a renewed concern with medium, she argues, enables the maintenance of a coherent set of (self-differing) conventions, which afford a necessary framework for understanding and judging present moves.[11] Nicolas Bourriaud's influential book *Relational Aesthetics* argued for an end to the revolutionary demands of utopian avant-garde projects.[12] Artworks would now be kinds of stagings for micro-topian interactions: occasions for open and friendly encounters between spectator-participants, whose activities when involved in the work would make up the work's content. Art is characterised here as a pocket within the social fabric in which a different system of interaction and communication is possible. Art as affective, de-territorialized affirmation; or as structured, mnemonic manoeuvre; or as interactive, interpersonal event-space. Clearly work in each mode would require different criteria by which it can be judged, but are they mutually exclusive, or is there room for them all?

Should the 'attitude' of art (and, indeed, art criticism) be affirmative or negative? Should the 'direction' of its gaze be self-reflexive, securing its own premisses and capacities, or explicitly angled onto the external world? I would argue that art operates usefully in both 'attitudes' and in both 'directions'. The relative emphasis must be a strategic (or perhaps tactical) question of 'dosage', worked out within the whole complexity of an ongoing practice in formation, and established according to where, when and with whom one is intervening. This means that one would need to bring different sets of criteria to bear upon different kinds of artistic contribution; but such criteria are still necessary in order to give the critic's work a purchase beyond the more banal, instrumentalized functions it performs at the service of art's publicity machine. Clearly accurate, suggestive and engaging descriptions of artworks are very helpful, especially given that most readers will not have seen the exhibition in question. But it is satisfying to also have that encounter with the exhibition set within broader frames of reference; how does it take a place within the articulated but mobile field of art and cultural production more generally? How appropriate is the comportment embodied by the work towards language, materials, the social world and psychic life? What kind of world-view does the exhibition figure, however latently or obliquely? And why this type of intervention now? How potent, compelling, intelligent or rich was the contribution: how well was it realised? Both historical awareness and a set of criteria, however precarious and incomplete, will help give substance to answers to these kinds of questions.

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1. Page numbers are taken from the PDF of the issue, which is downloadable here: http://recirca.com/issues/131/Issue 131.pdf

2. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, 1987), 161.

3. Thomas McEvilley, 'Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief: ''Primitivism' in 20th century art' at the Museum of Modern Art,' *Artforum* vol.23 (November 1984), 54-61; Benjamin Buchloh, 'Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol,' *Artforum*, vol.18 (January 1980), 35-43; Linda Nochlin, 'Matisse' and Its Other,' *Art in America* vol.81, no.5 (May 1993), 88-97 (for a brilliant lecture by Nochlin on her own practice as a critic, visit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7j1X7WEB47Qhttp://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7j1X7WEB47Q).

4. For an illuminating account of the present state of play, and of the philosophical foundations of aesthetic judgment, see Michael Newman, 'The Specificity of Criticism and its Need for Philosophy', in Michael Newman and James Elkins (eds.), *The State of Art Criticism* (New York, 2008), 29-60.

5. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minnesota, 1984).

6. Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch,' *Partisan Review*, 1939, vol.6, no.5 (Fall 1939), 34-49.

7. "You cannot legitimately want or hope for anything from art except quality. And you cannot lay down conditions for quality. However and wherever it turns up, you have to accept it. You have your prejudices, your leanings and inclinations, but you are under the obligation to recognize them as that and keep them from interfering." Clement Greenberg, 'Complaints of and Art Critic', *Artforum*, vol.6, no.2 (October 1967), in John O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol 4 (Chicago, 1993), 265-72.

8. Donald Judd, 'Specific Objects,' *Arts Yearbook*, 8, 1965, 74-82, reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900-1990* (Oxford and Malden, 1992), 813.

9. See John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Wesleyan, 1961).

10. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York, 1996), and Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (New York and London, 2003).

11. See, for example, Rosalind Krauss, 'Re-Inventing the Medium', *Critical Inquiry*, vol.25 (Winter 1999), 289-305, and 'The Rock: William Kentridge's Drawings for Projection' *October* vol.92 (Spring 2000), 3-35.

12. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris, 1998).

Criticism?

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So what should art criticism be, what should it do, and what does it mean to be purely online? (Peter FitzGerald)

I have been turning the above question over and over in my mind for some weeks now. In considering why it's such a ball of string I've come to the conclusion that it's because at its nub is the desire to redefine an eighteenth-century concept – that of the 'critic' and 'criticism' – within the conditions of twenty-first-century life. This is not to say that these terms have not been in popular usage since then, but simply that the origin of the idea stems from and is indexical of a very specific way of thinking about the world, which is typical of eighteenth-century Enlightenment Europe. Though to think about art criticism, one must first think about art. Just as each artist, through their work, has made propositions on what art might be, so too has each writer of art criticism made implicit suggestions through their writing about the purpose and scope of criticism. Here and now, a decade into the beginning of the twenty-first century, we find ourselves explicitly having to wrestle with this question of the form, function and purpose of art criticism. Though, since art criticism cannot exist without art, is it not worth giving some consideration to the question of the significance of art in the current climate?

