CIRCA Contemporary art in Ireland

Issue 131, Part 1 • On Criticism

Our first purely online issue is now live. We have a select group of writers to tackle what is in effect *Circa* 's core activity: **criticism and criticality** .

It's a new venture – one linking to the past and looking to the future; please join us.

Issue contents

Introduction

Peter FitzGerald is Editor of *Circa*.

Welcome to this, our first fully online issue of *Circa*. We are at a point of continuity and change, upholding the legacy of almost thirty years of *Circa*, while going virtual like so much nowadays.

It seemed very appropriate to have our first online issue themed around critique and criticism. It has been frequently remarked that art criticism is very peculiar: not only does it have no set norms, no academic home, no agreed theoretical approach, but its ephemeral nature constantly prompts the question of who reads it, how many read it, and why? Many question its use and value, yet it proliferates, now spurred on by the growing informalities of the internet. Criticism, critique and criticality are at the heart of what *Circa* does; now seemed a good time to question those core activities.

So what should art criticism be, what should it do, and what does it mean to be purely online? We sent out an invitation to a number of art writers early this summer, asking this question (though at greater length – see invitation here). What you see are the first fruits of this process. More are to come, and we will also be inviting formal responses from other writers (in the meantime, anyone may add comments after the texts).

Alongside this and forthcoming issues of *Circa*, we plan rolling reviews and feature articles. Please keep an eye out, comment, and join us on this new journey.

My sincere thanks to the writers, and to the Editorial Committee: Georgina Jackson, Tim Stott, Mary Cremin, Isabel Nolan (and myself).

“An avalanche, a transformation…”

Declan Long is a lecturer at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin.

December 1987, and for perhaps the twentieth or thirtieth time in one long, languorous, teenage afternoon, I am again eagerly poring over the latest issue of what is, without question, the most important journal of cultural criticism in the world: the weekly music magazine *Melody Maker*. It is the end-of-year round-up edition – the compendium of reflections and selections from regular writers, culminating in their agreed overall best-of lists – and my just-bought copy is already worn and ragged from a combination of rapt close-reading and frenetic page-turning. U2 are on the cover – fair enough, since it is the year of *The Joshua Tree*, the year of their confirmed status as a rock superpower – but inside, in the stirringly idiosyncratic commentaries and choices of the magazine’s most mesmerizing writers, there is strong evidence of other pressing priorities, of other phenomenal forces to be reckoned with. Inside, let’s say, I just *might* have found what I’m looking for…

Reading this humble indie-rag back then was – however ludicrous it might now seem – an experience of exhilarating recognition and revelation, a giddy week-on-week rush of alternating ‘Yes! That’s it!’ and astonished ‘What the fuck…?’ moments. (Effects which recall, incidentally, Nabokov’s belief that “although we read with our minds, the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades.” “Let us,” he says “worship the spine and its tingle.”[1]) In that Christmas ‘87 issue, several of the albums and singles of the year were by bands with whom I was already in confirmed, but doomed, relationships: The Smiths, New Order, The Cure, The Jesus and Mary Chain; the core quartet of my limited indie-miserabilist canon. Yet alongside chart placings for these dying loves were slots for other bands I had thus far only read about – and so had yearned to hear – and for others again whose names and noises were utterly unfamiliar to me, but who would soon become objects of disconcerting infatuation.

Much of this momentous new music (new and momentous to me, at least) was from America and, accordingly perhaps, was more extrovert and excessive in attitude and form than a lot of the British (Post-)Post-Punk that had pre-occupied me in recent years. It was certainly, in some cases, a good deal louder: albums by Big Black (No.5 on the year-end list with their tender meditation on romantic love, *Songs About Fucking*), The Butthole Surfers (at 10 with the similarly sensitive *Locust Abortion Technician*) and Pixies (coming hollering into the world with the manic, mutant pop of *Come on Pilgrim*, at 19) were by turns brutal and bewildering, electrifying in their extremity and absurdity. Other discoveries were expansive in different ways. There was, for instance, the emotional vulnerability and angular, agitated rhythmic and melodic unpredictability of Throwing Muses (*The Fat Skier*, no.4). Or there was the wonderful minimalist murmuring of Arthur Russell’s *World of Echo* (at no. 22), an album that I seem to remember ‘loving’ for a long-ish time before actually hearing it – making my own initial experience of it quite severely minimalist, I suppose. (The local record shop in my Co. Antrim hometown of Larne had, sadly, a somewhat disappointing section devoted to

pioneering avant-classical compositions for voice and distorted cello emerging out of downtown New York's experimental post-disco dance-scene.)

Back on this side of the Atlantic, though, there was also the feedback-misted dub space of AR Kane (appearing under their own name in the singles list at numbers 2 and 16, but also at 6 as part of the house-inspired, chart-conquering M/A/R/R/S: their one-off collaboration with 4AD labelmates Colourbox). AR Kane's dreamy, queasy, psychedelic love songs came out of nowhere – and seemed to exist in a strange, dizzying musical nowhere, between genres, between states of mind and being – achieving a spellbinding strangeness rarely evident amongst the shambling lo-fi jangle or portentous goth gloom of the English indie-charts. And then there were The Young Gods: a barely-heard-of trio of Swiss sampler fanatics who, despite the U2 cover splash, had been voted as band of the year by *Melody Maker*'s critics in 1987. Celebrating the trio's poll triumph, David Stubbs hailed their eponymous debut album as "the apotheosis of 1987's dark expansion, its fabulous recession, its headlong urge towards blackout."[2] This was a work that was, Stubbs argued, absolutely radical in its re-imagining of how sampling technology might be employed and of how 'rock' might be transformed, malformed, rejected or renewed by sampling's influence: instead of introducing specific samples as "nods and winks, reference and collage," The Young Gods's sources were "crumpled and charred, blackened, cascading and tumbling into one another." It was an album of stolen, melted-down riffs, *sturm-und-drang* strings and (French language) metaphysical poetry – and it drew from Stubbs a critical prose more akin to the Futurist manifesto than to routine, rational, marks-out-of-ten reviewing. With The Young Gods, Stubbs claimed,

> A giant gulf opens up between THEN and NOW. This is the NEW ELEMENT, a new METAPHYSIC, a rock CONCRETE. Everything – time, the future, the sea, sky and moon – belongs to The Young Gods because they throw everything in. The Young Gods are MASSIVE, TOTAL, UNDIFFERENTIATED, ELEMENTAL, an AVALANCHE, a TRANSFORMATION…

Such sentences and sentiments were of course preposterous and pretentious – but they were also, to my preposterous, pretentious young mind, unaccountably *thrilling*. In an era when nothing special was presumed to be on the agenda, when it was all too readily accepted that all popular music's great glories and innovations were in the past, when irony, whimsy, or faux-soulful subservience to tradition were deemed adequate qualifications for artistic credibility, here was a bold critical effort to shake off the dust of this settled, moribund contemporary moment, to dismiss the hierarchies, and pieties of the complacent present – and, in concert with the writings of a cluster of fantastically intelligent and talented colleagues, this was a critical effort that was often as extreme and absurd and bewildering as the brilliant music it sought to celebrate.

