

HAL FOSTER

Critical theory took a serious beating during the culture wars of the 1980s and the 1990s, and the 2000s were only worse. Under George W. Bush, the demand for affirmation was all but total, and today there is little space for critique even in the universities and the museums. Bullied by conservative commentators, most academics no longer stress the importance of critical thinking for an engaged citizenry, and most curators, dependent on corporate sponsors, no longer promote the critical debate once deemed essential to the public reception of advanced art. Indeed, the sheer out-of-date-ness of criticism in an art world that couldn't care less seems evident enough. Yet what are the options on offer? Celebrating beauty? Affirming affect? Hoping for a "redistribution of the sensible"? Trusting in "the general intellect"? The post-critical condition is supposed to release us from our straitjackets (historical, theoretical, and political), yet for the most part it has abetted a relativism that has little to do with pluralism.¹

How did we arrive at the point where critique is so broadly dismissed? Over the years, most of the charges have concerned the positioning of the critic. First, there was a rejection of *judgment*, of the moral right presumed in critical evaluation. Then, there was a refusal of *authority*, of the political privilege that allows the critic to speak abstractly on behalf of others. Finally, there was skepticism about *distance*, about the cultural separation from the very conditions that the critic purports to examine. "Criticism is a matter of correct distancing," Walter Benjamin wrote over eighty years ago. "It was at home in a world where perspectives and prospects counted and where it was still possible

1. Not much of this is new; see the roundtable published in these pages ten years ago, "The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," *October* 100 (Spring 2002). The fundamental problem remains one touched on there. Confident as a class, the bourgeoisie once sought out the test of criticism; it was seen as central to the give-and-take of its own ideal of a public sphere—but that was long ago. My account here begins with the big picture, hence the slippage between "critique," "criticism," "critical theory," and "critical art"; in what follows I focus on the latter two. Finally, "post-critical" has a different valence in architectural debate, where it is used to draw a line after the theoretical reflexivity of such architects as Peter Eisenman, and to announce a renewed pragmatism of "design intelligence." But its effects do not appear to be much different.

to adopt a standpoint. Now things press too urgently on human society.”² How much more urgent is this pressing today?

Yet not all critique depends on correct distancing. Estrangement à la Brecht is not correct in this sense, and there are interventionist models in art (from Dada to the present) in which critique is produced immanently through techniques of mimetic exacerbation and symbolic *détournement*.³ As for the other old charges (which come mostly from the left), they boil down to two: critique is driven by a will to power, and it is not reflexive about its own claims to truth. Often enough two fears drive these two accusations: on the one hand, a concern about the critic as “ideological patron” who displaces the very group or class that he represents (the famous caution given by Benjamin in “Author as Producer” [1934]); and, on the other, a concern about the scientific truth ascribed to critical theory in opposition to “spontaneous ideology” (the dubious position assumed by Althusser in his re-reading of Marx). Such fears are not misbegotten, but are they reason enough to throw the baby out with the bathwater?

More recent attacks, especially on the critique of representation and the critique of the subject, have operated through guilt by association. Rather than too confident of its truth, the critique of representation was said to sap truth-value as such, and so to promote moral indifference and political nihilism.⁴ The critique of the subject was also charged with unintended consequences, as its demonstration of the constructed nature of identity was said to abet a consumerism of subject-positions (e.g., multiculturalism repackaged as “The United Colors of Benetton”). For many, these two outcomes count as postmodernism *tout court*, which is to be condemned outright as a result. Yet this is a caricature that reduces postmodernism to the rote expression of neoliberal capitalism (i.e., as neoliberalism deregulated the economy, so postmodernism derealized the culture).⁵

More pointed questions about critique have come from Bruno Latour, who focuses on his field of science studies, and Jacques Rancière, who focuses on his

2. Walter Benjamin, “One-Way Street” (1928), in *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1996), p. 476. The other negative association, too complicated to take up here, is that between criticism and *ressentiment*.

3. Not to mention the different variants of deconstruction. On mimetic exacerbation, see my “Dada Mime,” *October* 105 (Summer 2003).

4. In fact such nihilism is an attribute of the right more than the left. Recall the 2004 acknowledgement of a Bush official (said to be Karl Rove): “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out.” See Ron Suskind, “Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush,” *New York Times Magazine* (October 27, 2004). Or consider how the notion of “the social construction” of science is used to dispute the fact of global warming. See Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004).