Since the financial downturn the arts have took a good kick in the bollocks. For those who depend on the creative industries for their livelihood, this has been disastrous and has led to much decrying of government policy. Against these cuts I have heard several arguments repeated again and again. At the root of these arguments is an overly romanticised conception of what art is and its power to affect society. At its worst and most extreme the argument goes something like this: art is as old as the hills and without art society will somehow be unable to survive. There is an implicit sense that without art society will lose its moral compass and descend into another age of darkness. However, such arguments lack rigour. Art as we understand it today, just like art criticism, really is no older than the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. How did society survive before this? When people say that art is as old as the hills, what they mean is that *creativity* is as old as the hills. Art is the categorical commoditisation of creativity, one that impedes untrained individuals from availing of the currency of their artistic outpourings. Stewart Home made an interesting comment on this subject, which is worth considering here. He stated:

Rather than having universal validity, art is a process that occurs within bourgeois society, one which leads to an irrational reverence for activities which suit bourgeois needs. This process posits the

objective superiority of those things singled out as art, and, thereby, the superiority of the form of life which celebrates them, and the social group which is implicated. This boils down to an assertion that bourgeois society, and the ruling class within it, is somehow committed to a superior form of knowledge.[1]

Essentially Home is saying that the production of art, far from being some innate function of humanity, is essentially a mechanism of bourgeois society that supports and bolsters bourgeois society's sense of itself. Thus, far from being an essential feature of society, it is nothing more than window dressing: the steam above the factory, and not the spanner in the works some of the more romantic among us might envision it as. One could even go further than Home has. One could argue that the function of art in western capitalist society is to transform wealth into prestige. Art is not simply there to dress the windows but to provide an alibi for humanity's pathologies and endless bloody mindedness. As an accumulative material history the ideological and material discourses of art give the illusion that despite all the Machiavellian games of state, wars and atrocities against human rights that there is perhaps something truly transcendent in humanity that somehow justifies our existence and, somehow, makes all these terrible things forgivable. For how could we possibly make sense of the terrible emotional and ideological complexities of things such as war without these things first entering into a symbolic system of representation in which they can be suspended so that we may extrapolate some sense of meaning, albeit romantic, melancholic, heroic or otherwise?

Then again maybe this view is too extreme. In considering both arguments I would have to say that to fully appreciate the difficulty of the question of the contemporary significance of art, one must consider that, far from being some kind of transcendent social consciousness, art is in fact more of a social reflex, i.e., something produced in negotiation of the socio-economic conditions in which artists find themselves. Therefore the most significant artworks are those that give us the most insight into the human condition, not because they reveal some hidden ontological truth, but because they correctly ascertain and articulate the socio-economic, cultural and ideological conditions surrounding their creation. It therefore follows that good art criticism is that which elucidates and explores the presence of these conditions within an artwork without robbing the viewer of the pleasure of experiencing the artwork or their own personal conception of it.

While the above may be as true of both art and art criticism in the eighteenth century as it is today, it is also true to say that today's art audiences are less appreciative of didacticism. Indeed, it is fair to say of twenty-first-century western society in general that people are suspicious of authority and even more so of those who claim to possess it. Thus today the tone of art criticism – at least the kind I enjoy reading – is perhaps closer to that of conversation than that of the academic lecture theatre. Perhaps this has not come about by chance either. Perhaps this shift is indicative of a wider social shift in how we relate and communicate, for art criticism is part of the wider socio-economic system of the art market, which in turn is part of the wider global marketplace. Thus art and art criticism, as filthy as it may be of me to say it, are industries. To expand on this matter, it is worth looking slightly outside the field of art. In 1999, as the dotcom bubble was swelling, a text appeared, first online and then in book format, that

changed how businesses thought about the relationship between themselves and their customers. The text of course was the Cluetrain manifesto that declared in its subtitle "the end of business as usual."[2]

Cluetrain could be boiled down to a series of some ninety-five points that the authors believed would shape businesses of the future. They believed that bringing about the reshaping of business were the effects of the Internet upon how people communicate and relate to one and other. At the heart of Cluetrain was a very simple idea: markets are not made up of demographic sectors but rather of human beings. The essential nature of the market is that of a conversation and not a sales pitch. Companies had to learn to speak in a natural, honest and most importantly human voice, instead of their corporate rhetoric. They also had to learn how to listen to the consumer. The authors of Cluetrain believed that the businesses that understood this and their other related arguments would survive and profit from the internet boom, while those that did not would perish. Apocalyptic stuff: but not without a thread of truth running through it.

Cluetrain, whose authors were a group of software and IT specialists, sensed a wider cultural shift in how people were relating to and communicating with each other thanks to the growing proliferation of networked communication technologies. The same changes were discussed several years earlier, though to quite different ends by contemporary philosophers such as Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard. In art the idea of markets as conversations could also arguably be said to have manifested through the rise of relational aesthetics (a term reportedly first used in 1996) and the popularisation of the notion of dialogics as opposed to dialectics as a mode of relational analysis. In short, Cluetrain spotted something that was much bigger than the field of computers and business, which its authors were operating in – though it articulated these conditions in such a way that business professionals could understand and utilize them. Today, one need only look at the style and tone of advertising campaigns such as those by the Innocent smoothie company, for both an understanding and a confirmation of the effects of Cluetrain.

Although slightly dated, some of Cluetrain's original observations hold good, especially when it comes to the subject of art and art criticism. Just as audiences no longer want art that preaches at them or speaks as though it is the repository of some hidden knowledge, neither do they want an art criticism that preaches authority and leaves no room for the viewer's own experience. People want the option to join in the conversation. The Internet lends itself well to this. Just compare the length of any good online article on any major newspaper's site, to the length of its comments feed. People want to talk. Though, if Cluetrain is right, if markets are conversations, then what makes the position of the art critic tenable? Why is their voice more significant than those of other audience members?

To this we might return again to the concept that within the western system of capitalism the function of art is to turn wealth into prestige. To this we can add that both art and the language in which it is discussed are a kind of cultural capital, and capital, as Pierre Bourdieu pointed out in his 1986 text 'The Forms of Capital', is "accumulated labour."[3] Hence the value of the critic comes not only from the significance of their opinion but also from the fact that they have been doing what they have been

doing for a long time. Their writings are weighted with the value of their previous utterances. It therefore follows that the work of those critics who are most widely publicised and who have been writing the longest carries the most currency as social capital. That said, this does not necessarily make their writing the most valuable or insightful in terms of rigour or fact.