If I was awakening, then, to a wider world of music, I was also blinking and stumbling towards new ways of *thinking* about music and developing a half-alert appreciation of the manifold ways to imagine the encounter between music – or art or literature or anything – and criticism. In addition,

then, to falling for the extravagant manifesto-making and lurid comic exuberance of David Stubbs's weekly contributions (e.g. "The Butthole Surfers are proof that masturbation, indulgence, investigation of your own arsehole, or even your own entrails, wanton-ness, moral depthlessness, noisy obesity, the sacred, the profane, the obscene, the heavy bass, the hairy guitar solo, are not just permissible, but absolutely crucial just now…") I also swooned over utterly eccentric, surreal and romantic articles by Chris Roberts (who would depart from the commissioned task at every opportunity, composing obsessive, subjective, devotional hymns rather than assembling anything so humdrum as a 'review'), and I staggered issue-to-issue under the influence of Nietzschian contrarians The Stud Brothers, astonished by their gleeful rejection of common sense and consensus, relishing their high-minded, high-handed nihilism. Above all, though, I became transfixed and transformed by the seductive intelligence and the rich capacity for *rapture* in the musings of my emerging hero, Simon Reynolds – undoubtedly the most gifted of the *Melody Maker* writers, and the one whose work would rise most in prominence and influence over subsequent years. Reynolds had – and has- an extraordinary knack for capturing the texture of music in text, articulating and triggering great delight in the sensuous particularity of sound – a talent that gave licence for his critical endeavours at *Melody Maker* to become less determined by the responsibility of balanced judgement than by the delinquency of delirious enjoyment ('licence' seems doubly apt: implying both permission and perversity). In this regard, there are telling resemblances to Roland Barthes, who, as Susan Sontag once said,

> repeatedly disavows the … vulgar roles of system builder, authority, mentor, expert, in order to reserve for himself the privileges and freedoms of delectation: the exercise of taste for Barthes means, usually, to praise. What makes the role a choice one is his unstated commitment to finding something new and unfamiliar to praise (which requires having the right dissonance with established taste); or to praising a familiar work differently.[3]

'Praising differently' would mean diligently seeking out the non-obvious response; luring 'criticism' away from received knowledge. As Sontag says succinctly of Barthes's method, "The 'message' is already received or obsolete. Let's ignore it."[4] I very much like, here, the sense that 'praise' might serve a purpose beyond dutiful professional promotion – beyond the PR function that the critic can be pressed into or tempted towards – and that perhaps, pushed to an excited, sensuous extreme, celebratory writing might have the potential to become something risky, even radical (like Sontag says: praise as *dissonance*). A corollary of this tendency, moreover, could be that 'strong' critical writing need not be aggressive. Simon Reynolds's writing, for instance, has certainly always had a 'muscular' quality – lithe, taut, pulsing with energy and ideas – but his manner has never been macho, his persona in print never one of the domineering, intimidating expert, ever-determined to throw his weight around.

Not that there wasn't, in these *Melody Maker* articles, plenty of intellectual weight to be reckoned with. The link to Roland Barthes, for example, isn't a forced or incidental one, since it was in reviews, interviews and think-pieces by Reynolds that I not only received my introduction to such essential

Barthesian notions as textuality, *jouissance* and the 'death of the author', but also encountered for the first time mind-scrambling provocations from the work of Kristeva, Cixous, Derrida and Foucault. My initial experience of 'theory' was therefore, largely inseparable from the dizzying disorientations of the music eulogized in this treasured magazine (even if, given the time it could take to lay my hands on copies of these raved-about records, it was often the writers' descriptions alone that started my head spinning) with allusions to Barthes and his poststructuralist comrades pointing to a playful but demanding critical language wholly appropriate to the beautiful convulsions I was experiencing as a confused but ecstatic underground pop fan. Such landmark works of continental theory as Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* or Kristeva's *The Powers of Horror* were, as Reynolds has recently recalled, "texts that seemed to writhe with the same unruly and reality-rearranging energies as the music."[5] And in fact, Reynolds suggests, it was precisely the capacity of theory to "intoxicate" that was of most pleasurable, powerful value: "Far from being born of a cold-blooded drive to dissect and demystify, the attraction of critical theory (especially the French kind) was that it set your brain on fire."[6]

Given the potency of these illicit intellectual substances, it still surprises and pleases me to think that they were, in several ways, so *accessible*. How amazing it is to remember that this progressive, critically adventurous publication – promoting and pilfering fragments from psychoanalysis, deconstruction and discourse theory – could be picked up each week not in some out-of-the-way radical-bookshop but in my *very* conservative neighbourhood newsagent's. For at that time, all-too-briefly, *Melody Maker* was an unorthodox primer in subversive French thought that happened to take the form of a widely available pop magazine. It's worth pointing out, of course, that not all readers were quite so convinced by the more edgy and esoteric contributions – much as, a few years earlier, sales figures of the *New Musical Express* had drastically tumbled in response to the daring, and often splendidly demented, efforts by Ian Penman, Paul Morley and others to re-make and re-model that rival magazine as an organ of Situationist sloganeering and arch Po-Mo theorizing. (Morley has since been rightly disdainful of music journalism's steady move towards a now-dominant consumer-guide mode, despairing at the "librarian" fogeyness of ever-worthy monthlies like *Q* and *Mojo*). But despite inevitable resistance to the Barthes-citing, bliss-seeking style from some hostile readers (who demanded doctrinaire, canon-respecting recommendations and properly 'objective' analyses), my own imperfect memory is that in 1987, and on into the truly magnificent year of 1988 (Pixies' *Surfer Rosa*; My Bloody Valentine's *Isn't Anything*; Talk Talk's *Spirit of Eden*; Sonic Youth's *Daydream Nation* …) the most impressive of the *Melody Maker* writing was often elliptical, lyrical, theoretically-informed or highly personal but it wasn't wilfully opaque. Rather, it seemed to me, in a variety of ways, eager to please, eager to engage an audience. Reynolds *et al* – unlike many academics or art writers today – wrote as if someone, even if only their less theory-inclined colleagues, might actually enjoy reading what they had to say. They wrote as if their abundant enthusiasm might just be communicable – however deconstructive their critical position, however unresolved or contradictory their opinions, however purposefully chaotic their articulations of sensation and intuition – and as if their energetic pursuit of new perspectives might, in fact, change someone else's point of view too. It was galvanizing, then, to gain the sense that criticism could be complex but also committed to at least

some version of 'lucidity', that it could be capable, in an intellectually credible manner, of capturing something of the subjective turbulence and uncertainty of an 'art' experience while also being convincing and welcoming to non-initiates.

This luminous *Melody Maker* moment passed quickly, of course – so quickly, perhaps, that it would be foolhardy to suggest that such a fleeting period in the history of a now-defunct magazine could offer anything as concrete as a model for future critical activity. But my nostalgic admiration for the generous editorial policy and risk-taking critical practice of this otherwise quite 'ordinary' publication remains undimmed (even if what I would choose to celebrate, whether theoretically or artistically, is likely to be a little different today). For this formative fascination with a particularly Dionysian paradigm of music journalism helped to make 'criticism' itself seem something worth celebrating, just as it has continued to keep open the question of what the 'proper' place and purpose of criticism might be – and of what 'improper' thoughts it might yet prompt.

