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John Baldessari. This is Not to Be Looked At. *1968. Courtesy of the artist.*

Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism

George Baker: I want to read from Paul de Man's essay "Criticism and Crisis" to start off. For there, de Man isolates a cycle of innovation and obsolescence that had invaded the activity of criticism by the late sixties, a cycle which it now seems to me is itself obsolescent:

> Well-established rules and conventions that governed the discipline of criticism and made it a cornerstone of the intellectual establishment have been so badly tampered with that the entire edifice threatens to collapse. . . . The crisis aspect of the situation is apparent, for instance, in the incredible swiftness with which often conflicting tendencies succeed each other, condemning to immediate obsolescence what might have appeared as the extreme point of avant-gardism briefly before. Rarely has the dangerous word "new" been used so freely . . . Today almost every new book that appears inaugurates a new kind of nouvelle nouvelle critique.

Perhaps this statement makes some of us nostalgic. For today we do not see the constant renewal of critical discourses of which de Man spoke, a renewal that once took the form of the buttressing of artistic and literary criticism with insights gleaned from fields ranging from philosophy to sociology to structural linguistics to anthropology to psychoanalysis. Critics operating in the midst of this interdisciplinary opening of critical discourse, like Craig Owens, once dreamed of an erasure of cultural "divisions of labor." But perhaps, in a more masochistic move, it was not the elitism of modernist criticism that was erased, but the larger transdisciplinary relevance of the specific activity of art criticism itself: interdisciplinarity became an opportunity for increasingly esoteric languages and for the abandonment of stakes that art criticism had always claimed as its own and had defended. Now, I have no interest in declaring art criticism to be obsolete, but the notion of a crisis interests me: as de Man points out, the two, criticism and crisis, have always traveled hand in hand, and often in productive ways. Never has it been more

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difficult to practice art criticism. What are some of the other conditions of this difficulty, of this crisis today?

Rosalind Krauss: Well, here is an example of a change. Dealers, I think, used to feel that the work of art didn't exist in a discursive vacuum, that it was given its existence in part by critical discourse, and therefore there was a need for catalogs with serious essays by critics. That perceived need, on the part of both the artist and the dealer, seems to have diminished in the last ten years, to the point where the institution of those catalogs has for the most part disappeared. And what seems to have replaced it is simply the fact that the artist is having shows regularly at an established gallery and that is enough. This sense that there is a kind of discursive space within which the artist has to be placed in order for the work to take on a certain kind of importance has pretty much vanished in established art magazines as well.

Benjamin Buchloh: I would like to back this up. I think that we have witnessed in the last twenty years or so an extraordinary process of abstraction, or rather extraction, a heretofore unknown level of specialization. Once the traditional assumption that artistic practices supposedly generate a critical if not a utopian dimension of experience had withered away, we were left with a sense of the primacy of institutional and economic interests. The judgment of the critic is voided by the curator's organizational access to the apparatus of the culture industry (e.g., the international biennials and group shows) or by the collector's immediate access to the object in the market or at auction. Now, all you have to have is the competence of quality judgments and the high-level connoisseurship that serves as investment expertise. My exaggeration—and admittedly it is an exaggeration—serves to say that you don't need criticism for an investment structure, you need experts. You don't have criticism of blue chip stocks either.

Criticism, as a voice that had traditionally been independent of both institutions and markets and that had mediated the various segments of the public sphere of avant-garde culture, was obviously the first thing to go (and the traditional functions of the museum were the next). Both of these elements of the public sphere of art have become mythical and obsolete, since nobody really wants to know and nobody has to know any longer what the context, the history, the intentions, and the desires of artistic practice might have been.

I think this discussion is an extraordinary opportunity to consider these developments from the vantage point of the different perspectives and positions represented by this group: artists who are critics or artists who work in a very critical fashion; two or three generations of art critics and historians speaking to each other; and a critic who is a major museum curator.

Andrea Fraser: Going back to Rosalind's comment for a moment, I think it's important to make a distinction here between different kinds of critical discourses and different kinds of writing about art. I think we have to be careful about how we're defining criticism. For example, if we're defining criticism according to a

criterion of critique, I would have to ask whether essays in gallery catalogs, which are fundamentally marketing tools, ever really played that role. On the other hand, if we're defining criticism as writing about art, while "serious" essays in catalogs and journals may play less of a role in establishing artistic reputations, the popular press and popular media seem to be playing a much greater role.

Buchloh: Can you give us an example?

Fraser: Well, London is the prime example. The Young British Artists are defined by the popular press in Britain more than they are by a domestic art market, of which there is very little. In the United States, fashion and shelter magazines are now playing a greater role in defining artistic careers and, through promotion, creating markets for artists.

David Joselit: I think it's important to think about what criticism does discursively. Traditionally its function has been to judge or to parse. To respond to Benjamin's opening salvo, I think that criticism does still exist as an interpretive mode, but what is hard to maintain today is criticism as a mode of judgment that carries weight. Interestingly, I think that the popular press is where in fact those kinds of judgments matter today. So now you get the YBAs as a kind of popular cultural entity.

Buchloh: The YBAs?

Joselit: Young British Artists. *[Laughter.]* That's probably a symptom.

James Meyer: I'd like to raise the issue of practice: specifically, the relationship of artistic practice to criticism. It seems that a lot of practice out there is uninterested in criticism. One has the sense that practice is not involved in the critical issues and the kinds of critical debates that a lot of us have thought about, and that so many of the people at this table have generated. There seems to be a loss of interest or belief in criticism as something necessary and valuable for its own sake, something to follow. And (although the connection is perhaps less than obvious) we see a disinterest in criticality as well: an artistic method engaged with critical thought, with critical issues. Much work at present does not bother to speak back to critics and to criticism. Obviously, there is an old tradition of artists who have professed not to care about criticism and, in the case of a Flavin or De Kooning, were publicly scornful of critics. But the fact is that often these artists did care, and read criticism avidly. This seems to be not so much the case now.

Robert Storr: If criticism is not being taking seriously, part of the fault may be that the things being said, or at least the language and style that are used to say them, are no longer effective or useful. If you want to pursue certain kinds of arguments and make certain kinds of cases, you must realize that many younger artists are disenchanted by the assumptions and tone of criticism that dominated the seventies, eighties, and to an extent the early nineties. So the manner in which questions are raised is fundamentally important, but writerly approach and critical language are just as important. If you fail to get a

response nowadays, it doesn't necessarily mean that people are totally unconcerned by the basic issues being addressed—it may just be a problem with how they are addressed.

Krauss: Could you be a little more specific? What sort of writers are you talking about?

Storr: I mean, for example, that if Dave Hickey can have the kind of response he has, it has a lot to do with how good of a writer he is.

Buchloh: Does he have that much of a response? I'm not being coy, I really don't know that he does. You mean among artists?

Storr: Certainly he has.

Hal Foster: Part of the attraction of Dave Hickey is that he has developed a sort of pop-libertarian aesthetic, a neoliberal aesthetic very attuned to the market. Arthur Danto is also impressive to many people because he presents a relativism from the other side, the philosophical side, but that relativism is also pleasing to the market.

Storr: I don't share all of Dave's views by any stretch of the imagination, but I do appreciate his candor in relation to issues of the market. I don't think that we should speak as if the market were, one, myopic; two, new; or three, all-powerful. Before we speak about the market in an abstract, totalizing, or "meta" way, we have to be frank and come to terms with the fact that people have always written for cash, and they've always tried to have some effect on opinion, and some of the people they've had an effect on are actually buyers. I would say, however, that the principal readership for Hickey is not people who buy art, because if you look at the work he's promoted, much of it is not, in fact, wildly successful on the market. The principal readership for Dave is people who like to read and think about art.