This issue of value and cultural capital raises another problem, for there exists an abundance of speech in contemporary western society. Indeed it is my contention that while the problem of the former eastern block was the right to speak freely, the problem of the West is the right to be properly heard. To try and frame this up in more concrete terms: there exists an abundance – perhaps even a surplus – of conversation about art in western society. How do we distinguish what is of value from what is not? For speech, especially quotes culled from philosophers and theorists, has become a kind of currency which, detached from the context of their original historical utterance, has become ambiguous comments aimed at all things in general and has therefore ultimately lost its value. Anyone who has ever had the pleasure – and I use that word broadly – of being party to the musings of a 'thinker in residence' at an art event may well know what I'm talking about. Then again I may just have been unfortunate in my experiences of such things.

It would therefore seem apparent that to address the questions of "what should art criticism be, what should it do, and what does it mean to be purely online?" one must consider the social, cultural and economic position we find ourselves in. For just as the form and function of art is affected by these things, so too is the form and function of commentary upon it. The largest single factor affecting the production of art at the moment is the economic climate we are operating within. In considering, I find myself reflecting on Suzanne van der Lingen's comments in her text 'Critical Masses: Towards a New Medium for Art Criticism' – particularly her statement that "With advances in technology and cutbacks in finances, change is a given…While this transformation is immense, it is not isolated; it is representative of a paradigmatic shift in the relationship between the economy, technology and culture."[4] While I find myself in agreement with her observation that we are in the midst of a time of great change, I do not find myself agreeing with the notion that this shift is paradigmatic. It is not the underlying conditions supporting the relationship between economy, technology and culture that is shifting but simply the configuration of the relationship between these things. Thus, while the current situation may be chaotic, the means by which we derive and negotiate value and capital remain the same. It is only the mechanisms of distribution and prioritisation that are shifting. Thus, I would argue that we are not undergoing a fundamental change in our approach or underlying assumptions. Rather we might more aptly, with an eye to history, recognize the current situation as a political shift to the right. But what does a shift to the right mean for artists and the criticism of art?

Aside from the financial changes that are already underway, one would imagine the popularisation of the kinds of arguments against art that I – devil's advocate that I am – tabled at the beginning of this text, i.e., that society can survive fine without art and that art is a superfluous activity. I can also imagine – not least because art is a soft target – more hostility towards art and artists from the working and middle classes, since funded art will be seen as both an unnecessary waste of time and a luxury.

This doesn't bode well for artists or critics. Thus the questions asked at the beginning of this text seem to take on a new relevance, as do some of the areas I've covered herein.

In closing it is perhaps worth my time stating a position on the opening question of: "what should art criticism be, what should it do, and what does it mean to be purely online?" To my mind, the role of art criticism is to initiate a conversation between the critic and the audience regarding the socio-economic, cultural and ideological conditions that gave rise to a given artwork and the experience of it. Given the current climate, I think the critic has a certain responsibility to open up discussions around forms of visibility and forms of capital in relation to art. Also, I feel critics have a responsibility to argue on behalf of art in terms of its social value. Being online is a perfect space for this communication, thanks to the way in which the Internet embraces and supports asynchronous dialogues. The Internet offers a set of possibilities that are not available through conventional printed media. In times such as these, where society is swaying dangerously to the right and the risk of social alienation is high, the Internet offers a means of consolidating communities through dialogue, exchange and self-organisation. Its production costs are comparatively cheap and its generative potential is great.

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1. Stewart Home, *The Assault on Culture*, 1988, p. 43

2. http://www.cluetrain.com/

3. http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/bourdieu-forms-capital.htm; site accessed 18 November 2010

4. http://www.recirca.com/cgi-bin/mysql/show_item.cgi?post_id=5265&type=Issue131&ps=publish – site accessed 18.11.10

Re: Circulation (An invitation…)

Chris Clarke is a critic and curator of education and collections at Lewis Glucksman Gallery, University College Cork, Ireland

Dear all,

I've been invited to respond to Circa magazine's recent issue on Criticism and Criticality and, as a result, I'm interested in addressing the implications of the online forum as a space for producing and distributing art writing.

Working from Suzanne van der Lingen's essay 'Critical Masses' in Circa issue 131, I would prefer to initiate a discussion about this shift into online publishing (through this invitation to yourselves as artists, curators and critics), employing the inherently discursive properties of the internet as opposed to a static, lecture-based essay (downloadable as a PDF to boot!).

Incidentally, Circa's re-establishment as an online journal, while utilising some of the rhetoric of openness and 'freedom' that accompanies such transitions, also disguises the financial circumstances that made such a move necessary.

I'm intrigued as to how this change in medium affects critical writing from the point of view of the writer, how one takes on (or disavows) the potentiality of the internet as a space for engagement, what difficulties may arise and how such a development might affect criticism as a whole.

With this is mind, I would be very appreciative to hear your thoughts on the subject and to open the space of Circa's online journal to a plurality of perspectives. Your responses will be printed in the finished (if that's the right term) text and open to the comments page from its wider readership.

Thanking you in advance and hoping to hear from you soon!

Best,

Chris Clarke

(Sent via Facebook, 6 November 2010)

Ohad Ben Shimon:

I would like to respond to the questions and issues at hand by referring to a conceptual framework of artistic practices that became prevalent in Israel during the 1960s and continued into the '70s, '80s and early '90s. This conceptual framework may be compared to minimalist and post-minimalist practices in 'the West' but its local character had a lot to do with economic, political and religious power relations, that I believe stemmed from a desire to engage in a process of material lack and not from a kind of anti-surplus or anti-excess approach as a reactive tool.

In direct translation, the term for this conceptual framework would be 'Paucity of Material'. The main 'agenda' of the framework and the artists involved in it was to bring under questioning and into a skeptical dialogue the mythical constructions of institutional zionism and the kind of double-bind nature of capitalism, art and politics in the local setting of the Middle East. Whether or not the roots of this framework can be traced as originating from a certain source does not interest me. What does interest me is the mode of production and the implications such a framework had to work through in order to become visible and in a sense constitute an interesting, sensitive and inspiring discourse.