An art-critical coda. 'Celebration' (so central to these vague memories and barely half-baked speculations) can also be framed as 'affirmation', and in a recent paper written for the symposium *Canvases and Careers today: Criticism and its Markets*, George Baker has argued that a "criticism-as-affirmation" is one of the viable "lives" that art criticism might now lead. (Criticism in these terms is seen to be in need of a new lease of life, having been sent into early retirement as a result of the dynamic critical capacities of contemporary curatorship) In any traditional sense, 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":

> Instead of judgement (good vs. bad), critical affirmation brings something – thought and art – to visibility. It is something like what Boris Groys has recently called a form of 'phenomenological criticism', a simple making-visible and perceivable of art, as opposed to historicization, judgement or critique. But affirmation is not just a making-visible, but also a making-possible: criticism as affirmation links critical discourse to the art object in the modality of creating a new space of being for the work of art (and for criticism), new possibilities.[7]

Baker's thesis on art criticism here is strongly influenced by the emphasis on 'becoming' that is central to the writings of Gilles Deleuze (also an important influence on Simon Reynolds, most particularly as he began to immerse himself in dance music and rave culture during the early 1990s), and Baker quotes admiringly a passage from Deleuze that he once had pinned above his writing desk as an inspirational reminder of his critical goals. Writing should not be about "judging life in the name of a higher authority which would be the good, the true," says Deleuze. Rather "it is a matter of evaluating every being, every action and passion, even every value, in relation to the life they involve." Accordingly, we must aim to see the "good" as "outpouring, ascending life, the kind which knows how to transform itself, to metamorphose itself according to the forces it encounters, and which

forms a constantly larger force within them, always increasing the power to live, always opening new 'possibilities'…"[8]

In advancing such a critical attitude (and aptitude) a fundamental question for Baker is, nevertheless, how to 'affirm' in a manner that is not merely instrumental or, more accurately perhaps, how to cultivate a criticism-as-affirmation while acknowledging that the former instrumental roles for art criticism have been usurped. Coupled with an aspiration for criticism is, then, a historically and art-institutionally specific anxiety about its 'lateness' – the 'time' of criticism has passed, its redundancy confirmed, so what might critics do now? Baker's hunch is that the art world's cold-shouldering of this once powerful cultural form is to welcomed: only now, shorn of its duties, and shunted to the margins, might criticism re-invent itself, revelling in the freedom of a new-found art-world 'autonomy'. A "criticism-of-lateness," Baker proposes, might begin to invent new criteria and modes of operation[9]. "Late criticism," as he calls it – consciously echoing Edward Said's thoughts on "late style" – would be a criticism that seeks to employ "wilfully anachronistic criteria,"[10] that would "locate the art and the artist who falls outside of the times."[11] It would be, intriguingly, "a criticism of anomalies."[12]

Given my earlier, stated predilection for forms of criticism that retain some degree of perverse disregard for propriety, I am very taken with 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. His notion of a newly 'autonomous' form of criticism is, I think, interesting and intelligent – but it surely falls short by undervaluing the potential of testing the many live *situations* of criticism. A real joy of the *Melody Maker* writing that so delighted and disturbed me as a youth was the combination of an affirmative mode with a pronounced and impertinent sense of context: a sense of being n the right place and utterly out of place all at the same time. And it is perhaps not a space of autonomy that will forge a 'new' criticism, but the affirmative dynamism of a richer, more profoundly plural sense of criticism's potential relations, audiences and sites of activity.

---

1. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, Florida: Harvest, 1982, p. 56.

2. David Stubbs article on The Young Gods and a small number of other examples of late 1980s Melody Maker writing can be found at http://archivedmusicpress.wordpress.com/http://archivedmusicpress.wordpress.com/

3. Susan Sontag, 'Writing itself: On Roland Barthes', introduction to *The Barthes Reader*, London: Vintage, 1982, p. xi.

4. ibid, p. xii.

5. Simon Reynolds, 'Music and Theory', *Frieze*, http://www.frieze.com/comment/article/music_theory/http://www.frieze.com/comment/article/music_theory/, 18 September 2009.

6. ibid.

7. George Baker, 'Late Criticism', in Daniel Birnbaum and Isabelle Graw (eds.) *Canvases and Careers Today: Criticism and its Markets*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008, p. 28.

8. These Deleuze quotes are taken from *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 141.

9. Baker, p. 31.

10. ibid. p. 31.

11. ibid. p. 32.

12. ibid.

Critical Masses: Towards a New Medium for Art Criticism

Suzanne van der Lingen is a practicing artist currently based in the Netherlands.

With advances in technology and cutbacks in finances, change is a given. *Circa* has to take on the difficult task of maintaining its position as Ireland's leading art-criticism publication whilst shifting from the printed medium to a virtual, online platform. 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. The move by no means equates to diluting critical judgement. The possibilities that an online publication brings with it – a higher degree of interactivity, wider accessibility, and the expanded possibilities of multimedia coverage – all offer brilliant potential if approached conscientiously.

If art is already and always moving away from established forms, it seems correct that the critique of it follow suit and appropriate new forms of communication as well. Jörg Heiser refers to the art dealer Seth Siegelaub and his claim that "the possibility of the dissemination of an artwork is its only 'physical reality'."[1] Bernard C. Heyl has written, "…if a quality recognized by one period as a certain kind of value becomes for another period an entirely different value, how can the value reasonably be considered to have ontological subsistence in the object?"[2] Grasping this instability, an online format offers exciting ways to disseminate art and its theoretical framework, potentially enabling a further democratisation of art and its audience.

For example, the artist Marcel van Eeden posted a new drawing up on his website daily as a supplement to his exhibition in the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam this year.[3] He also has a Facebook page, a Twitter account and a YouTube channel. Equally, an online publication can easily make articles interactive by including related links in the text, adding slideshows and video interviews, allowing comments, and even going so far as to organise online real-time discussions. *Flypmedia.com* is an ambitious example of an online publication fully exploring its multimedia potentials, and last year in the US the first-ever National Summit on Arts Journalism was streamed on *ustream.tv* (the videos are still available to watch online), with online viewers able to e-mail questions to be directly answered in the live discussion.

What really makes the potential of online culture so intriguing is that lesser-known names have the potential to reach as large an audience as more established ones. Jen Bekman, a curator based in New York, is a pioneer of using the internet as a tool for cultural promotion. Having launched *Hey, Hot Shot!*, an online competition for up-and-coming photographers, she has given relatively unknown

practitioners the possibility to reach a wider audience. Their work is published on her website, they receive online feedback from a panel of professional judges, and can win the chance to exhibit in Bekman's eponymous gallery in New York. Since its launch in 2005, the competition has grown to become a significant accolade. Bekman's goal is to nourish emerging artists as well as emerging collectors; as for her wide-reaching online presence, she has stated in an interview, "I don't think you need to be mediocre to reach a broad audience …There is a lot more permeability now, in terms of class and taste."[4]

Heyl has written, "…liking, understanding, and approbation are three different aspects of participation in a point of view."[5] Ideally, an online art journal can promote a debate, involving both contributors and readers, which will consider these three aspects as individual but significant factors in the critique of art. To cite curator Philippe Vergne:

I like what Thomas Hirschborn says about theory and philosophy. He reads it, needs it, absorbs it, and at the same time isn't sure he understands all of it. But he makes it his. I like this idea that what we do carries this element of misunderstanding. I like the idea that we might be writing a history of misunderstanding.[6]

The budget cuts and the culture industry's response to them could have as big an impact on art criticism as Duchamp's *Fountain* did on art, or the critics of *Cahiers du Cinema* did on French film. What art criticism should promote above all is a considered approach to opening up conversation around opinion, theory and context. In her book *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Susan Buck-Morss wrote:

… the transmission of culture (high and low) … is a political act of the highest import – not because culture in itself has the power to change the given, but because historical memory affects decisively the collective, political will for change. Indeed, it is its only nourishment.[7]

A convergence of critical thought and medium is a powerful political tool. The current economic and consequent technological shifts should act as a catalyst for a constructive debate around critical discourse and its dissemination.

1. Jörg Heiser, *All of a Sudden: Things that Matter in Contemporary Art*, Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2008, p. 239.