Fraser: Here again I would say that there are different kinds of markets for art. There is the economic, commercial market, but there are also intellectual markets for art, which include the academy and institutional markets like museums and foundations and public agencies. These are also markets to the extent that they are structured by competition for different forms of capital and function to establish value—and not only economic value, but historical value as well. As Larry Gagosian has said, a place in history is "the bottom line for my artists." For me the most important question is the relationship between these different markets

Mel Bochner. Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art. *1966. Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery.*

and the forms of capital they privilege, that is, their relative authority and autonomy within a field of art and with regard to the overall legitimization of particular practices.

John Miller: And of course art writers don't mostly write for cash (for there is none), it's more for the position in academia that's secured by publishing. So the payoff isn't the writer's fee, it's mostly the prestige that comes from first establishing an apparently negative relationship to the market per se. As it accumulates, that symbolic capital can always be converted to real capital.

Storr: Your point is important, for so far we have mentioned museums and the market, but the academy itself is every bit as much an institution as the museum. Speaking as someone who was actively involved in the student movement in the 1960s, I find it curious that those currently engaged in critical activities (such as "institutional critique") seem to think everything is fair game except the academy. It is a dubious exemption.

Buchloh: We don't want to exclude academia from our considerations; in fact that was part of Andrea's caveat to your earlier comment. But I would like to return to my earlier point about the withering away of criticism. This was partially initiated in the context of Conceptual art. I could flip the entire logic of what I said earlier by focusing on the fact that it is from within the purview of the most radical artistic practices of the sixties and their subsequent developments that not only the commodity-status of the work of art or its institutional frame are targeted—one of the targets of this work was also the secondary discursive text that attached itself to artistic practice. Criticism and all secondary discourse were vehemently attacked. That is something we should not underestimate or forget. So we can construct a more dialectical image of the contemporary situation by saying that readers' competence and spectatorial competence had reached a level where the meddling of the critic was historically defied and denounced.

Baker: What kind of practices are you thinking about?

Buchloh: The whole generation of Conceptual artists certainly, from Joseph Kosuth onward, addressed these issues systematically—Kosuth's not my first witness generally, but certainly in this case I have to give him the credit—to Andrea Fraser, who has contested the viability of the role of the critic. I don't think that Andrea's work calls

Joseph Kosuth. Titled (Art as Idea as Idea) (Meaning). *1967. The Menil Collection, Houston. © 2002 Joseph Kosuth/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.*

for critics at all since she is engaging—or so she claims—various functions that would have been at least partially addressed by critics in the past. So what I am trying to say is that we should construct a more dialectical reading, one that acknowledges that the withering away of the secondary discourse of criticism was also an integral part of the rise of the spectator/speaker/reader to competence.

As I said in my earlier remarks, the other side of this historical phenomenon entails the dismantling of competence through the market, where the public sphere of the museum is no longer calling for that third independent voice between the producer and the recipient. And if it is now, increasingly, a question of the functions of art to maintain the power structure of the apparatus, this of course the exact opposite of the rise of the reader's and spectator's competence. It is at such a moment, when it has become more than evident that the critic has no place anymore in our cultural structures (and now I'm coming back to Rob), that rhapsodic substitutes like Dave Hickey can come back into the picture, appearing as though he was resuscitating the obsolete practice of criticism by giving us something that has no social function, no discursive position, but that serves as a critical placebo.

Storr: I'm not sure that's fair. I'm not going to defend all of what Dave says, but I don't think we can presume that because somebody does not have a utopian vision that they don't have a social vision. On the contrary I think that, in fact, part of what Dave has done is to take apart, or attempt to take apart, a set of myths about the avant-garde and its relationship to the lookers and readers of the art world and to give back to them a certain power that he feels was appropriated by the academy and the museum. Insofar as I work for a museum I'm aware of how these things do happen, how the autonomy of the public can be compromised by institutional practices and institutional conduct. And though I'm not a full member of the academy, I grew up within it, and I'm acutely aware that its authority can also be abused.

Baker: So Dave Hickey is the Robin Hood of art criticism.

Storr: I'm not saying he's the Robin Hood, I'm saying he's a serious contender because he's got his finger on the nerve of actual power relations. The assumption that a utopian vision needs to remain an essential component of serious criticism is, at the very least, something to be questioned.

Helen Molesworth: I think one of the reasons Dave Hickey is so popular right now is because he talks candidly about the market and the relations between the market, taste, the art world, and the museum. However, I don't think he actually functions as a critic of art per se. Which leads me to a more pedestrian question, which is what do we really mean by criticism, particularly as I disagree with James and with Benjamin about its "death." I find that there are artists for whom criticism is still deeply useful, and they are very invested in having a dialogue with it. My rejoinder is twofold: first, I am wary of assuming that an artist like Andrea doesn't need a critic because she brings criticism into her

own practice. I'd like to think that there is always a benefit to a discursive position from a vantage point exterior to the work. Second, I think some artists are currently responding to criticism in ways that we don't quite read or recognize as such. Let me put an artist like Rachel Harrison on the table. Her work is, actually, deeply invested in the texts that many of the people at this table have produced about Minimalism and phenomenology and the role of the photograph in spectacle culture. But she is making a kind of work that I think maybe isn't recognized by the very people with whom she's trying to have a dialogue. This is all by way of saying that I don't want to pronounce criticism dead before we've even quite decided what it is.

Joselit: I agree that we need a more specific definition of what we take as criticism. I would go back to saying that it is about making a judgment and not simply an interpretation. And then the question becomes, what kind of real estate can you get for your judgment?

Baker: So are you now differentiating between criticism and art history as well? Based on what you are proposing, interpretation might be seen as the work of art history and judgment the task of criticism.

Joselit: Well, it's a slippery slope. I think one of the major critical issues of the moment actually emerges from, but exceeds the limits of art history. It has to do with the

Left: Rachel Harrison. Untitled. *2001. La Morena salsa can, reproduction of* The Archduke of Leopold's Gallery *on wood shelf. Right: Harrison.* Untitled. *2001. Becky (friend of Barbie), white walls, c-print. Courtesy Greene Naftali Gallery.*

question of visual culture, which pivots on a boundary distinction—a judgment about what the object of aesthetic interpretation should be.

Baker: Bringing up that position brings us back to the problem of the specialization of the critic. The art critic is not necessarily speaking to the conditions of visual culture in its larger, longer history. So we're back to the problem that Benjamin was laying out—on the one hand, an erasure of certain competencies, or conversely the opening up of new spaces within which criticism can operate.

Miller: I actually see a different legacy emerging from Conceptual art practice. A lot of the first-generation Conceptualists fell into an intentionalist fallacy, where they thought that by eliminating the critic, then the audience would better and more directly understand their intentions as the correct meaning of the work. But we could instead consider the de-skilling of the critic from the standpoint of cultural studies and Duchamp. Just as Duchamp's work implied the de-skilling of the artist, it also implied a concomitant deskilling of the critic.

Joselit: But don't you think it's really a re-skilling? I think this is helpful to realize—that the example of Duchamp suggests the development of alternate forms of aesthetic or linguistic skill.