The reason I start with this kind of chronological genealogy is to remind myself, and perhaps potential readers of this article, that by no means reductions or cuts in art funds and grants will ever be able to entirely diminish the range of artistic practices, thinking processes and modes of exchange that are already constituted widely in different, more or less open circles and structures, wherever the word 'art' means something to the group of people gathered together or apart.

The critical writer in this constellation is not really a writer but a kind of guard, a pseudo-specialist, a backbone which the entire structure is dependent upon and looks to for answers.

It is therefore in my impression not a crisis or shortcoming of the system if such art writing and criticism becomes more ephemeral. On the contrary. The lack of a physical focal / fixation point in the form of a printed-matter publication, the physical body of the writer or the vertically designed column can only encourage the attentive viewer or reader to construct his or her own point of view of the subject in question and by doing so to add to the already expanding field of art 'experts' and critics.

The word 'critic' in Hebrew has two meanings. One is the normal western definition of the critic. The other meaning is – visitor. Perhaps the art critic and art criticism can become less a concentrated point which invites a static and fetishistic fixation, a resident in the so-called 'institution of art', and more a kind of transitional figure passing through the room art creates, a visitor in a new and more open configuration, which takes whatever new space opens up as a possible zone of transition to pass through and come across.

Sarah Cook:

On a serendipitous note I am today at the CHArt conference in London where there have been presentations this morning about digital art journals in relation to old-style printed art journals and most of the questions concerned future preservation / upgrading to new systems without losing content in the process. A doctoral student at Northumbria University, Carla Cesare, has been trying to launch a new e-journal, *Portfolio*, which would accept video and audio and photographic content. Though her journal isn't out yet, she has some definite opinions on how the process is different in this self-publishing online world (see http://projects.beyondtext.ac.uk/StudentLedInitiatives/index.phphttp://projects.beyondtext.ac.uk/StudentLedInitiatives/index.php).

The other experience I could draw on is my recent blogging for the Guggenheim for their *YouTubePlay* project (The blog is called *The Take*) – where our submissions as writers were limited to 400 words and went through very rigourous editorial before they were posted, causing an enormous timelag between writing and feedback – not something you'd normally think of as a problem with the web, but something that is a given for printed work (that it might be peer reviewed, that it would be copyedited by other people, that it might be checked for content by an editor, or in this case, by a corporate body – YouTube – or a legal team – for copyright questions). I also had to, of course, sign and send back a contract / agreement to the Guggenheim and my blog post was treated as a piece of writing as though it were for an exhibition catalogue.

Lastly, I find it deeply, deeply weird to be having this discussion on this platform – Facebook – as I associate critical writing online with the mailing list I run (*CRUMB*) and therefore in my e-mail account not on my social networking site!

Kathy Rae Huffman:

I want to recall the *Telepolis* journal, which was launched in 1995 as one of the first online journals, where the online environment was the main topic of all writing. For this journal, Margarete Jahrmann and I wrote the column 'PopTarts', which for several years was the multi-media column that discussed what was to become 'new media', with all female references. It was not a feminist discourse; we simply used female voices to substantiate all the interviews, works and theories at that time. This was, of course, a bit 'before' the current wave of online curators and critics – and *Telepolis* (albeit mostly in German) set a sort of standard for online journalism (with links, images, sound, video and other new ways of telling what was happening in the digital net world).

For Margarete and me, it was important to bring new information to the journal, and artists who had moved from more traditional media into the online world. Some of our co-writing (we built up the texts collaboratively in English and German) is still available online. Armin Medosch and Florian Roetzer were editors. Armin has since left the *Telepolis* family, and I'm not sure about Florian. We were paid,

our research travels were paid, and we were given tons of technical support to upload and create our column.

Telepolis started in '97, after *Nettime* (which started in '95), and at about the same time that the *FACES* list started (which was initially a response to *Nettime*'s dominant male voice regarding things 'net') and also at about the same time as the now long forgotten *Syndicate* list, which was a mailing list forum for artists in Eastern Europe to connect, communicate and collaborate, coordinated by V2 in Rotterdam.

This was all when being online was very new, very exciting, the 'cowboy' days of organizing: anything goes (there were net etiquette rules of course, even then). IRL meetings along with net discussion were always important.1

Of course, a lot has been accomplished since this time, but it is really sad that these early, massive communities of people have been overwhelmed by Facebook and other controlled mailing lists that attempt to keep people to topic! One of the early guiding principles of the Net was that to attempt to control it was to commit net suicide.

Sissu Tarka:

Selected excerpts from *Collaborative Futures*

Collaborative Futures has developed over two intensive book sprints. January 2010 in Berlin, Adam Hyde (Founder, FLOSS Manuals), Mike Linksvayer (Vice President, Creative Commons), Michael Mandiberg (Assistant Professor, College of Staten Island / CUNY), Marta Peirano (Author), Mushon Zer-Aviv (Resident, Eyebeam Center for Art and Technology), and Alan Toner (Filmmaker) wrote the first edition in five days under the aegis of *transmediale festival*'s *parcours* series. June 2010, the book was rewritten at Eyebeam's *Re:Group* exhibition in NYC with the original six and three new contributors: kanarinka (artist and founder, The Institute for Infinitely Small Things), Sissu Tarka (artist and researcher), and Astra Taylor (filmmaker). The full book is available to read and to write at *www.collaborative-futures.org*.

EXCERPT 1:

http://www.booki.cc/collaborativefutures/_v/1.0/from-sharing-to-collaboration*http://www.booki.cc/collaborativefutures/_v/1.0/from-sharing-to-collaboration*

First Things First

Information technology informs and structures the language of networked collaboration. Terms like "sharing", "openness", "user generated content" and "participation" have become so ubiquitous that too often they tend to be conflated and misused. In attempting to avoid this misuse with the term

"collaboration" we will try to examine what constitutes collaboration in digital networks and how it maps to our previous understanding of the term.