2. Bernard C. Heyl, *New Bearings in Esthetics and Art Criticism: a Study in Semantics and Evaluation*, London: Oxford University Press, 1943, p. 105; available at: http://library.du.ac.in/dspace/bitstream/1/7103/1/New%20Bearins%20In%20Esthetics%20And%20Art%20Criticism.pdf

3. See http://www.marcelvaneeden.nl/cm/ and http://www.nederlandsfotomuseum.nl/index.php?option=com_nfm_agenda&task=view&id=241&Ite

mid=166; see also Chris Fite-Wassilak, 'Marcel van Eeden: The Archaeologist', *Circa*, Issue 122, Winter 2007, pp. 106 – 107; available here: http://www.growgnome.com/Downloads/eeden.pdf

4. Eric Miles, 'Jen Bekman's Gallery Without Walls', in *FOAM international photography magazine*, winter 2007, issue 13, 2007, p. 26.

5. Bernard C. Heyl, op. cit., p. 98.

6. Philippe Vergne, in *Ice Cream: Contemporary Art in Culture*, London: Phaidon, 2007, p. 11.

7. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1991, p. x.

The Hope for an Open Wound

Chris Fite-Wassilak is a writer, freelance critic and independent curator, as well as a part-time cheesemonger; he is a regular contributor to *ArtPapers*, *FlashArt*, *Frieze*, and the *Visual Artists Newsletter*, as well as writing for *ArtReview*, *Art and Australia*, *Circa* and online for *Artforum*.

When asked to write and reflect on art criticism – trying to separate yourself from the issue, to get off the hamster wheel and look at its mechanism – it's hard to avoid from first chanting the usual trite truisms of the trade, so let's get them out of the way: that the same names and shows keep cropping up; how difficult it is to find someone actually being insightfully critical; and that visibility counts for more than what's actually written. And like any persistent rumour, there are kernels of truths to these generalisations. Yes, larger publications do tend to turn up their noses a bit at shows unless they've been pre-vetted on the rumour mill, overlooking the fact that the vicissitudes and practicalities of running a publication can remove and disjoint you from the very activities on which one is meant to be commenting. Yes, a lot of articles end up sounding more like pat-on-the-back monographs than a critical reflection on an artist's practice. And yes, a large proportion of reviews end up by and large as stuffing for press-clipping folders. The institutions of art have become remarkably adept at utilising criticism in a particular way – emphasizing its form (the lengths and relative prominence of features, authors worn like badges on a school blazer), while treating its content like a private conversation that is politely ignored.

But the problem with these common complaints is their implication or assumption of a singular community and perspective. As if it was all a tidy *Truman Show* one-town set-up, each artist with their own gallery and the promise of an institutional retrospective down the line, with attentive, theory-led critics from fat glossy mags providing continual running commentary. As if all the zines, conversations, informal discussions and unseen efforts didn't exist behind a set of singular words that all start with capitals: Art, Culture, Criticism. So, like the debates on the decline of 'skill' in art, the loss of proper dining etiquette, or the last great American novel, we can just go on and dance with the fact that there are no more over-arching perspectives or Grand Narratives. The supposed 'crises' in art criticism proclaimed again and again – its constant anxieties to uphold some sort of standards as if it were the last stronghold of some ancient order under threat from the petulant would-be-king of the marketplace – are not dissimilar from other cultural movements this past century, in an ever-evolving fracturing and atomization to innumerable colloquial, multi-vocal and democratic forms that run alongside, underneath, over and within those pre-existing. The 'art world' might not be an overly populated place, but it sure as hell ain't one place we can make sense of in any coherent, sweeping way. And who would want to? Its forms of criticisms then should be as varied as the manifold forms art can take.

If there is a crisis in criticism, it is quite simply a practical one. As an almost extreme form of specialisation, this is not a place to make a living and simultaneously keep straight-faced integrity. When I meet other critics and mention I freelance, their first reaction is, "You don't make a living from it, do you." It's not a question. The rates most publications pay (with the more old-fashioned ones demanding exclusivity), there's no way of surviving without teaching or hopping on some form of the institutional gravy train. At the same time, full-time positions as a writer are becoming more and more scarce – newspapers and magazines have an increasingly smaller skeleton crew and a large base of contributors, and many publications have recently begun having lower word counts in exchange for simply more articles and reviews. So perhaps to add another truism into the mix: the role of the independent critic is not a financially viable one. Most critics are today 'embedded' like war journalists, writing from positions within museums, galleries and universities. It brings to mind Jerry Bruckheimer's being appointed adviser to the Pentagon on how to portray the Iraq war in the US media; photographers have subsequently commented on the 'sanitising' effect of the censorship on coverage. Despite Deconstructionist claims of critically occupying a structure to comment on it, I would have to say that being embedded poses more limitations than anything else, by already determining what kinds of practices you are exposed to and defining your avenues for engagement. But then, with the bastardised social-professional networking life of the art worker, circulating among colleagues, friends, and aspirational acquaintances, the 'independent' critic is probably just as compromised.

The oft-repeated question of whether criticism is relevant or needed today is more what *kinds* of criticisms are relevant. Ideally, criticism is an intricate and complex system of responses, both intuitive and intellectual, setting up a sort of feedback triangle or matrix between an artist's work, the writer, and the reader / viewer. The dominant model for art's criticism has always been that of literary criticism, taking on the role of the distanced, third-person narrator who speaks with the tone of an almost weary academic. This is the voice of documentation, of the library, of the archive, and so accordingly is largely bound to print media. And yet, one of the huge, and most enjoyable, benefits I've found in this model is its inherent possibility for slow, long-term conversations. Months or years after an exhibition has passed and an article has been written, various readers can re-read or stumble upon a piece, and re-visit the thoughts held there and experience the work in ways that can subtly change. This gradual, sea-change space of print criticism works perhaps in a parallel space to an artwork that can be viewed over many occasions, like popping in to the National Gallery to see Caravaggio's *Taking of the Christ* or, maybe more appropriately to my analogy, a novel that you read and re-read. Reactions and emotions build and shift around both the artwork and the writing, and relationships and meanings become more complex.

The considered realm of the literary model of criticism, though, is a cumbersome one, and usually favours the theoretical and conceptual. The opposite corollary to that model, then, might well be the brash, first-person informality of the blog. Both, I think, are necessary, though the blog is still a sort of derided younger sibling. The shorthand models of online forums and blogspots hold much of the potential for more experimental art criticisms, but good, strong examples are still few and far between

– while music, film, and even restaurant criticism seem miles ahead in adapting and expanding to online formats. The advantage of online writing is its immediacy and subjectivity, which also means trawling through a lot of garbage, but I enjoy the anarchy. Here, the saying 'Everyone's a critic' is carried through without sarcasm. As such, the online 'location' that is to me most valuable is the Comment section following any article published online. Quick, more spontaneous and communal conversations, sometimes quite dithering, sometimes ironing out exactly what you think needed to be drawn out of a piece. Here is 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.

Today's criticisms have the possibility to be more personal and evocative than ever before, and it is these risks I'd like to see more of. There are apparent gaps in ways to approaching criticism, from visual responses to exhibitions, artists' replies to pieces written about them, to more phenomenological, subjective and experiential missives on particular works, and even (much as I hate to admit it) a lack in conservative perspectives (not the traditionalist, 'that's not art' approach, but more as in right-leaning interpretations of contemporary work). The point is, criticism is not a single thing but merely a medium to encourage, engage and create a polyphony of conversations and an endlessly open debate.

Art Criticism – Disrupting or Creating Consensus?

Sarah Tuck is the Executive Director of Create, the national development agency for collaborative arts.