Miller: I was just using Benjamin's term, but I take your point. The re-skilling is nonetheless a rupture that dislocates and delegitimizes established competencies.

Buchloh: But let's take the interesting example of an artist like John Miller—who is an artist and who writes criticism, and who teaches a course on artists writing criticism, which I think is a really brilliant idea. And yet when I read his criticism, which I have done quite consistently, I'm always amazed by how different it is from my own. *[Laughter.]* But put simply, there is a continuity between your work and your criticism, and whenever I read your criticism I realize that I am not at all seeing myself as being continuous with the artistic project in all instances. I see myself as a contestant, as somebody who is skeptically investigating, interrogating, probing, while you work in a continuous move from your own work into the practices of other artists, into intellectual questions as a cultural project that is, basically, in synch with your practice. For me challenge, contestation, hesitation, doubt, skepticism are integral elements of criticism—hopefully, not the only ones—when I confront new artistic practices. So it's like saying, before the myth becomes too powerful, I would like to probe it. For you, that's not an issue. You would say "the myth is never powerful enough," in a sense. I think you hardly ever undermine an aesthetic project. If anything you want to bring it forward, right?

Miller: It depends on who I'm writing about. But I also think, systemically, that even explicit skepticism and interrogation can ultimately function as an affirmation, depending on how much clout the critic has.

Baker: But you do, John, very strongly state in some of your criticism that there is a difference between the artist critic, as you describe yourself, and the academic critic, or the journalistic critic. In a sense, you have been laying out different

critical positions and functions. Your position implies that in this challenging of the traditional functions of criticism since the sixties, there is neither an erasure of competencies or conversely an erasure of divisions of labor and a transformation of criticism "beyond recognition." There is in fact and in practice not an erasure of distinctions between artist and critic and curator and academic, but there are actually now different forms of critics and criticism, different spaces and more varied functions. Criticism and the figure of the critic, in this view, is not monolithic but fractured, calling upon not one but several histories.

Molesworth: But if we concur with David's earlier point that the function of criticism is now one of judgment as opposed to interpretation, what does he actually mean by judgment there? Is it in terms of whether the art is good or bad, whether or not it should enter into the canon, or is it judgment in terms of something like Donald Judd's criterion of "interest"? What are the terms by which the judgments are made?

Buchloh: If they're not based on interpretation. . . ?

Joselit: Well, of course they're based on interpretation, but one of the crises of criticism might arise from the fact that the concept of quality has lost its legitimacy for people like us. So you can't say this is good and that is bad, at least not in the ways in which it was possible when quality was invoked at earlier moments in history.

Foster: What terms does judgment call up for you when uncoupled from quality? One of the projects of my generation of critics—which is yours too—was to work against this identification of criticism with judgment. That was the part of the long reaction against Greenberg.

Joselit: I would say one can judge what constitutes an object. That's what I'm interested in.

Buchloh: An aesthetic object?

Joselit: Yes, or an object of history.

Foster: What David proposes, if I hear him right, is that one task of the critic now is disciplinarian, or, if you prefer, antidisciplinarian: to decide whether boundaries between categories of art and categories of visual culture should be drawn or crossed. It sounds like an academic task, but for you it is a critical one.

Joselit: I'll give you an example. I recently wrote about the Whitney exhibition *Into the Light.* I argued that this particular exhibition fails to produce a history of the practice it claims to address, which is video and film installation, and I tried to consider the problem of constructing a history—which implies the passage of time—of media that are characterized by temporal instantaneity. I don't think it is necessarily an individual failing on the part of the curator (Chrissie Iles) but rather, that the exhibition manifests a kind of crisis in terms of how one makes ephemeral media into a historical object.

Foster: Maybe that wasn't her intention.

Joselit: I'm not sure that it was, but we're talking about criticism, and that's what I, as a critic, felt was important.

Baker: I would like to hear more about the question of criteria, about criteria "after quality," not just from David but from James and Helen—from a younger generation that has not had as much public discourse to develop what their criteria are. My criteria are not single or unified. Sometimes they are formal and sometimes political. They are deeply reactive, in two senses: reactive to a transformed field of artistic practice that it is still the task of the critic to attempt to delineate, but also reactive to the difficult situation in which the critic and the artist now operate, where certain types of work and certain types of aspirations are judged by many as cashiered, over, finished. So one criterion that is really important for me perhaps only comes into view as a criterion at all in the current situation, as a function that I think criticism today has to hold onto ever more tightly. Namely, to bring into public discourse practices that are being silenced.

One of my models for what I do as a critic is something like an explorer. Of course, critics have always done this and one has to be wary of merely falling into the function of serving the needs of research and development. But the kind of "exploration" that I'm thinking of has become increasingly difficult now. There is not supposed to be any outside to the art world today, there is immediate affirmation of almost any practice you can imagine, an instant circulation of young artists through the global venues of the biennials. But an outside exists, many in fact, it just becomes increasingly opaque and difficult for any one critic to locate them. Outsides are not about something that is new or currently ignored; they are about something that is silenced, repressed. It's strange: my critical formation was almost like a research project, it took a lot of work. Others at this table did this work too, like James and Helen, and I benefited from their activities surely. For at the moment of my critical formation, a whole generation of artistic practice that has developed the critical strategies of the sixties, seventies, and eighties was in the process of being voided by American magazines and art galleries, and if I had depended upon my experiences in visiting and reading them, I would have been similarly blinded. Instead, I did things like pore over every issue of the German journal *Texte zur Kunst* when I was twenty-five or twenty-six. You suddenly realize how parochial New York has become, how narrow its definitions of art and culture. You realize too how parochial is the purview at the same time of the globe-trotting critic; there is no outside in that route either. But as a critic, it is a manifest decision of my own writing about art to balance anything I write about an artist who is actually well known with a precisely equal amount of artists who are not. Criteria refer to judgments of quality; in the wake of the dissolution of that critical task, criteria perhaps become criteria in duress, such as this one: locating silences, articulating repressions, providing a space for certain types of work and certain artistic aspirations to continue and to evolve.

Foster: That is an old task of the critic, though.

Baker: It is still one that I value.

Foster: In a sense, I agree with you. But one difference now is that there is no consensus about the status of advanced art. The critic emerged in the public sphere of the nineteenth century to seek out work that contested the bourgeois order. There was a space for art and for critical practice to work out conflicts and contradictions that were in play in that order. Even as recently as the 1960s, there was a consensus about advanced art and advanced criticism as this kind of testing. The old "umbilical cord of gold" was a condition of this testing, not a foreclosure. Today art doesn't serve that purpose anymore. Whatever counts now as the ruling class isn't interested in it. At a certain point in its long decay, the bourgeoisie wanted that function, but not now.

Storr: Hal, you're right to quote Greenberg about the umbilical cord of gold, but if you go back to Baudelaire and to the moment where he basically says he despises the bourgeois for whom he's writing, the fact of the matter remains that he was competing for an audience within that group. He was looking for people who could stand to listen to that challenge in order that he could talk to them about art, because it's very clear that this was his audience, a historical fact concerning the potential for any audience in that period but also a fact about him—he too was in many respects a bourgeois. The paradox that you're talking about seems to me relatively unchanged except for those episodes in history where there have been genuine revolutions. Otherwise we keep being caught in situations where we are simultaneously pushing against and trying to draw toward us people whom we think are going to be capable of understanding what we understand but whose aesthetic point of departure or social or political perspectives may not at all be our own.