Sharing is the First Step

User Generated Content and social media create the tendency for confusion between sharing and collaboration. Sharing of content alone does not directly lead to collaboration. A common paradigm in many web services couples identity and content. Examples of this include blogging, micro-blogging, video and photo sharing, which effectively say: "This is who I am. This is what I did." The content is the social object, and the author is directly attributed with it. This work is a singularity, even if it is shared with the world via these platforms, and even if it has a free culture license on it. This body of work stands alone, and, alone, this work is not collaborative.

In contrast, the strongly collaborative Wikipedia de-emphasizes the tight content-author link. While the attribution of each contribution made by each author is logged on the history tab of each page, attribution is primarily used as a moderation and accountability tool. While most User Generated Content platforms offer a one to many relationship, where one user produces and uploads many different entries or media, wikis and centralized code versioning systems offer a many to many relationship, where many different users can be associated with many different entries or projects.

Adding a second layer

Social media platforms can become collaborative when they add an additional layer of coordination. On a micro-blogging platform like Twitter, this layer might take the form of an instruction to "use the #iranelections hashtag on your tweets" or on a photo sharing platform, it might be an invitation to "post your photos to the LOLcats group." These mechanisms aggregate the content into a new social object. The new social object includes the metadata of each of its constituent objects; the author's name is the most important of this metadata. This creates two layers of content. Each shared individual unit is included in a cluster of shared units. A single shared video is part of an aggregation of demonstration documentation. A single shared bookmark is included in an aggregation of the "inspiration" tag on delicious. A single blog post takes its place in a blogosphere discussion, etc.

This seems similar to a single "commit" to a FLOSS project or a single edit of a Wikipedia article, but these instances do not maintain the shared unit / collaborative cluster balance. For software in a code versioning system, or a page on Wikipedia, the single unit loses its integrity outside the collaborative context and is indeed created to only function as a part of the larger collaborative social object.

EXCERPT 2:

http://www.booki.cc/collaborativefutures/_v/1.0/social-creativity*http://www.booki.cc/collaborativefutures/_v/1.0/social-creativity*

Social Creativity:

Collectivity Resurgent

This basic conception of creativity as individual leaves the legal framework ill-equipped to deal with contemporary forms of wide-scale cooperative production. Collectivity is inscribed in both their form and architecture, from the discursive and serial nature of problem solving in forums, to the version control histories of software and wikis. These practices are confronted with a legal framework unable to respond to their needs. This explains why so many have turned to alternative forms of copyright licensing which change copyright's defaults so as to facilitate or even encourage free collaboration, such as the GPL and (later) Creative Commons.

In addition to these artifacts native to the digital context, online activity generates copious amounts of documentary evidence of the collective nature of design and execution in every other field. As creative practices become more explicitly derivative and collaborative, the legal stability of copyright's categories are being strained past breaking point. Movements in all fields of the arts had foreshadowed these tensions. Practices of montage, recycling of footage in cinema, collage, the cut-up in writing, re-photography all reflected the fact that in an age of ubiquitous media, creative reinterpretation would necessarily take the form of recombining, 'appropriating' pre-existing elements. Courts struggled incoherently with these challenges, ruling inconsistently and inventing progressively more peculiar distinctions. These practices were clearly not about 'piracy', but were in direct contradiction to the claims of original genius of the 'romantic author'. The result was chaos, but as long as access to the technology was restricted by high entry costs, it affected only a discrete group.

The spread of the personal computer and software for media manipulation in the 1990s, followed by the arrival of high-speed domestic connectivity, washed away the final flood wall. Doctrines developed to regulate industrial cultural producers are in crisis, confronted by a public itself now equipped with the tools of production and distribution.

Tereza Kotyk:

I am responding to Circa's change in format and this request whilst sitting in a wanna-be-office-room-thingy of my home in the mountains of Tyrol and working on inter/national exhibitions, specific projects in photography, and identities and projects for different websites (business and social-wise).

This work list (or better: work load) is common among freelance curators and it is more or less unpaid, silent, and unseen work. Thus the internet or online-work is of an ambivalent assistance here: on one side it is hiding personal circumstances and contributing to a precarious working and private situation (often for women), but on the other side it fosters a highly supportive network and platform, based on websites, postings or blogs which identify you nowadays as what you do, no matter where you are, and

make your work be seen. Getting in touch with professionals regarding projects is something of immediate matter and can be followed up with fewer hazards.

Independent curators have naturally less financial support, which at least contributes to a more ecological behaviour: I can speak of entire rainforests I have already helped to save by not printing off everything I receive or am working on. I cannot afford to travel and meet up with people as I used to or to buy loads of art magazines, but I am in touch with more people than ever via social networks and I do read articles online. Projects seem to happen more quickly, which in return saves me a lot of money to be used for a new netbook. 'Language' is less of a problem: I can easily translate thanks to online dictionaries and can even listen for the accurate pronunciation.

I am back to Austria, after having worked in the UK for two and a half years, but I am still a participant in what is going on there. I miss all the people I have been working with, but social networking works better than ever. Critical discourse has to continue, of course, but why not in this more democratic way? "Breaking through the grand wall of silence, with the use of the internet."- Liu Xiaobo.

Ohad Ben Shimon is an artist and writer based in The Hague, Netherlands.

Sarah Cook is a curator and writer based in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, and co-author with Beryl Graham of the book *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media* (MIT Press). She is currently a research fellow at the University of Sunderland where she co-founded and co-edits *CRUMB*, the online resource for curators of new media art, and teaches on the MA Curating course.

Kathy Rae Huffman is an independent curator, currently based between Berlin and Los Angeles. She is curator for InterSpace, Sofia, Bulgaria for the project *TRANSITLAND: Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989-2009*, which is currently on tour internationally, and is also lead curator for *EXCHANGE AND EVOLUTION: Worldwide Video Long Beach 1974-1999*, a project for Pacific Standard Time, coordinated by The Getty Foundation.