5. Sometimes that connection is said to be very direct. For example, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello charge that “artistic critique” of the disciplinary workplace was key to “the new spirit of capitalism”—that what they mean by “artistic critique” has little to do with art. See Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2004).

hobbyhorse of contemporary art. For Latour the critic pretends to an enlightened knowledge that allows him to demystify the fetishistic belief of naive others—to demonstrate how this belief is “a projection of their wishes onto a material entity that does nothing at all by itself.”⁶ Here the fatal mistake of the critic is not to turn this antifetishistic gaze on his own belief, his own fetish of demystification, a mistake that renders him the most naive of all. Latour concludes:

This is why you can be at once and without even sensing any contradiction (1) an antifetishist for everything you don’t believe in—for the most part religion, popular culture, art, politics, and so on; (2) an unrepentant positivist for all the sciences you believe in—sociology, economics, conspiracy theory, genetics, evolutionary psychology, semiotics, just pick your preferred field of study; and (3) a perfectly healthy sturdy realist for what you really cherish—and of course it might be criticism itself, but also painting, bird-watching, Shakespeare, baboons, proteins, and so on.⁷

For Rancière, too, critique is compromised by its dependence on demystification. “In its most general expression,” he writes, “critical art is a type of art that sets out to build awareness of the mechanisms of domination to turn the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation.”⁸ Yet not only is awareness not transformative per se, Rancière continues, but “the exploited rarely require an explanation of the laws of exploitation.” Moreover, critical art “asks viewers to discover the signs of capital behind everyday objects and behaviors,” but in so doing only confirms the “transformation of things into signs” that capital performs. Like the critic for Latour, the critical artist for Rancière is trapped in a vicious circle.

Much the same can be said of these two meta-critics. Latour replays the Ur-critical move of Marx and Freud, who argued as follows: “You moderns think you are enlightened, but in fact you are as fetishistic as any primitives—fetishists not only of the commodity but of any object you desire inappropriately.” To this reversal Latour now adds his own: “You antifetishistic critics are also fetishists—fetishists of your own cherished method or discipline.” To this extent, then, he remains within the rhetorical coils of the very critique he wants to cut.

Rancière joins in this challenge to the hermeneutics of suspicion at work in critique à la the Frankfurt School. Yet not only is this challenge a familiar one within critical theory; it was also fundamental to its own shift from a search for hidden meanings to a consideration of “the conditions of possibility” of dis-

6. Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,” p. 237. Also see Latour, “What Is Iconoclasm? Or Is There a World Beyond the Image Wars?,” in *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*, ed. Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), and Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1993).

7. Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,” p. 241.

8. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Cochran (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), pp. 46–47.

course (as in Foucault), of the significance of textual surface (as in Barthes), and so on.⁹ Moreover, Rancière condemns critique for its projection of a passive spectator in need of activation (this is his version of the naive believer in need of demystification), yet he, too, assumes this passivity when he calls for such activation beyond mere awareness.¹⁰ Finally, his “redistribution of the sensible” is a panacea, and, when pitted against the capitalist “transformation of things into signs,” little more than wishful thinking, the new opiate of the art-world left.¹¹

*

All this said, one understands the fatigue that many feel with critique today, especially when, taken as an automatic value, it hardens into a self-regarding posture. Certainly its moral righteousness can be oppressive, and its iconoclastic negativity destructive.¹² Against this image of the critic Latour offers his own:

The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naive believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in need of great care and caution.¹³

Who could not warm to this figure of the empathetic critic? Yet such an ethics of generosity introduces a problem of its own, which is in fact the old prob-

9. In the hands of others both positions have degenerated, the Foucault into discursive generalities without much purchase on actual practices (e.g., the “regimes” that Rancière goes on about), the Barthes into a celebration of effect and affect (more on which below).

10. See Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009).

11. Defined as what can and cannot be sensed and said, “the distribution of the sensible” differs little from what Marx, in his best moments, understood as ideology—less the specific content of thought than its structural delimitation (i.e., how some thought is rendered unthinkable).

12. In this light a suspension of the critical reflex can be beneficial, as Jeff Dolven suggests in an e-mailed response to this text: “Here my basically pragmatist impulses are in play, for I want to know how far it is possible to understand and inhabit versions of aesthetic experience that are uncritical, without surrendering my party ID: epideictic? ludic? freely interpretive? imitative? . . . Can we give play to the kinds of conceptual suspension and ideological indeterminacy that Kant seems to find in aesthetic experience? Can we trust the capacity of properly aesthetic experience of a work of art to resist ideology? Are we prepared to credit works of art with soliciting such experience? And trust that, when we need to (which will be often), we can put our guard up again, have the resources of critique at our disposal, and train them on the very same objects? And allow, perhaps, critique to bound and restrain that aesthetic freedom, and allow, perhaps, aesthetic possibility to redeem objects that critique might urge us to banish? This is a *practical* question—of which, when.”

13. Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,” p. 246.

lem of fetishism, for here again the object is treated as a quasi-subject.¹⁴

Recent art history shows a marked tendency to do much the same thing: images are said to have “power” or agency, pictures to have “wants” or desires, and so on. This corresponds to a similar tendency in recent art and architecture to present work in terms of subjecthood.¹⁵ Although many practitioners aim, in good Minimalist fashion, to promote phenomenological experience, often what they offer is the near-reverse: “experience” returned as “atmosphere” and/or “affect,” in spaces that confuse the actual with the virtual and/or with sensations that are produced as effects yet seem intimate, indeed internal, nonetheless (examples range from James Turrell to Olafur Eliasson in art, and from Herzog and de Meuron to Philippe Rahm in architecture). In this way the phenomenological reflexivity of “seeing oneself see” approaches its opposite: an installation or a building that seems to do the perceiving for us. This, too, is a version of fetishization, for it takes thoughts and feelings, processes them as images and effects, and delivers them back to us for our appreciative amazement. As such it calls for antifetishistic critique.¹⁶

The same is true, more generally, of “cynical reason,” the dismissive knowingness that drains so much energy from our cultural lives and our political lives alike.¹⁷ The problem is not that truths are always hidden (Latour and Rancière are right here) but that many are all too apparent—yet with a transparency that somehow blocks response: “I know the mantra of ‘no taxes’ is a boon to the rich, and a bust for me, but nevertheless . . .” Or: “I know the big museums have more to do with finance capital than with public culture, but nevertheless . . .” As a fetishistic operation of recognition and disavowal (precisely, “I know, but nevertheless”), cynical reason is also subject to antifetishistic critique. Of course, such critique is never enough: one must intervene in what is given, somehow turn it, and take it elsewhere.¹⁸ Yet that turning begins with critique.

14. My critique of fetishization is not a suspicion of desire, pleasure, and so on; it is simply a resistance, more Blakean than Marxist, to any operation whereby human creation (e.g., God, the Internet) is projected above us with an agency of its own, from which position it is as likely to subjugate us as it is to serve us.

15. See Isabelle Graw, ed., *Art and Subjecthood: The Return of the Human Figure in Semicapitalism* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011).

16. What was condemned in Minimalism as a concern with objecthood was really a concern with objectivity—the objectivity of structure, space, bodies in space, and so on. This concern drove the primary line of work out of Minimalism, but now a secondary line has become dominant. On this reversal, see “Painting Unbound,” in my *The Art-Architecture Complex* (London: Verso, 2011).

17. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

18. As indeed Paolo Virno has urged us to do with cynical reason; see *A Grammar of the Multitudes*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, et al. (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004). For a better example of this troping of a given condition, in this case our own as defined by neoliberalism, see Michel Feher, “Self-Appreciation, or the Aspirations of Human Capital,” *Public Culture* 21, no. 1 (2008). There are many more instances in recent art.

*

Maybe I am dead wrong: what about the blossoming of “critical art” today? The rub here lies in how these two words do (or do not) come together. It is common to speak of “social practice art,” but this rubric underscores how removed art is from everyday life even as it attempts to close that divide (it is with a similar magic that Rancière declares the political and the aesthetic always-already bound up with one another). In fact, rather than hold the two terms together, such rubrics tend to release a given practice from the criteria of either social effectivity or artistic invention; the one tends to become the alibi for the other, with any pressure from the one side dismissed as sociological and any from the other as aestheticist—and so the announced resolution breaks down again.

Let me end with an opposition that, though schematic, seems pertinent to this predicament. On the one side, there is the quasi-Gramscian position of activist art that, with aesthetic autonomy dispatched by an unholy alliance of critique and capital, sees a field wide open for social practice. On the other side, there is the quasi-Adornian position that insists on the category of art, but with the forlorn sense that its minimal autonomy now holds minimal negativity, and with little left to do but to go through the formalist motions. In a way this complementarity recalls that of Dada and Surrealism as seen by Debord, who (in his version of dialectics as mutually assured destruction) once wrote, “Dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it, and Surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it.”¹⁹ Our situation might evoke the 1920s in more alarming ways still: economically as an age of boom and bust; politically as a period in which a state of emergency becomes more normal than exceptional; and artistically as a time when, as some practitioners act out economic crisis and political emergency (e.g., Dada again) or build from this chaos (e.g., Constructivism), others flee it in a *retour à l'ordre* (the parallel to the return to degraded versions of the neoclassical tradition in the 1920s might be the return to old idioms of modernist painting and sculpture now).²⁰ If there is anything to this echo, then surely it is a bad time to go post-critical.

19. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p. 136.

20. See David Geers, “Neo-Modern,” in this issue, and my “Preservation Society,” *Artforum* (January 2011).