Buchloh: O.K., but let me ask one very specific historical question to concretize Hal's point. The question is not in any way nostalgic, nor is it a complaint. But don't you think, Rob, that the Museum of Modern Art under William Rubin in the late sixties to the mid-seventies had a direct connection still to Greenberg and Michael Fried, among many other people? That this institution of the bourgeois public sphere communicated with them and took the voice of the critic seriously?

Storr: Absolutely.

Buchloh: And would you agree that this is no longer the case?

Storr: But that linkage between critics and the museum wasn't always a good thing. Indeed it seems to me that in many ways Rubin is responsible for narrowing the focus of the museum that Alfred Barr created. Barr founded a museum that was multidisciplinary, imperfectly but genuinely internationalist, as well as one that entertained real contradictions of artistic practice rather than trying to winnow out the things that everyone could agree on as "mainstream"—with a little extra muscle from Greenberg.

Foster: To glorify Barr is a strange response to Benjamin's question. It was about the lack of interest the museum currently displays in the opinions of critics.

Storr: I'm just saying, as a historical reality, that I think Rubin's vision of modernism

was much narrower than that of the man who created the museum. Moreover the museum that many people rebel against is not Barr's museum but Rubin's museum. And one of the things that may have been happening—that I hope has been happening—is that the Modern has been opening up again. There's a will within more recent generations to make a museum that is more representative of the initial idea or model for a museum of modern art advanced by Barr between 1929 and 1943. One can connect this museum issue to the discussion of criticism that we have been having. There are, to be sure, many styles of criticism and many ambitions or projects for criticism, but if you begin to think in terms of having "lost out" in some definitive way, or of being "outnumbered or surrounded" by hostile forces, you have to consider whether or not you have competed as actively as you could have for the public that exists and that you profess to want to influence in a positive fashion. Baudelaire, after all, was writing "salons" for a general audience, part of which he deeply loathed. Nonetheless, he wrote some of the greatest criticism ever written, and he wrote it to be read by that audience. There's a difference between those critics who compete for a general audience, or at least compete for the parts of it that might respond, and those who, essentially, are writing for other professionals or for practitioners. And that is a big difference. I'm not saying one is better than the other, but I don't think we should talk about them in the same breath.

Fraser: If Rob is asking the question of whether "we have lost" because we haven't effectively competed, what about the question of whether we have lost because we *are* competing? Because we've entered into competition with popular culture, with glossy magazines, with commercial entertainment complexes for audiences? Because we've accepted and invested in a set of stakes defined by quantitative criteria and the quest for visibility? This is not to call for a return to elitism and obscurantism but to acknowledge that a historical shift has occurred. The progressive ambition of building audiences for art museums, which was spurred in large part by public funding in the seventies, was extremely important.

Andrea Fraser. Official Welcome. *2001. Performance at the MICA Foundation. Photo: Sarah Kunstler.*

Private museums began to recognize that they had publics and public responsibilities, as did artists and critics and curators. But when public funding gave way to corporate funding in the eighties and nineties, those publics became markets, and museums' notions of their public responsibilities came to be seen largely through the prism of professional and institutional needs, above all the demands of institutional reproduction through competition and growth. So art for art's sake was replaced by growth for art's sake—which itself often seems a thin cover on growth for growth's sake. First we have to ask the question of why should art, or artists, or museums or critics, have larger audiences? How are those audiences in fact being engaged? The answer to that question should then be the basic criterion for artists, curators, and critics. If it's just about creating a greater demand for our products and services, then yes, we have lost, as far as I'm concerned.

Foster: There is a problem in what Rob says. Baudelaire was ambivalent toward the Salon public for which he wrote; we have a very different situation in place now. Many critics write in open identification with their constituencies.

Fraser: In light of which it is important to think not only about criticism of the practice of art, but criticism as an artistic practice.

Joselit: Andrea, do you think it's possible to be an artist without absorbing a critical practice? Art always involves a critical practice of some sort or another, but I'm talking about absorbing a discursive critical practice elaborated by art critics.

Fraser: Probably not. But artists absorb criticism in very different ways. The way that I absorbed criticism was very much defined by the legacies of Conceptual art and institutional critique and the art-world engagement with critical theory in the early and mid-eighties. Ironically, perhaps, the way I absorbed criticism, becoming a hardcore "institutional critic," led me to the rather extreme position that art criticism should not exist. Which may be why there are no monographic essays about my work. *[Laughter.]*

Meyer: Andrea, you've certainly benefited from the support of critics and art criticism.

Fraser: I'm not saying that I haven't. I'm just identifying the parameters of an extreme position that emerged from the legacy of Conceptual art as I absorbed it. But I don't see that legacy quite as Benjamin does, as being primarily an attack on secondary discourse as another dimension of the institutional frame—if that's what you meant, Benjamin. For me that legacy had more to do with a critique of the way artists themselves participate in the mechanisms of abstraction and institutional legitimation by offering themselves and their work up as inarticulate objects of explication and promotion. So my position for many years was that artists have a responsibility to represent themselves; that art catalogs should not be about the artist but should be about what the artist's projects are about and that such catalogs should not include biographies or essays by outside writers about the artists. I do think those elements tend to reduce catalogs to marketing tools. But that's not to say that catalogs shouldn't include essays by outside writers about what the artist's project is about.

Molesworth: I'm confused.

Fraser: It's a position that derives from the notion that divisions of labor within the art world are fundamentally divisions of the labor of legitimation. The latter are fundamental to the production of belief in the value of the work of art by providing an appearance of autonomous investments or autonomous judgments that appear, to varying degrees, as sublimated with respect to the material dimensions of that value and to the personal and profession stakes that participants in the field have in the production of that art. While the notion of the autonomy of the critic may be even more full of holes than the autonomy of the artist, it probably plays an even greater role in the production of belief in works of art.

Molesworth: I'm still confused. We have a body of criticism put forward by Rosalind about the fallacy of statements of artistic intentionality. And now it appears as if the artist has the last word, with Andrea coming in saying something like "there shouldn't be an essay about anything other than what the work is about." I'm wondering what happened to the idea that the work of art has, as part of its function, the potential to be a conversational gambit? What happened to our belief in a criticism that situates the art object, and articulates how it functions, within a larger discursive field of texts, objects, and institutions, rather than one that elaborates the art project as delineated by the artist? What happened to our belief in something like the conversation that might happen around the object, not the artist?

Fraser: If I held the position that art criticism shouldn't exist it's certainly not because I thought that artists should be masters of their universe. Quite the contrary. Like all divisions of labor those in the art world are hierarchically structured. But those hierarchies are not immutable.

From the vantage point of institutional critique, I define criticism as an ethical practice of self-reflective evaluation of the ways in which we participate in the reproduction of relations of domination, which include for me the exploitation of monopolies of competence and other forms of institutionalized authority. Just as artists can and do abuse their authority, I think critics and curators can and should engage in institutional critique. So if anything, my position that art criticism shouldn't exist was rooted in the desire to level such hierarchies; it depends instead upon the notion that artists and writers and curators are collaborators working together on a common social and cultural project. I imagine that's how Lucy Lippard, for example, saw her role in relation to Conceptual art and the women's art movement. In my experience in the eighties, I think that's how Brian Wallis saw his role when he curated *Damaged Goods* or edited the Dia books with Group Material and Martha Rosler. Those books aren't about Group Material or Martha Rosler. They are about cultural democracy and the housing crisis.