Typing 'art criticism' into Google reveals an anxiety that art criticism has lost its relevance and has been usurped by other more compelling and more immediate routes to information. Numerous articles speak of an abandonment of theoretical rigour and evaluative criticism, replaced by neutral introductions of an artist's work.[1]

In addressing the question 'What is the role and value of art criticism at present?', posed by *Circa*, it seems necessary to think of audiences and to ask who is the art critic writing for? This is not to suggest that the art critic's primary role is to serve and service a reader's information needs, but to look instead at the possible functions of art criticism and, by extension, of an online journal, and in so doing identify and propose how art criticism can reassert relevance through the location of the arts in a wider discursive field of political, cultural, technological and economic critique.

If "polemics on art criticism are as cyclical and predictable as local television weather reports,"[2] as Damon Willick writes, this reconsideration of the role and value of art criticism invited by *Circa* has to also ask why are we asking this question. In the e-mail invitation received, it stated that "We *(Circa)* do not wish to dwell upon crises," though in responding to the core question it seems necessary to trace the contemporary situation through debates on the role and value of art criticism, in order to suggest future possibilities.

Damon Willick provides the following summary: "Writers [arts critics] usually fall into binary oppositions: one side of the debate decries the absence of aesthetic standards, mourning the loss of formalist criticism à la Clement Greenberg, while the other side derides formalism's subjectivity and elitism while defending itself against accusations of academicism and political correctness."[3] Needless to say, a nostalgic return to a Greenberg model of art criticism would ignore the legacies (and lessons) of postmodernism, poststructuralism, feminism, multiculturalism and globalism, since the tropes of aesthetic judgement and quality have long been used to exclude. It might be interesting to ask what an artist from Indonesia resident in Ireland would encounter in their first serious interview in an arts publication – a passing interest in cultural exoticism, serious engagement, or tokenism? Would her contribution as an artist be understood as a new form of knowledge?

It is through a critical address to these questions that art criticism and an online arts journal might locate future relevance for a domestic and international audience, radically disrupting the "unthought axiomatics"[4] of the arts, art criticism and globalisation.

Earl Miller, in 'The State of Art Criticism and Critical Theory', assesses the current relationship between art criticism and the globalised market:

If the market killed criticism, it is Damien Hirst's notorious skull made of diamonds (*For the Love of God*, 2007) that is its grave marker. Staring out against a stark black background on the cover of the ad-heavy, coffee-table-book-sized April 2008 issue of *Artforum* about the art market, it stands as ghoulish testimony to art criticism's loss of relevance. A controversial work arguably satirizing the excesses of the art market, *For the Love of God* is, however one views it, one of the most ostentatious pieces of art ever made. Its placement on the cover of an issue devoted to the art market in its current state of hypergreed shows how the commercial threatens the critical, even as the magazine proposes to reflect critically on the phenomenon.[5]

Miller's implication of *Artforum* in failing to critique and reflect upon the arts as 'traded commodities' would suggest that art criticism needs to understand itself as a political and cultural activity, embedded in the everyday and in the contest and argument of public meaning and the public realm.

At this year's Australian Arts Council's annual arts-marketing summit in Brisbane a panel of directors and arts marketers were asked 'Now Everyone's a Critic Who's a Critic Now?'.

Marcus Westbury, in his report on the panel, describes how the internet, blogs, e-mail lists and social-networking sites are bypassing the traditional critic. With Twitter and Facebook amplifying, "We're all critics the moment we see a show, read a book, watch a film and share our reactions to it … creating our own criticism, commentary and feedback without thinking about it."[6]

We are all now actively encouraged to be popular critics through shows like *Pop Idol* and *The X-Factor*. Alongside these FreeMantle Media properties, FreeMantle boasts that it is "is one of the world's largest and most successful creators, producers and distributors of outstanding entertainment brands. From prime time and serial drama to entertainment and factual entertainment, our programmes continue to excite, challenge, entertain and inspire audiences." This description can be compared with the proposed development of the cultural industries in SIDS – Small Island Developing States (Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago and the Eastern Caribbean):

The term cultural industry describes the role of cultural entrepreneurs and arts enterprises … in the production, distribution and consumption of film, television, books, music, theatre, dance, visual arts, masquerade, multimedia, animation and so on. The cultural industries sector is not just a commercial arena, it is an aesthetic and social space where spiritual values, psychic meaning and bodily pleasures are displayed, enacted and represented.[7]

Given this backdrop, in which the grammar of global entertainment franchises and policy drives to articulate 'creative industries' begin to resemble one another, the role and value of the arts and by extension the role and value of an online arts journal and art criticism become a pressing question. This question then reformulated is not a reiteration into the binary logic summarised by Willick, but is instead a consideration of arts as a cultural, social, political, aesthetic and critical practice.

Westbury's account of We are all Critics Now and FreeMantle's franchised shows of audience as critic are also examples of technological advances which allow for more 'products' to bypass any moment of public launch and debate, increasingly delivered as a private moment of consumption and judgement. Fetishising new technology in cyber-libertarian discourse, that assumes these new technologies are value-free or historically novel, finds in neo-liberalist discourse the corresponding echo of consensus.

It is against this background of a fetishised populism, assaults and disinvestment in public services, and a precarious labour market that artists work and in which an online arts journal publishes. Given these contexts, perhaps the most pertinent and appropriate response to *Circa*'s question – 'What is the role and value of art criticism at present?' – is to ask: what art?

To commence with this question could lead to "a rigorous and inclusive dissensus"[8] through which the role and value of the arts could be publicly debated and ideas of critique and criticality could be repurposed and re-imagined.

1. See 'Fillip and Artspeak present Judgment and Contemporary Art Criticism': http://judgmentandartcriticism.com/

2. See Damon Willick, 'Criticism after Art', published in *X-TRA Contemporary Art Journal*: http://www.x-traonline.org/past_articles.php?articleID=175http://www.x-traonline.org/past_articles.php?articleID=175

3. ibid.

4. See *Understanding Derrida*, for a discussion on 'deconstructive invention' that "invents nothing, when in invention the other does not come," ed. Jack Reynolds and Jonathan Roffe, London: Continuum, 2004.

5. Earl Miller, 'The State of Art Criticism and Critical Theory', *C: International Contemporary Art*, 2008; http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+state+of+art+criticism+and+critical+theory%3A+Earl+Miller…-a0192257858

6. Marcus Westbury: http://www.marcuswestbury.net/2010/08/03/now-everyones-a-critic-whos-a-critic-now/

7. See Keith Nurse: ‘The Cultural Industries and Sustainable Development in Small Island Developing States’; http://portal.unesco.org/en/files/24726/110805219811CLT3.doc/CLT3.doc

8. See Lane Relyea: ‘Impure Thoughts’, published in *The State of Art Criticism,* ed. James Elkin, Routledge, 2008.

Critical Fantasies

Matt Packer is Curator of Exhibitions & Projects, Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Cork.

Criticism appears to be in a situation where there is considerable consensus around its failings, and yet no immediate demand for its overhaul. What is commonly sought from criticism in an Irish context – the top three: judgment, authority, acuity – is more often cited as occurring 'elsewhere' (in occasional examples of *Artforum, October, Texte zur Kunst*) and in the past (the 1960s and early 1970s, most particularly). As such, there is a concern for critical standards that is dangerously close to coming across as an anxiety of competitivity and historicity: an emphasis on tactics within the existing benchmarks of criticism, rather than principled on criticism's progressivity and better function.