Sissu Tarka is an artist and researcher with an interest in the criticality of emerging practices and economies of media art. Her work addresses themes of non-linearity, modes of resistance, and articulations of democratic, active work. Tarka was born in Helsinki and lives in London. She is currently affiliated with CRUMB Curatorial Resource for Upstart Media Bliss.

Tereza Kotyk is an independent curator, cultural producer and Director of The Soap Room in Innsbruck, Austria. Recent exhibitions include *Personal Tempest* (2011) at UH Galleries, Hatfield, UK; *Chosil Kil: The Stage, in Order of Appearance* (2010 / 11) at The Soap Room, Innsbruck; and *The Art of Design* (2010) at freiraum INTERNATIONAL, MuseumsQuartier, Vienna.

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1 'IRL' = 'in real life'

Stupid Judgment

James Merrigan is an artist based in Dublin.

"What is it to offer a critique?" This was the first question posed by Judith Butler in her brilliant essay *What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue*.[1] Butler goes on to discuss the very limits of critique via Foucault; she writes: "At stake here is the relation between the limits of ontology and epistemology, the link between the limits of what I might become and the limits of what I might risk knowing." Since the onslaught of comments visited upon *Circa* following Gemma Tipton's blog, *On Mediocrity*, Friday 9 July 2010 (which highlighted the difficulty of 'local' criticism without the writer getting their fingers burnt),[2] and due to funding cuts which resulted in the swap of *Circa's* 'hard copy' for an exclusively online presence, I was asked to respond to what has been written on the subject of art criticism in Part 1 of *Circa's* online issue titled *On Criticism*. Following Butler, my questions regarding criticism are: what does the critic want to achieve from their criticism of an art object? Is their criticism based on a selfish or selfless act? And from what position is the criticism coming from? As an artist first and an 'art writer' second, this response will take into account my position as an artist, and will openly discuss opinion on the subject of criticism from that vantage point.

Declan Long's article, *An Avalanche, a Transformation,* offers the reader a nostalgic return to the 1980s from the perspective of music, not art. Long's autobiographical underpinning to the subject of 'criticism' in his article has been important in my construction of a response to some of *Circa*'s *On Criticism* texts. Like Long, I also was a child of the '80s, but my preoccupation was skateboarding, which was firmly attached to the music scene that Long ruminates on in his text. I understand the energy that the glossy magazine gave to its young readers, but what registers as energy and influence for oblivious youth can register as naiveté and unproductive rants to cynical adulthood. There seems to be a casual *presentness* in youth's reception of the world, while with growing maturity comes the curse of an aging cynical gaze and backward glance at history. Back then, *Thrasher* skateboard magazine and *Rad* were my choice of pick-me-ups, or poisons, depending on my adolescent and subsequent adult perspective.

One thought that always puzzles me, regarding what I was doing then, and how the hidden parallel contemporary art world was conducting its business as usual at the same time, unbeknownst to me, is what my response would have been if I had come in eyeshot of the work of, let's say, New York's art superstar of the time, Julian Schnabel. Honestly, I would have said "what a load of shite." This personal revelation may offer a starting point for some questions, and dare I say it, answers, about how art exists in the world, how it is found, digested, loved, misunderstood, and criticised. This cyclic digestion of art, from the 'dumb' aggression in the remark "what a load of shite" to the so-called 'learned' aggression in the word 'criticism' begs the question, what is the difference? But herein lies

the problem of the word 'criticism'; let's take for instance Long's proposal of "affirmative criticism" via George Baker. Long writes:

> Baker suggests, affirmation is criticism's polar opposite: to merely affirm is to be "non-critical," to avoid the challenges of critique. But affirmation, he says, might also be understood in more positive terms as a mode that "voids criticism's own former functions."[3]

This proposal is all well and good, as I begin to shift in my seat to throw some weight around, but this recommendation by Baker only amounts to a philosophical discourse that views polar opposites as meaning the same thing, and proposes a *Ring a Ring o' Roses* formulation for more reflective art writing, not criticism. Baker goes on to write about "new possibilities" and "making-visible"; these are the terms that artists use to avoid talking about their own work.[4] Maybe it is a generalisation or a cheap method of getting artists' backs up when I reiterate what Picasso said (or some say Matisse), regarding artists talking about their own work: "He who wants to be totally dedicated to his art, must first cut out his tongue!" When critics and curators use words like 'potentiality', a position is not taken, which creates a stand-off between the art objects' esoteric cultism of 'sign' and 'symbol' and the art critics' current disavowal of judgment.

In the mid 1990s I was introduced to art writing via Andrew Graham-Dixon of the English *Independent* newspaper and Robert Hughes of *Time Magazine*. Graham-Dixon was the antonym of Hughes. Back then I enjoyed reading the English writer's dignified prose, a poetic articulation of life and art through historicisation; there was hope and romanticism in his vernacular for the would-be artist.[5] The Australian Hughes was a kick in the face; his rant on the previously mentioned Schnabel in *The New Republic* journal in the late '80s was as frighteningly inappropriate as criticism can get.[6] His language was raspy and succinct, and his use of negative metaphor was humorous. He was the '80s model of a 'Greenbergian helmsman', with his own 'grand narrative' for how art should be – something that Joan Fowler diagnoses as an impossible position and element of criticism today.[7] Although *Time Magazine* has more gravitas than Long's *Melody Maker* and my *Thrasher*, from the art-purist view, it was still a distant cry from Rosalind Krauss's modernist 'Ivory Tower' proclamations in *October*.