Buchloh: But that is a distinctly obsolete position with great nostalgic, not to say sentimental value in retrospect. I mean, Louise Lawler, for one, has argued for

twenty years that all artistic practices are collaborative projects. And I think by now we know that, with the way that the institutions and the sphere of cultural production have changed, it would be really foolish to say that we are engaged in a collaborative project—Julian Schnabel, myself, and somebody else . . .

Baker: Come on, Benjamin. How about yourself and Michael Asher, or myself and Christian Philipp Müller? There are collaborations that continue.

Buchloh: All right, that's true, but does that exception allow us to misrecognize the actually ruling situation? To think we are engaged in a collaborative project in the current distribution of power and in the current division of labor seems to falsify history at a grand scale.

Fraser: I would never say that I believe that is the case. It's what I wanted to be the case and what I believed I had a responsibility to work toward, if only to create a few instances which could function as models.

Foster: In Conceptual art, the move to make art as transparent as possible had this pathos: art became ever more opaque, at least to viewers beyond an immediate milieu, beyond a coterie. The same thing has occurred with the model of collaboration. It seemed to open out, but it has led, as often as not, to hermeticism, to an involution of practice, and again the viewing public dropped out. This is to play, somewhat, the devil's advocate. The celebrated birth of the reader or of the viewer never really happened. Those people fell away, they fell into a default position that is usually antiartistic, anticritical, antiintellectual . . .

Storr: I'm not sure I follow, who are these viewers who fell away?

Foster: You know who they are, Rob . . .

Storr: No I don't. And that is insider or coterie talk, because you're saying, "Yes, you know who they are," and I don't know who they are. So tell me.

Foster: Well, gee, Rob, they're about three-quarters of your viewers at the Museum of Modern Art. The default position about contemporary art, one popular view, is that it is about hype or controversy or both. There's a basic antiartistic culture in this country, haven't you heard?

Storr: I'm sorry. I don't accept that. I don't.

Foster: O.K., we disagree profoundly on this point.

Storr: I don't accept it from a position of somebody who works with the public much more than you do. I am aware that the audience is unsure of itself in relation to the institution, to the art in question and so on, but it is also frequently surprised to find that it can connect with what it sees. What people can do with that connection or are unable to do with it is very largely determined by the kind and quality of discourse that is going on around them. Which is one of the

Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation.
1984. Photographs selected and arranged by Louise Lawler in collaboration with Brian Wallis.

reasons that I think writing for that audience—writing seriously but writing with it in mind—is an important function. Otherwise you do, in fact, cede it to people who are anti-intellectual and anti-art.

Meyer: I have to accept Hal's premise here, and I do so as a practicing art critic writing for the few glossy art magazines left, in which I find myself asked to write "Top Tens," reduced formats—"sound bite" criticism—in a style that Rob is calling "writerly." One feels a certain pressure to emulate a Hickeyesque model, which I would more precisely characterize as belletristic. This is of course a very old model (recall the *Art News* of the fifties, the writing of Schuyler and O'Hara, which Judd and Morris reacted so strongly against). But the word "writerly" is used to describe a criticism which, having pretensions to the literary, is valorized for its tone of sensibility and its capacity to seduce, to sell a magazine. It is not writerly in the Barthesian sense of a disruptive kind of writing. On the contrary, the belletristic model, as one finds in the current *Artforum*, or in a collector-oriented publication like *Parkett*, could be described as antiwriterly in ambition. And because it often concerns the author's "feelings" or personality, belletristic writing of this kind tends to avoid a sustained reflection on the art. This style is supposed to appeal to readers; it keeps the magazine afloat. All well and good—but at what cost?

Baker: You might just have defined what criticism is *not*. The situation that you describe is not criticism. These "writers" are not art critics. For criticism depends upon disruption, in some sense, to function as criticism at all.

Storr: That said, some of the best criticism of the past has been reviews or "occasional," even "belletristic" writings by practitioners and moonlighters from other fields. It's not just a question of Baudelaire's salons, or even of Greenberg's columns for *Partisan Review* and *The Nation*. There's also a tradition of avant-garde artists writing criticism—Donald Judd in *Arts Magazine* and Robert Morris in *Artforum*, for example, as well as the poet critics and belletristic critics of the kind just mentioned, some of whom were very, very good. And after all, didn't Roland Barthes write the essays in *Mythologies* for a monthly cultural journal, and didn't he adapt his style to that change in forum?

Krauss: I'd like to return to David's definition of criticism, his partial definition of criticism as judgments of quality . . .

Joselit: Or just judgments.

Krauss: O.K., judgments. For me as a writer, criticism has always involved a more historical sense of shifts in direction of the large part of art practitioners. For example, the decision, at a certain point, on the part of a group of writers, that there was something called postmodernism to which one had to pay a great deal of attention, and postmodernism then took on a life of its own and rendered other forms of artmaking obsolete. So this sense of scanning the horizon for some new blip appearing on it, is part of what I've always assumed was the job of a critic.

Joselit: It is interesting that you say "scanning for a blip," because your work helped to

produce a definition of postmodernism, rather than merely reporting on a preexisting phenomenon.

Krauss: It's true. A good critic produces as well as reports.

Joselit: Yes, in fact you could say that what criticism does is judge the boundaries of a field. It delineates the field. I guess I disagree with James. I write for the same magazine that he does and I recognize its limits. But I also think you have a choice about how you use that real estate. You can be a squatter in their real estate.

Storr: I like that.

Molesworth: To hear Rosalind's description of criticism makes me think of one of the things that we talked about when we started *Documents*. We were aware that scanning the horizon codified and consolidated a group, and it was something we were actually quite wary of, and in fact, we were trying to avoid it.

Baker: Why?

Molesworth: Because we saw that form of codification as a powerful form of legitimation bound up with the production of a commodifiable group entity for the market. We were also trying to figure out if it was possible to write intelligently about work one didn't support.

Baker: That's perverse. This is really what I called earlier the masochism of the critic, abandoning functions that were worth retaining.

Molesworth: Call it perverted, but it was something we discussed at length. We, too, were trying to figure out the function of criticism. We were curious about the possibility of a criticism that registered ambivalences and ambiguities in a field that we felt was structured by the logic of exclusion and affirmation. There is part of me that still feels quite invested in that, which is why I'd like to return to David's comments about judgment. In the early 1990s I was skeptical about judgment because "quality" had become such a problematic term, hence, ambiguity—about what one liked and what one didn't like—seemed like an important and viable alternative.

Joselit: My assumption is that just writing about something is an affirmation of it. So I think that we have to be clear what kind of value we are adding in a particular context.

Foster: I want to go back to the model that Rosalind presented a minute ago, to point to a difference. Take the example of Leo Steinberg in relation to Rauschenberg and Johns, or Rosalind in relation to Minimalism and Postminimalism. These were shifts with very vested interest on all sides; for or against or ambivalent, you needed to follow them somehow. That is not the situation now. There is no consensus about what departures are significant, if any. Take the artists mentioned in this conversation tonight . . . I don't think we have a consensus about the importance of Christian Philipp Müller the way we do about Gerhard Richter.

Baker: Thankfully so.

Foster: Well, maybe or maybe not.