What complicates any review of criticism in an Irish context is the fact that criticism is universally doomed, or reportedly so. Criticism's failings and disempowerments seem so self-evident and so certain, that we might even accuse the art journal *October* of gallows humour in their decision to dedicate their 100th anniversary volume to the theme of 'Obsolescence', devoting twenty-eight pages to a roundtable discussion on 'The Present Conditions of Art Criticism'.[1]

(Similar in apprehension is CIRCA's approach of asking writers to respond to the issue of criticism in the present issue, after its well known financial difficulties. An approach that is simultaneously a dance of death, and a way of shoring-up CIRCA's performative functions for its own survival)

The truth is that criticism's 'obsolescence' – its 'crisis' and its 'issue' – have become criticism's own engine. Writing in the 1980s about the status of criticism in the 1970s, Elizabeth Bruss recognized "an increase of theoretical activity … whenever the function of criticism itself is in doubt."[2] And, while the conferences, discussions, and publications have kept coming in different varieties, each stressing the urgency of their enquiries, it seems that the doubts about the function of criticism haven't really changed. There is still the question of autonomy, the compromised relationship with the art market, the loss of influence and purchase to both art practices and art histories, the redundancy of criteria. Professional homelessness. The internet is perhaps one of the few lonely changes that have altered this landscape of criticism in recent years, and yet rarely is this issue convincingly taken up.

Together with the resuscitative doubts of criticism's function, there is also the fog caused by the desire to recapture old glories. The models of criticism from the 1960s and early 1970s – more precisely the *Artforum* years 1962 to 1974 – seem to be a permanent fantasy of criticism's possibilities from our contemporary perspective; a phase of emergence into new territories of art-making that lingers lazily through a series of super-aestheticized snapshots: trails of cigarette smoke, beardy people, difficult art, fingers pointing, friends won and lost through the high stakes of argument.

This isn't to discount anything of what was achieved during those *Artforum* years, that gave us – in one issue of Summer 1967 – Michael Fried's article 'Art and Objecthood', Robert Morris's 'Notes on Sculpture', Robert Smithson's 'Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site' and Sol LeWitt's 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art'. This being an extraordinary example of a situated criticism that defined the moment and shaped moments to come. It is almost erotic, however, the attempt to install a similar sense of 'emergence' upon our present age that otherwise seems so pale.

The glory days of *Artforum* 1962 – 1974 have to be understood as specific correspondences, rather than general rhetorics. It was a time that witnessed the precise transitions of Greenbergian Formalism, Minimalism, and Conceptual Art, coinciding with a shift of the artistic vocabularies that began to borrow more heavily from across the social sciences. (Examples include Robert Smithson's *A Tour Of The Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* [published in *Artforum*, December 1967] and Dan Graham's *Homes for America*, [published in *Arts Magazine* 1966-67].)

The full consequences of this shift might have actually caused the very problem of criticism that we've since been trying to address: namely that through the expansions of disciplinary vocabulary "it was not the elitism of modernist criticism that was erased, but the larger trans-disciplinary relevance of the specific activity of art criticism itself,"[3] as George Baker has claimed.

Of course, for Conceptual Art, the shift of vocabulary was just one thing in the slipstream of larger wranglings with the entire critical and institutional apparatus, which saw itself attested and appropriated in works by Michael Asher and Joseph Kosuth, among others in the 60s and thereafter. To a certain extent, the traditional exteriority of critical position became internalized within the horizon of artistic practices. As Benjamin Buchloh has written, referring to Conceptual Art: "one of the targets of this work was also the secondary discursive text that attached itself to artistic practice" with a result that "readers' competence and spectatorial competence had reached a level where the meddling of the critic was historically defied and denounced."[4] Charting a similar story of Conceptual Art, Peter Osborne has written of a "an erosion of the division of labour between critic and artist which had emerged in Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century … Its most radical effect was an expansion in the notion of art practice (and hence, the artwork) to include – at its limit – the products of all of the artist's art-related activities."[5]

This internalizing of the critical apparatus continues today also, and through politicized exhibition structures such as *Documenta 11* and the recent installments of the *Istanbul Biennial* that have compromised the traditional exteriority of criticism from another direction. As Liam Gillick has recognized, these exhibition structures "seem to create an excessive core of ideas that sweeps past a sufficiently effective response to it."[6] The criticism that seems missing has therefore been co-opted in two ways: by Conceptual Art and its legacy, operating with the apparatus traditionally offered by the institutions of art and criticism, and also by newly developed curatorial structures that set their priorities to socio-political agency and public-mindedness. Most of the contemporary frustrations about criticism result from trying to prise open this fold, which has the double effect of designating its

separateness. I would argue that the convergence upon the critical apparatus by artists informed by Conceptual Art strategies and, secondly, new curatorial structures, have combined with the consequent shifts in disciplinary vocabulary to reposition criticism with plenty of options and rather diffuse powers.

More often, criticism can seem to do nothing more than point to discrepancies between art's pronouncements and effects, sometimes brilliantly, sometimes poorly. I'm not sure that this qualifies as a crisis. We can perhaps begin to imagine a different criticism once many of the assumptions around criticism's capacities are given up as nostalgic poses.

1. George Baker, Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, Andrea Fraser, David Joselit, James Meyer, Robert Storr, Hal Foster, John Miller and Helen Molesworth, *The Present Conditions of Art Criticism*, October, Vol. 100, Obsolescence (Spring, 2002).

2. Elizabeth Bruss, *Beautiful Theories: The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism*, The John Hopkins University Press, 1982.

3. George Baker, *The Present Conditions of Art Criticism*, October, Vol. 100, Obsolescence (Spring, 2002).

4. Benjamin Buchloh, *The Present Conditions of Art Criticism*, October, Vol. 100, Obsolescence (Spring, 2002).

5. Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art and / as Philosophy,* in *Re-writing Conceptual Art*, edited by Michael Newman and Jon Bird, Reaktion, 1999.

6. Liam Gillick, *Claiming Contingent Space*, in Liam Gillick, *Proxemics: Selected Writings 1988 – 2006*, JRP Ringier, 2006.

Say who I am[1]: Or a Broad Private Wink[2]

I had two books with me, which I'd meant to read on the plane. One was *Words for the Wind*, by Theodore Roethke, and this is what I found in there:

> I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
> I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
> I learn by going where I have to go.

My other book was Erika Ostrovsky's *Céline and His Vision*. Céline was a brave French soldier in the First World War – until his skull was cracked. After that he couldn't sleep, and there were noises in his head. He became a doctor, and he treated poor people in the daytime, and he wrote grotesque novels all night. No art is possible without a dance with death, he wrote."[3]

Re-imagining the art object as sharing a number of basic ontological qualities with the riddle, I would like to discuss some ways to write about, or again write *round* the art object: to illicit; to unlock; to *induce* its essential obscurity with essential obscurity.

Approaching the writing of this text, I looked back at my original proposal, and discovered that I had used a very wrong word. In fact the usage of this wrong word was somewhat of fundamental error on my part, and thankfully, now that I've amended this, I can proceed with the proper word, (or so I hope).