The events involving Krauss's departure from *Art Forum* can illustrate how unscripted 'ruptures' in the surprisingly fragile administrative structures that hold art institutions together can open up a whole lot of possibility.[8] Some say that Krauss's departure from *Art Forum* was due to a growing dissatisfaction with the 'colourful' angle the magazine was taking, but the more entertaining story goes something like this: In 1974 the artist Lynda Benglis bought an ad in *Art Forum* that coincided with a review of her work in the same issue. The image showed the artist naked and "sporting [a pair of sunglasses and] an enormous dildo."[9] *Art Forum* editors wrote in the subsequent issue that Benglis's centerfold was "an object of extreme vulgarity" and "it represents a qualitative leap in that genre, brutalizing ourselves and, we think, our readers." This event and story has had its lasting effects on the art world; some say it was the 'straw' that forced Krauss to leave and start *October* in 1976.[10] It also highlights how similar

ruptures in the 'business' of art discourse, prompted by artists, writers, critics, curators and philosophers, cannot be intellectually controlled by reasoned reflection on the essence of critique. We could even view the 2008 economic collapse as a rupture in the increasingly polished production values of *Circa's* hard copy, in order for a more productive enterprise to spring forth – the questioning of the very thing that fails and succeeds in its continuing struggle to articulate art practice and theory, criticism.

Appropriately, in the margins of *Circa*'s website, and I presume, intentionally acting as an adjunct to the seven texts that make up the online issue, is Joan Fowler's article, *Notes on Art Criticism with Reference to the Writings of Sven Lütticken*. I know I have ventured from the 'Issue' but Fowler's article and position as an art theorist is revealing in how art criticism is distributed in its 'purer' and 'secondary' guises. Fowler writes:

> Art criticism is now much more theoretically based but, as such, it has mutated. In its purer form, its outlets are increasingly in specialist journals or equally specialist catalogues. In its secondary form, it has entered the practice of art itself since critical awareness is so much a part of the formal and informal education of artists that criticism or critique is seen to be essential.[11]

Fowler's penetrating critical analysis reminds me of Butler's method, especially when she describes what is good critical practice in Lütticken's writing as apposed to Hal Foster; she writes:

> For example, where Foster's writing, in keeping with much art criticism of the past, often lacks references, Lütticken's writings are usually liberally sourced. This seems to me to be not just a generational difference, but to contain differences of outlook as to the operations and function of criticism. It reflects a shift to the knowledge economy that characterises the start of the twenty-first century.[12]

What we get from Fowler's view of 'good practice' is a rigorous pulling-apart of the 'subject' of criticism itself, against the backdrop of art-world conditions, philosophical perspectives and critical theories. In this method – and this is the artist's agenda peeking through here – there is a loss of the art 'object' in the overarching shadow of the 'subject' – the self-referentiality of art criticism itself. Fowler defines the "speculative in art" as a condition of Lütticken's critical method.[13] This situates Lütticken's critical agenda firmly in the 'subject' of art criticism rather than the 'object' of art. I am not prescribing another 'Greenbergian' era where the shape, form, colour, sound, movement of an art object defines its place in world, which Fowler aligns with "class privilege." However, the substitution of the art object and the contexts that shape it with a growing focus on philosophical underpinning and labelling of periods, rather than the 'shite' that makes up the mechanics of the world, is elitist in its own textual manner.

As an artist and sometime writer, I understand the separation of art object and the critical thought that follows, or what we could call the disappearance of either the 'object' or the 'subject'; the *one or the other* syndrome. When I am making work, I am not writing or reading art criticism. This is not a conscious decision, I physically and mentally cannot write. OK, this could be an individual symptom, but I doubt it. If we generalise, and view the comments that were made after Tipton's blog as representative of the Irish art world's view of the writers and institutions that control opinion on what is good and what is bad in art, then what the art public wants is a 'rupture' in what it perceives as parochial nepotism and fiscally controlled watered-down art writing. This view is childish and unrealistic. Maybe this current 'knowledge economy' that Fowler speaks of is the main barrier to criticism. If aesthetics is representative of 'class privilege' then education is its partner. Can criticism, the general idea of criticism, only exist in the parameters of the quick blog, secondhand gossip, or the 'free for all' democratic comment-box at the end of the 'highfalutin' article? Is criticism, in the form of language, a failed enterprise? Maybe we are better off with criticism wrapped in an image, like Benglis's 'dildo'?

In *Canvases and Careers Today: Criticism and its Markets*, the same book from which Long cites Baker in his *Circa* online article, the critic and artist Melanie Gilligan writes:

> I should add that I am much less likely to go for the more recent appellation "art writer," since it re-brands art criticism as reflection on art without conflicts or staking position on what is worthwhile and what isn't.[14]

Specifically in response to Gilligan's article, Isabelle Graw, editor of *Texte zur Kunst*, extends this idea of 'judgment' with art and the market; she writes:

> I would go as far as to say that art and the market belong together, if only on a conceptual level. Since "art" is a value concept, it implies judgments, and evaluation. And evaluations are a major trait of any economy. Seen from this vantage point, there is an economic dimension inherent to the concept of art alone.[15]

But with judgment comes hurt. Chris Fite-Wassilak's desire to find an "open wound" is nearly too easy; no matter how good and cautious the criticism is. Fite-Wassilak describes the comment-box as "a place where different voices meet; you write in the hope of striking a nerve that might continually hurt, and this is one place to confront that and see if that has happened."[16] Continuing with comment-box criticism, one of the most enduring comments on the aforementioned Tipton blog was by 'SS', on 2010-07-14 16:45:08:

> tbh i don't really see any real need to distinguish b/w opinion and criticism. A certain kind of dryness is engendered by the inadmissibility of, like, gossip and opinion which are kind of the seeds of real conversation and debate. The problem isn't really the small closed system of accredited commentators, but the lack of smaller

> constellations of effect and reaction. A forum for lively and, well, informal levels of opinion is pretty necessary and lacking. I'm not really sure its possible to artificially instigate this, but i do think the internet is kind of crucial to opening up a wider network of discourse.[17]

As the previous comment suggests and Fite-Wassilak outlines in his *Circa* online article, there is possibility in these less travelled spaces. Even if the comments are puerile, the anonymous blog and comment-box has the same potential for creating ruptures as the difficult-to-argue 'purer' text of Butler and Fowler.