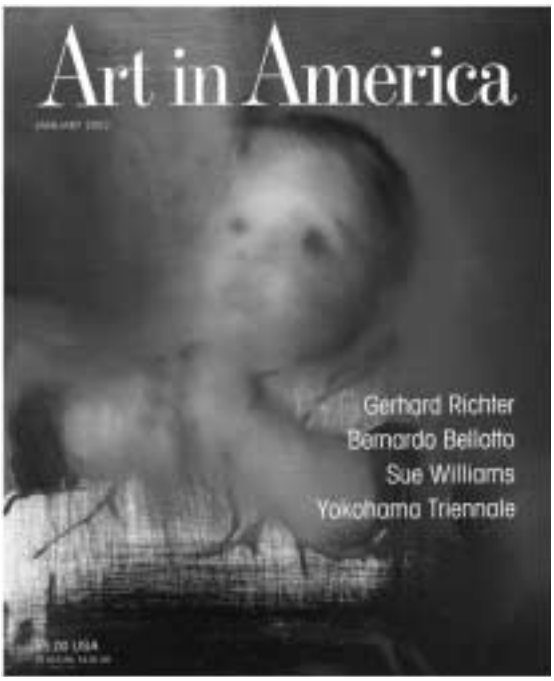
Baker: I'm not sure about how you keep using this term "consensus," Hal. The lack of consensus is one reason why criticism is still needed. If consensus becomes less possible today, that might even mean that criticism is more necessary. I don't think it interesting to pretend that consensus was once possible and now is not, and so a certain model of criticism falls with that. Rosalind's support of Minimalism was not accepted by hoards of people involved in the art world at that moment, at times along generational lines. This generational clash continues. For in fact, we don't have a consensus about Richter. And that is a good thing, I think.

Foster: It just doesn't happen anymore that a critic chases a shift in art that has repercussions for many people. There are too many ripples going every which way, and we're not all in the same waters anyway.

Miller: One thing that has replaced the notion of significant and monolithic artistic shifts is the invocation of youth culture, particularly in the glossy magazines where there seems to be a two-tiered system of focus: either older artists are affirmed as quasi-masters, or the artist is young and their work has to have some kind of relation to D.J. culture or something similar. This seems to be how style is codified in a more definitive manner; the invocation of youth culture becomes almost obligatory unless one is seen as a master. Andrea has analyzed this clearly—vis-à-vis Charles Saatchi's style of collecting—in her "Sensation Chronicle."*

Molesworth: This is slightly tangential, but it does have to do with the idea of

* Andrea Fraser, "A 'Sensation' Chronicle," *Social Text* 67 (Summer 2001), pp. 127–56.



consensus and the role of the critic. One thing that strikes me as missing from our conversation is a discussion of how the rise of alternative spaces, the rise of contemporary art museums, and the proliferation of project rooms has changed the role of the curator. The contemporary curator is now someone who seeks out "new talent," not someone who waits to receive that information from elsewhere. I wonder if part of the anxiety felt here on the part of critics—and I'm speaking now as a critic and not a curator—is that the voice of the critic is no longer heard in the space of the museum in the same way. It does not enter into the ear of the curator as an authority proclaiming, "Listen, I've been out looking and I really know what you should bring into the museum." Now the museum is willing, it seems, to validate more art, and to validate it more quickly than ever before. This creates a crisis of judgment, for canon formation, for both criticism and art history alike. Not to be rude, but who now can't be in a project room, or in a big group show in a museum? We've all been to these enormous international biennials, where we see more artists than we have the capacity to remember . . . where does critical judgment lie there? So, in terms of the point John just made, maybe we got some of what we asked for. Ironically, much of this change has come about as a result of demands made by artists and critics to open the museum. I'm thinking here of the Art Workers Coalition. I suppose that the productive challenges to old-fashioned museological ideas of criteria and judgment had to necessitate a decline in consensus.

Miller: But the flip side of this question is about who can't be in a biennial, because that has become the top level of legitimation. Compared to museums, biennials aren't as diverse and there is a kind of international circuit of artists who dominate the same biennials time after time, regardless of where they might be.

Storr: This business of biennials has been questioned by many critics. For example, you have Peter Schjeldahl writing a column for *The New Yorker* on what he calls "festivalism." Now Peter is in no way a radical. He is close in sensibility and style to Dave Hickey. Nonetheless, in that context he did a pretty thorough job of dismantling the phenomenon of the biennials. And he did so without a specific theoretical construct—it was impressionistic and it was opinionated but it was also on the mark and very, very effective.

Molesworth: How is it effective?

Storr: It's effective because it makes people begin to mistrust what they are seeing—or so one can hope. And because Peter is serious about art, he's not saying "mistrust all of the work you see across the board," but mistrust this particular institutionalization of it.

Baker: Schjeldahl is often involved in baiting the anti-intellectualism of the public that Hal highlighted earlier. That is one of his talents. He is only serious about the corpse of a certain understanding of art, and in keeping that corpse presentable for the public for which he writes.

Buchloh: George, earlier you gave us one identification of a critical task, namely the archaeological resuscitation of that which has been obliterated or neglected,

Far left: Art in America *cover. January 2002. Courtesy Brant Publications, Inc.*
Left: Artforum *cover. January 2002.*

which I think, as Hal said, has been one of the crucial critical functions. I certainly think that has always been one of my key functions as a critic, and one that I hope to continue to perform. I am very glad to hear from you that it would still be operative in the next generation or the next two generations, however much we might differ in age. But what are the other functions from your perspective? I would really like to contrast our positions more in this conversation because I imagine that a critic growing up in the sixties and seventies must have had totally different motivations from a critic growing up in the eighties and nineties. That is partially what I had hoped this conversation would clarify: how does one differentiate and operate across the chasm that has occurred undoubtedly between our generations? We all agree, major changes have happened on every level. My generation works on one side of this divide, and your generation works on the other, and I think that the differences haven't been sufficiently brought out.

Baker: Well, you're pointing to "chasms" and major changes. I don't disagree that in some sense they have occurred. But they seem to have led you in your own criticism to abandon certain practices that I assume you now find inoperative. I have not drawn the same conclusions in the face of this chasm, of these changes. The major changes that have occurred in the institutions for criticism make me fall more and more into a position that almost sounds like Greenberg or Michael Fried saying modernism is about continuity and nothing else. Well, postmodernism may be about rupture and nothing else, but that necessitates continually redefining and tracing the transformations in certain previous discourses and practices. As I intimated earlier, one action that criticism might take for itself right now is to resist precisely the changes in artistic institutions and in what can be said within certain art magazines. No matter how much the situation has changed, the critical voice has to, in some sense, keep certain projects alive. Not simply throw up one's hands and say "It's no longer possible."

Buchloh: Critical projects and artistic projects?

Baker: Both. That's been my position. Institutional Critique is the example subtending my thoughts here. Some might say that in the transformed conditions of the present, it has become an academic exercise, a genre, or worse, a style. Completely recuperated. This is undoubtedly true of certain cases. But such a judgment rests on an understanding of avant-gardism that is no longer operative, perhaps no longer desirable. And the contemporary situation doesn't obviate all communicative, critical practices. There are significant ways in which work formerly known as Institutional Critique has been transformed and thus continued in the present. In ways true to the chasm separating the sixties from the nineties. And this still awaits its full critical articulation and elucidation.

Foster: O.K., so now we have the archaeological function, the exploratory function, the paradigm-marking function, and mnemonic function. But this isn't differentiating the generations here in any way.

Buchloh: No, it's not.

Foster: So what does?

Joselit: This may not be a sufficient answer, but I'm not sure that the chasm in Benjamin's sense of the word exists. I've always thought that your generation moved from being critics to being academics because of the exigencies of survival. I started working at just that time when you were making the transition to academia, and I more or less concluded that one had to do so to survive. Most of the rigorous critics who have been engaged in theory have moved into academia, whereas all of you started out outside of it, right?