My wrong word was *deduce* – what I really should have said was *induce*. For to loiter near the art object, with the intention of capture through critique should essentially be a procedure of *induction* rather than of *deduction*, in that we are creating or tracing a broader, possibly more fertile environment through close looking, rather than tracking a logical conclusion from the clues given. To concur with Maurice Blanchot as he would have it in his 1941 novel *Thomas the Obscure*, "…making no distinction between the figure and that which is, or believes itself to be, its centre, whenever the complete figure itself expresses no more than the search for an imagined centre."[4] Working in the margins, writing the "…the inside meaning of it if you understand me."[5]

We should keep in mind that after all, the supposed ur-deducer, Sherlock Holmes, had detailed knowledge of 'everything' that could be applied to his inductive investigations of crime, but little to no knowledge of the material world outside of his investigations. We can see this inductive approach – the approach of the conscientious critic perhaps – here from Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet* originally published in 1887, in a comment made by Holmes to Watson:

> Most people, if you describe a train of events to them, will tell you what the result would be. They can put those events together in their minds, and argue from them that something will come to pass. There are few people, however, who, if told them a result, would be able to evolve from their own inner consciousness what the steps were which led up to that result. This power is what I mean when I talk of reasoning backward… [6]

This backwards reasoning is temporal in nature – traversing past-production no longer accessible, shot through a present of inscription, towards a future that will probably be barely dented by our observations. Without this reasoning however, there cannot be a full understanding of *what* or *why*, critical art writing that harbours at its core a vocative aggregate problematises yet harmonises its subject; to borrow an observation of Marie Darrieussecq's, "The unsaid is that which advances literature, that which it explores as a virgin or submerged land. Ghosts are born of the unsaid… To write is to give a voice to ghosts."[7]

To read and write the object simultaneously.

Or again, to write as you read.

All of this of course has direct implications not only for the validity of the judgement procedures of art criticism, but also for its direction, speed and methods of approach.

Let's reconsider Sherlock Holmes' impulse of reasoning backward in relation to an observation from Michel Tournier in his autobiography *The Wind Spirit*, an observation in which we may catch strains of the faint scent of critical methodology: "… in all good philosophy the solution always precedes the problem. The problem is nothing but the shadow cast by its solution, a fountain of clarity that spurts *motu proprio* ['of its own accord' – *Ed*.] into the empyrean of the intelligible."[8]

Whilst I would not necessary hold with, or even particularly desire the type of clarity that is generally assumed to be of use to culturally assemble (or is that re-assemble?) a 'complete' art object – rendering it less leaky, and therefore more substantive or even marketable from any viewable angle – I would like to spend some more time re-imagining how backwards movement might help us to 'assess' the art object more clearly, that is to further the purposes of parlous (here meaning difficult or uncertain, rather than its homophone *power*less) navigation.

But then again, there's backwards movement, and there's backwards movement.

Looking for the wrong kind of help here, we can glance briefly toward a fundamental principle of Cartesian analysis, which suggests that when given a problem to be solved we examine the conditions to be fulfilled, dividing them into simpler conditions that are themselves easier to solve, to go backwards, so to speak, from the given problem to the simpler and solvable constituents. *This* type of backwards movement presents a problem, however, in art writing, in terms of how to divide, sort or

again order the parts into a form that seems easier to inspect. The 'ordering' action, by its very nature, suggests a sequential or narrative thrust toward a specific destination, the place of judgement, not, I would suggest, a very useful movement in criticism, and one that is often characterised by descriptive, rather than inscriptive processes.

The kind of backwards movement that interests us here is more closely identified with the seemingly counter-intuitive dynamism of Maurice Blanchot's 'Orphic Gaze': its power to inspect, to vaporize, to transform. Blanchot has said in his essay 'The Gaze of Orpheus':

> At first sight, the image does not resemble a cadaver, but it could be that the strangeness of a cadaver is also the strangeness of the image… what is left behind is precisely this cadaver, which is not of the world either – even though it is here – which is rather behind the world… and which now affirms, on the basis of this, the possibility of a world – behind, a return to backwards."[9]

This "return to backwards" depicts a resistance or perhaps more exactly a sly challenge to comprehension, highlighting as it does the essential obscurity of the image – or here as we are terming it, the art object – thereby suggesting that it must be approached in a different way, and, just as the cadaver itself is in a state of "infinite erosion", so too is the art object, in terms of its physical presence, together with its cultural and economic currencies. Contemporary art criticism that is nurtured by the appearance of value may be both witness to and witnessed to be assembling an inauthentic absolute object or teratological corpus, through rationalist grafting of interpretation from scrappy parts – criticism demanding to be read of itself, whilst simultaneously calling for a re-reading of something which is outside of itself.

We can look to less orthodox modes of criticism to examine the dissolution or again dissemination of the absolute object, in the same way as we look to fiction to lead us on an aporetic procedure; enacting critical judgements through question after question, rather than answer after answer.

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. This complex object, this art object may, by speaking, shed itself of the soup stowage of deductive judgement value, encouraging us to develop the catoptric approach of being reader and writer at the same time: or again to write as we 'read' the object critically.

Monsieur Teste, Paul Valéry's eponymous antihero asserted that, "God made everything out of nothing, but the nothing shows through."[10] Perhaps it is the very 'nothing' of the art object which may be interrogated and indeed celebrated as half-intended discovery through the backward reasoning of

more experimental modes of critical art writing, but only if that very same writing is willing to embrace, and yes, even to embody the inherent obscurity, the delicacy, the dispersive excursion of induction.

1. Daniel Tiffany 'Lyric Substance: On Riddles, Materialism and Poetic Obscurity' in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol.28, No.1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 73.

2. Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Flamingo, 1993), p. 117.

3. Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse 5* (St Albans: Panther, 1972), p. 21.

4. Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas the Obscure*. (New York: David Lewis, 1973), p. 3.

5. Flann O'Brien, op. cit., p. 167.

6. Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), p. 123.

7. http://www.uri.edu/artsci/ml/durand/darrieussecq/en/exc_interview.html (accessed 01 February 2009)

8. Michel Tournier, *The Wind Spirit* (London: Methuen Publishing, 1991), p. 125.

9. Maurice Blanchot, *The Stationhill Blanchot Reader* (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1999), p. 439.

10. Paul Valéry, *Monsieur Teste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 101.

Art Criticism and Writing as Failure: "That is not what I meant at all."

Imelda Barnard is a writer based in Dublin.

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock (1915) by T. S. Eliot pivots around the failure of articulation and the inadequacy of words, a failure that is symptomatic of the speaker's own personal inadequacy. The iteration that "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" and the continued insistence that meaning is deferred, absent, perhaps even impossible, alerts us to the discrepancy between word and thing.[1] According to Zadie Smith, "writing is always the attempted revelation of an elusive, multifaceted self, and yet its total revelation … is a chimerical impossibility. It is impossible to convey all of the truth of all our experience."[2] The compromise that a writer must make, between the way the world is seen and the way it is written about means that "the most common feeling upon re-reading one's own work, is Prufrock's: 'That is not it at all… That is not what I meant, at all…' Writing feels like self-betrayal, like failure."[3] This inability to fix what is fleeting means that writing must accept that there is no absolute meaning to express. Whatever is captured is bound within the unstable fabric of language.

For art criticism, any attempt to approach the chasm between word and thing – a desire to faithfully verbalise what is seen – is complicated by the fact that the artwork itself is an elusive entity. Translating the visual into the verbal exposes the referential inadequacy of word and thing, of both the text and the artwork; the act of writing, never easy, is entangled further when the object of its attention is something as loaded, confusing, obtuse, antagonistic and speculative as a contemporary artwork. The pile of wood in the middle of a white cube gallery space, the semi-figurative paint marks that bleed off the canvas and the neon lights that are blinding in all their look-at-me glory can be felt and written about in innumerable ways. This is part of language's – and art criticism's – dilemma, hinting at the more general difficulties of ekphrasis, of overcoming the 'otherness' of the visual from a textual standpoint. The image – the artwork – cannot literally come into view, meaning that "the textual other must remain completely alien; it can never be present, but must be conjured up as a potent absence or a fictive, figural present."[4] However, the interpretative pluralism that contemporary art fosters, as well as the myriad ways in which to express this interpretation within discourse, renders the gap between word and thing – which so troubles Prufrock – less relevant. Although "at first you feel a bit lost … on sober reflection, you prefer it this way, confronting something and not quite knowing yet what it is."[5] 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.