Amongst all the promotional literature that makes up the majority of art writing out there, criticism needs to rear its perceived ugly head. Personally, and from the position of an artist, criticism should be an involuntary textual spasm that sporadically feeds back into a growing conversation on art; promoting the growth of art, not individual artist's careers. Criticism, in its 'purer' guise, should question an art work based on the 'rules' and 'boundaries' that protect art from the tumultuous exterior world. It may be a fact that criticism cannot exist in the places that we are currently looking, such as the article or individual review. Maybe it is the critic's job to be non-critical, in order for the invisible bedrock of influence (first-, second-, and third-hand gossip, the most common, local and powerful forms of criticism) to force art's fragile nature in different directions and spark new arguments. Maybe the critic cannot support 'stupid judgment', as 'judgment' does not fit the philosophers' and critical theorists' belief in the ambiguity of truth. To repeat Butler, maybe I fear "the limits of what I might become and the limits of what I might risk knowing."

Sarah Tuck's succinct "What art?" response to *Circa*'s question: "What is the role and value of art criticism at present?" may say a lot more than its two words at first signify.[18] It brings me back to the impetus for Tipton's blog – mediocre exhibitions in Dublin. Maybe the onus should be on the artist and curator rather than the writer to create an impetus for criticism? There are lots of 'maybes' in these concluding paragraphs, but allow me one more: maybe it is the artists' job to create 'ruptures', so criticism doesn't have to exist?

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1. This essay was originally delivered, in shorter form, as the Raymond Williams Lecture at Cambridge University in May of 2000, then published in longer form in David Ingram, ed., *The Political: Readings in Continental Philosophy*, London: Basil Blackwell, 2002.

2. Gemma Tipton's Blog: *On mediocrity* (9 July 2010): from http://www.recirca.com/cgi-bin/mysql/show_item.cgi?post_id=5220&type=gtblog&ps=publish

3. Declan Long, "An avalanche, a transformation…", Circa online, Issue 131, Part 1; from http://recirca.com/cgi-bin/mysql/show_item.cgi?post_id=5270&type=Issue131, October 2010

4. George Baker, 'Late Criticism', in Daniel Birnbaum and Isabelle Graw (eds.) *Canvases and Careers Today: Criticism and its Markets*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008.

5. See his BBC 6-part series *Renaissance* (1996-9), which also spawned a book with the same name.

6. Here is a taste of Hughes's criticism of Julian Schnabel's memoirs: Hughes writes: "And some go through the door marked Push, And some go through the door marked Pull. As a true self-constructed American, Schnabel chose the former. His entry was propelled by a megalomaniac, painfully sincere belief in his own present genius and future historical importance…Indeed, Schnabel's work is to painting what Stallone's is to acting – a lurching display of oily pectorals – except Schnabel makes bigger claims for himself." Originally published in *The New Republic*, 1987. See Robert Hughes, *Nothing if Not Critical*, Harvill Press, London, 1990.

7. These quotes are from Joan Fowler, 'Notes on Art Criticism with Reference to the Writings of Sven Lütticken', Circa online, Issue 131, Part 1: from http://www.recirca.com/cgi-bin/mysql/show_item.cgi?post_id=5259&type=NewArticles&ps=publish

8. Joan Fowler once said that 'ruptures' in the art world are rare. She was referring to critical episodes that are out of the norm such as the back-and-forth responses between Liam Gillick and Claire Bishop in *October*, and my favourite, Richard Prince's series of humorous responses to the curator of the *Pictures* exhibition, Douglas Crimp. Prince says: "I've never said this before, but Doug Crimp actually asked me to be in that show [*Pictures* exhibition]. I read his essay and told him it was for shit, that it sounded like Roland Barthes. We haven't spoken since. I didn't know anybody in the show at the time." (*Art Forum*, March, 2003)

9. To practice what I preach about the potential of blog criticism, the SLOG is Seattle's most popular news-and-arts blog. Jen Graves writes an informative synopsis on the Krauss, Benglis and Robert Morris debacle: 'What Lynda Benglis Wore', posted by Jen Graves on 2 July 2009 at 2:28 pm; http://slog.thestranger.com/slog/archives/2009/07/02/what-lynda-benglis-wore

10. In 2009 the Krauss / Benglis and Robert Morris debacle became 'fodder' for an exhibition at Susan Inglett Gallery, New York. The back-story to Morris's inclusion in the exhibition goes something like this: at the time, Krauss was living with Morris (we could even surmise that Krauss's photo of Morris dressed up in S&M get-up for a gallery poster was the impetus for Benglis to produce the subversive ad). The tug of war was really with Benglis and Morris, but Krauss, as a respected editor of *Art Forum*, wielded much capital and promotional influence, the mainstay of New York's art world. See *Art in America*, Kriston Capps's review of 'Lynda Benglis / Robert Morris: 1973--1974, Susan Inglett Gallery, Jun 18 – Jul 31, 2009', from http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/lynda-benglisrobert-morris-19731974/

11. Fowler, op. cit.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Melanie Gilligan, 'The Contemporary Social Market', in Daniel Birnbaum and Isabelle Graw (eds.), *Canvases and Careers Today: Criticism and its Markets*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008 p. 121.

15. Ibid., Isabelle Graw, 'Response to Melanie Gilligan', p.140

16. Chris Fite-Wassilak, 'The Hope of an Open Wound', Circa online, Issue 131, Part 1: from http://www.recirca.com/cgi-bin/mysql/show_item.cgi?post_id=5264&type=Issue131&ps=publish

17. Gemma Tipton's blog, op.cit.

18. Sarah Tuck, 'Art Criticism – Disrupting or Creating Consensus?', Circa online, Issue 131, Part 1: from http://www.recirca.com/cgi-bin/mysql/show_item.cgi?post_id=5263&type=Issue131&ps=publish