Baker: Not really. Not Rosalind.

Joselit: But in a way, a case could be made for her as having been an active journalistic critic and academic—almost on parallel tracks.

Molesworth: Is, then, that sense of the diminishment of the audience for criticism partly bound up with this sense of criticism's academicization? So now it's for students?

Joselit: Well, if this happened, it seems to have happened in the generation of the senior *October* editors, because all of you went from being critics to being academics.

Storr: Not all serious critics did. Some of them are still freelance writers, some are editors, some work in institutions, museums, and so on. Those are legitimate alternatives. It's by no means true that all roads lead to the university. You are really talking about a certain type of critical discourse.

Joselit: Yes, Rob, I am.

Storr: But I think you have to entertain the possibility that there are other kinds of serious criticism for which there may be other kinds of day jobs.

Buchloh: So who is outside?

Storr: No one is outside.

Buchloh: Even Dave Hickey teaches. *[Laughter.]*

Molesworth: I never felt this as a generational divide before, but maybe it is one. I always thought one of the criteria for great criticism was that it was the kind of thing that artists would read seriously. I was never really interested in the audience of *The New Yorker* per se, I mean I didn't think that that was where great criticism happened—great criticism was an essay that artists read. Maybe that's very romantic on my part.

Baker: And the reason for that is that this form of criticism reconfigures the conditions within which one could make art.

Molesworth: Right, because in this scenario the artwork is functioning as a conversational gambit, taken up and potentially responded to in kind by the artist. Perhaps we are back to your idea of collaboration. In this model really good criticism is a dialog between texts and objects, and I don't think that happens in the popular press; there I see criticism functioning as an interpretive interlocutor of objects for an audience. In some ways I see my ideal form of criticism as potentially very intimate, with the caveat being that the function of criticism is to render the intimate public. For me it is precisely

criticism's publicness that transforms what could potentially be a conversation between persons into a dialogue between texts and objects.

Baker: One of the things that your point raises is that if that is the model for good criticism, then some good criticism written by people at this table has affected artistic practice in ways that have then been ignored by the same critics who initiated certain artistic shifts themselves. So, Benjamin, I'm talking about your work defining institutionally critical practice and its effects on an entire generation of artists that have positioned themselves in relationship to both that generation of artists and to certain critical stances that were taken.

Molesworth: Or, Hal, Rachel Harrison's work in relationship to your work on spectacle culture as well as the crux of Minimalism.

Foster: I would love to meet her. *[Laughter.]*

Molesworth: Well, better than meeting her, maybe you should look at the work.

Storr: I have to return to my earlier points. If you are concerned about a particular kind of intellectually rigorous and committed criticism, if that is what you want, it is not a given that there is no larger place for it. The question is: How do you claim that place?

Joselit: You have to change your discourse.

Meyer: But there is a different situation in place for writers today. I think that the issue that we have been talking about—the lack of constituency or the lack of a coherent public to whom one speaks—is crucial, indeed defining. You don't know anymore for whom you are writing. The *Artforum* of 2001 is not the *Artforum* of 1970 where you knew for whom you were writing and that your writing counted somehow. Or one could say the same thing about the *October* of 1981 versus 2001. So there is a generational difference here. We do not write with this sense of optimism and confidence that our work—that criticism itself—is an essential activity.

Baker: I think writers for *October* still know their audience, it is still a closely defined or confined forum, for better or worse. We might want to change that, if it is possible. It is not always such a bad thing not to know your audience, but I agree, under the conditions of the present, *Artforum* sometimes turns into the instrument through which you are writing for a mostly non-American and non-English speaking audience but just in your native language. As opposed to all the other commissions that come, for example, directly from German magazines where you can actually do the kind of work that you want and write about what you want but where you *really* don't know your audience at all. I am fantasizing about there being audiences out there that I don't know and who might be interested in the ideas and the art that I'm interested in.

Meyer: I am saying that you operate now with the awareness from the start that you are writing in a kind of vacuum, and you don't know who the audience is, and you have no sense that the criticism will "matter," that it will be read . . .

Storr: You just have to get used to that, I mean that's just life.

Meyer: I am not necessarily complaining. I am speaking to the circumstances in which we are writing. I'm talking about a historical change. So it is not "just life." In "Criticism and Crisis," where George started off, de Man claims that it is the nature or structural logic of criticism itself to exist in a perpetual state of "crisis." But his account does not address the question of the kinds of economic or social circumstances that can lead to different states of "crisis" at different times, such as the situation we are discussing here. The scenarios of the sixties and eighties that we are familiar with. But we are in a different situation now.

Fraser: Many of you have written about site-specific art, so let's talk about site-specific criticism. I think any site-specific practice worth the name has to start with a critical understanding of who the audience will be in any given context. Of course, that understanding will always be partial and involve a certain amount of speculation. But I do believe that artists have a responsibility to think critically about their contexts, and audience is a big part of context. I think critics also have a responsibility to think site-specifically. I don't think that criticism or writing can transcend its context any more than art can.

Molesworth: What would that mean? Speak more about that.

Fraser: Thinking site-specifically means writing for an audience or readership in an active way. It means not misrecognizing your readership as the other of your discourse but as the actual people who are probably going to be picking up the magazine and looking through its pages. It means thinking about who those people are and what kind of interests they are bringing to that publication and how you can engage those interests in a critical way.

Storr: That makes a lot of sense. But since we started out with big generalizations about the museum world, which I've tried to qualify, we have to be quite precise about the fact that within even a well-defined set of readers there are significant variations, and one of the powers one has as a critic—and there are very few—is to exploit that situation in a positive way, and to play with the things that are themselves in play in the mind of those readers rather than merely addressing them as if they all had a fixed type of attention span, economic interest, etc.

Joselit: You can choose to address other readers by writing in different ways. Writing books for a general audience, for example, is not the best way to advance an academic career, but it is important to propose new synthetic readings of the postwar period that nonspecialists including students may read. Academia's relative disdain for the general audience is significant, because it encourages scholars to stay within narrowly defined discursive channels where certain kinds of work are rewarded and others aren't. As a result, one's readership is narrowed. On some level we have to think about where our investments lie and to be site-specific. I think that is a great term.

Storr: One of the ways to stay fresh as a writer is to take the question back to the problems of being the maker rather than just thinking of the reader. There is a lot to be said for varying your speeds, for trying different genres of criticism, and in general, for making sure you do what is necessary to stay limber. One of

the dangers I find as a writer who almost always writes to deadline, and almost always writes for a large circulation, be it magazines or exhibition catalogs, is that you are limited in the types of writing that are possible. By that I don't mean the critical level you can aim for but rather the critical form and voice you are able to use. One of the tasks of the critic is constantly to scout out places where you can try the things that you aren't necessarily sure you can do. And that testing of untried stylistic waters refreshes thought. I understand your objection to the belletristic model if it just means a kind of well-mannered writing, but it can be much more than that.

Meyer: But you are saying that if it can be instrumentalized, it can attract readers and make them think . . . ?

Storr: Beyond that, I am turning that around and saying: Criticism may not necessarily be or even aspire to be literature, but it is a literary form, and learning to write in a variety of formats and learning to write using different aspects of one's own voice may be a means of gaining access to fresh ideas as well as to previously untouched audiences. It is important not to get stuck in one register.