Smith's study into the nature of writing posits that writers are themselves in possession of 'self-hood', that writing is infused with personality. Much more than biography, this is rather a film through which

we view and process the world. Conversely, Eliot believed personality had little place in writing, arguing instead for impersonality, the text itself an individual entity, yet one tied to a very palpable tradition. Eliot stood firm in his belief that writing and criticism be elevated to the status of an objective science, simultaneously abandoning any trace of the writing self.[6] In similar terms, contemporary art criticism may be seen to revolve around a subjective / objective dichotomy, with the latter encompassing calls for a quasi-scientific and academic form of critique, a writing that leaves the writer's personality very much outside. Despite the oft-perceived de-skilling of art criticism, as separated from the theoretical field of art history, and thus engaged in an activity that is less rigorous and more ephemeral, artistic practice is still situated within a set of validating norms: "Art writing, as pluralistic and uneven as the genre may be, is tightly linked to an established set of references and intellectual expectations … Too much writerly attention to the form of a text can lead to dismissive charges of belle-lettrism."[7] Additionally, the unique development of a complex art vocabulary promotes the sense of contemporary art as a specialism, and although the challenging nature of this field perhaps requires specialist 'artspeak', it also establishes a standard by which to measure all alternative ways of speaking about art. In discussing the possibilities for a philosophy of art criticism, a 'critique of critique', Pablo Lafuente nevertheless acknowledges the difficulties inherent in transforming a vaguely coherent practice into a more empirically rooted discipline: "What is the point of embarking on a process of clarification, definition, stabilisation and institutionalisation of art criticism, precisely when art is involved in a process of blurring demarcated lines and eliminating distinctions?"[8] In searching for a definition applicable to art criticism the resultant feeling is that this term is too loaded, too confining, such that "the word criticism has become part of the problem. Or the problem is that we are asking the wrong thing of the critic: critics are not the painting police nor the sculpture Swat team."[9] Dismissing notions of critical authority – "What authority?" – Adrian Searle further notes that "criticism is never objective, never impartial, never disinterested. It is subjective and partisan."[10] We know that the domain of art criticism admits a limitless number of subjectivities: freelance writers, theorists, curators and professional magazine contributors, to name a few, are all engaged with different methodologies, different audiences, and different agendas. This massive production of art criticism led James Elkins to proclaim a "worldwide crisis," for although it "attracts an enormous number of writers" it is simultaneously "massively ignored."[11]

The subjective nature of writing, or the self-hood which Smith describes, need not be the negative to the positives of critical judgement and impartiality. Writing about art means "… not looking at art in narrow, academic or 'objective' ways, but engaging uncertainty and contingency, suspending disbelief, and trying to create a place for doubt, unpredictability, curiosity and openness."[12] This move away from fixed meaning is elaborated by Susan Sontag, who dismisses the arrogance of interpretation provoked by a content-driven critique. Yet the paradox here, however, is that Sontag's critique, whilst eliminating Prufrock's insistence upon meaning, nevertheless presents the function of criticism as showing "how it is what it is, even that it is what it is." [13] Yet perhaps there is no "what it is" to uncover: always in the process of changing its currency and position, the artwork is continuously remaking itself, shifting meaning from context to context, text to text. The text then is

merely a faint addition that attaches itself to the glut of never-ending interpretations. Bound within discourse, the artwork may be seen to function as a trace, conjuring Derrida's presentation of the trace in language, itself an attempt to escape totality and finite interpretation: "Always differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself. It erases itself in presenting itself, muffles itself in resonating."[14]

Acknowledging the slippery nature of writing allows alternative forms of engagement, and perhaps accounts for the recent insistence upon art-writing as a form of art, privileging the fictive rather than factual. Such critical methodologies engage varying modes of writing, which differ from more academically structured narratives.[15] Rather than a purely objective mode of describing or unveiling, the emphasis is on performance rather than explication – on the "writerly attention to the form of a text" (see above). Answering the mysterious artwork with a form of writing that is itself mysterious opens a tangential dialogue between the visual and verbal, productively accepting the communicative failures within artwork and text. Questioning why more art writers do not "stray from the well-trodden path" to privilege great storytellers as their authorial models, Vivian Rehberg cites Italo Calvino as a writer who pursues a "constant and joyous shuttle between the verbal and visual realms."[16] Calvino asserts that "the word connects the visible trace with the invisible thing, the absent thing,"[17] suggesting that art writing, as a way of speaking the visual – or futilely attempting to – is valuable by its capacity to render absence present. Yet, ultimately, this is a presence that constantly erases and re-presents itself. This turn away from revelation, this failure, alerts us to the successful multiplicity of the artwork, the text and the writing self, all of which leave traces everywhere: "Each life is an encyclopaedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable."[18]

Envisaging the practice of art criticism as exploiting its status as a verbal medium that is utterly incapable of confronting the art object with any form of linguistic certainty frees it from potentially restrictive critique. It also means accepting Prufrock's assertion that it is impossible to say exactly what one would like, that the distance between experiencing an artwork and the moment of facing the blank page is a vast, but productive, one. In the poem *Words, Wide Night* by Carol Ann Duffy, the last line reads "… this is what it is like or what it is like in words."[19] A necessary way of expressing our mode of being in the world, words constantly fail us. But this does not mean that the art critic should turn away from the blank page; rather it is a case of trying to fail better.

---

1. T. S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915). Available at: http://www.bartleby.com/198/1.html

2. Zadie Smith, 'Fail better', in *The Guardian*, 13 January 2007; available at: http://www.barbelith.com/topic/26510

3. ibid.

4. W. J. T. Mitchell, ‘Ekphrasis and the Other’ (1994); see: http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/shelley/medusa/mitchell.html

5. Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1981, p. 9.

6. See T. S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919); available at http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html

7. Vivian Rehberg, ‘Notes to Self’, in *frieze*, Issue 131, May 2010; see: http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/notes_to_self/

8. Pablo Lafuente, ‘Notes on Art Criticism as a Practice’; see ICA Website: http://www.ica.org.uk/Notes on Art Criticism as a Practice by Pablo Lafuente+16958.twlhttp://www.ica.org.uk/Notes%20on%20Art%20Criticism%20as%20a%20Practice%20by%20Pablo%20Lafuente+16958.twl

9. Adrian Searle, ‘Has Big Money Replaced the Pundit as the True Authority in the Art World?’, in *The Guardian*, 18 March 2009; see: http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2008/mar/18/arthttp://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2008/mar/18/art.

10. ibid.

11. James Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, p. 3.

12. Jerry Saltz, ‘Writing Wrongs’, in *frieze*, Issue 94, October 2005; see: http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/writing_wrongshttp://www.frieze.com/issue/article/writing_wrongs

13. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (1964); see: http://www.coldbacon.com/writing/sontag-againstinterpretation.html

14. Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, in Alan Bass (trans), *Writing and Difference*, London: Routledge, 1980, pp. 278 – 94.

15. See, for example, journals such as *The Happy Hypocrite, F. R. David* and *Dot Dot Dot.*

16. Vivian Rehberg, op. cit.

17. Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, quoted in Rehberg, op. cit.

18. ibid.

19. Carol Ann Duffy, *Words, Wide Night*, in *Selected Poems*, London: Penguin, 2006, p. 86.