Buchloh: But it is a palliative, and that is what I have been trying to point out. I would rather look at a cultural landscape that is as desiccated as it is in actuality, rather than one that is falsely comforting. The example that has come up is that we supposedly retrieve earlier models of feuilletonistic writing or belletristic criticism, when in fact the crisis of criticism itself is a result of a larger institutional and social crisis that we have been discussing in various aspects tonight. So why should we be satisfied with various substitutions (both of artistic practice and of criticism) that are actually barred from access to a public sphere (whatever, if anything, might be left of it) or, rather, that are brought back to cover up its absence, i.e., the totally dismantled public sphere of culture and its institutions? I oppose these remedies. Just as much as I would prefer to look at a cultural realm where the validity of contemporary sculpture is contested—rather than having to look at the work that is touted as the "new" sculpture—I would prefer to read criticism that reflects on the current difficulties of writing criticism and makes these one of its subjects.

Foster: Benjamin, I'm not sure how helpful your all-or-nothing gesture is. In a text in this issue, Tim Clark talks about how, with the all-or-nothing gesture, you may end up with nothing. Will you be happy with nothing?

Buchloh: Under certain circumstances I am much happier with nothing.

Fraser: But, Benjamin, how can you say that you're happier with nothing when you write for *Artforum*?

Buchloh: But how often have I written for *Artforum* in the last ten years? I should not have to defend myself on that because I haven't written for *Artforum* more than a handful of times in recent years. But also, where is the logic of that objection? I am not writing the criticism that I am criticizing—I am writing a very different type of criticism. I am not writing belletristic criticism, at least I don't think so.

Fraser: Do you think that your writing transcends the context of *Artforum*?

Buchloh: Yes, of course I think that, otherwise I would not publish there. What I mean to say, actually, is that I don't make any amends so that my writing can be published there.

Foster: It uses the medium.

Fraser: I don't believe that your writing or anyone's writing could transcend that context.

Foster: It might be a space of critical possibility again, or even still.

Fraser: I think it has the same critical possibilities as just about any other context in which the relative autonomy that we enjoy as artists and critics prevails. But Benjamin, you made an extreme all-or-nothing statement about the cultural landscape, and I'm just wondering if you see *Artforum* as part of the cultural landscape that you would want to reject.

Buchloh: Absolutely.

Fraser: So then my question is, how does your all-or-nothing formulation fit into your participation in that context? I'm not asking this question as a judgment, but I'm curious about the logic of your relationship to those sites.

Buchloh: I guess this is only because you don't believe that your work can transcend the context of institutions.

Molesworth: I think Andrea's question is extremely valid and pointed. I think one of the things we often do—the mythic "we" here at the table—is presume that the work of art, when it appears in our criticism, only has one function. But art moves through lots of different spaces—the collector's home, the pages of *Artforum*, the slide in the seminar for your undergraduates—and its function is radically different in each of those arenas. Likewise, essays in *Artforum* are read very differently by those different constituencies. Site-specific criticism would mean building in a kind of self-reflexive awareness of this condition, of how one's work travels to many audiences and how it speaks to them.

Miller: Do we necessarily always want communication to be the yardstick for criticism?

Storr: We really have to wean ourselves from both utopian and apocalyptic visions. They are very useful in certain ways—for argument, for focusing on how bad things can get or how good they might be—but as a practical matter, crises are not made up of those all-or-nothing choices, and if this is a discussion about crisis, it's really about how you might navigate a potentially treacherous situation, but also one that offers genuine possibilities.

My view—and I confess I am now heavily "institutionalized"—is that I try to balance the relative freedom of operation I have, and the relative efficacy of that freedom, against the obvious constraints I am obliged to recognize as well as some that I discovered by bumping into them. One can proceed in the same way as a critic; you can say, "Yes, this is the occasion to write about this artist in this venue, or this type of publication," because in that instance you may want to reach a certain reader. In another instance you simply may want to do what George talked about, which is to stand up for an artist who needs to be stood up for, and the more public, the better, frankly. If you turn it into hype as a

writer, then you are culpable, but if, on the other hand, you take an opportunity that is presented by the system to say loudly what you believe and to use the authority of your own voice and the publication to say "Pay attention!" then it seems to me that these are legitimate trade-offs. The danger is that it's very easy to lose track of just where the balance in each situation lies. I admit that danger, but if you stay alert, it seems to me there is greater room for maneuver than we talked about there being when we started this discussion.

Fraser: I just want to clarify that my question to Benjamin is not from a position of someone who thinks or wants to be outside, necessarily, or thinks I can be outside. I was trying to ask that question from within the contradictions of your own statement, as I understood it, and as it relates to my own current activities. I used to see differences between nonprofit institutions and commercial galleries; between academic journals and glossy magazines full of advertising. In the past decade I have seen those differences diminish enormously, and I think it makes less and less sense to define one's practice according to receding oppositions. But even within those oppositions, my practice has been defined less by an all-out rejection of one context over another than by a methodology of critical site-specificity, which I believe that one can and should bring to any context within which one works, including the context of *Artforum*.

Meyer: I have a question for the people involved in *October*. We keep talking about *Artforum*. But what about *October* itself? *October* was set up in the late '70s to counter a dissatisfaction with what *Artforum* had become then. The idea was to set up a journal without gallery advertisements, and to provide a more sustained analysis of current practice. And so I'm just wondering about *October* in 2001: how does *October* see itself now? How do you see your practice as different from that of other critical sites, or even as different from *Artforum*?

Baker: The differences are obvious. They have to do with a certain resistance to the whims of the market—and I do think criticism becomes impossible when its feet are being held to the fire of the market—and about maintaining levels of complexity in discourse. But at the same time, this conversation has been instructive, for if anything it has increased my desire to find ways to increase the audience for *October* while holding onto its primary ideals. *October* has been part of an extremely productive "crisis" in the cultural realm—both provoking and tracking that crisis—and it is my hope that this can occur again. So that any artist, any critic, any art or film historian who doesn't subscribe, well, they will be the ones who are obsolete. I don't know about curators; we probably can't affect them. Today, they make all of us obsolete. Seriously, I agree with what Helen implied earlier, for in some way that we haven't discussed sufficiently, today it is the curator who has displaced criticism and the power and function of the critic.

If I have any effect as an editor, part of the renewal that I am envisaging will entail that the distinction and disjunction between historical and

critical work has to become unhinged within *October*'s confines a little more. That has to happen.

Meyer: Can you elaborate on that?

Baker: The historical essays that are published in *October* must have more of an intrinsic relation to contemporary practice, and the contemporary practices have to, in some sense, elaborate historical models. The critical and historical functions of this magazine have to come together in a more logical and, hopefully, more programmatic way, that will attract certain types of work—critical, artistic, and art historical—to it. *October* has to publish more art criticism, as opposed to just art history. It has to publish more artist writings, more artist projects, more forms of writing and perspectives on contemporary culture.

Foster: October has become more historical, even archeological, for the reasons that we discussed today. I agree that we need to reclaim its critical function; I just don't know if we can.

Meyer: You can in terms of audience, and you can in terms of practice, deciding whether there are practices you believe in, the way you believed in practices in the early '80s.

Storr: October was produced by a rebellion, which was a phase in a much larger turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s. That was a long time ago, and circumstances are very different now. It is an historical mistake and a theoretical mistake to think that a particular organ, or for that matter, any institution, can or will bring about change without a broader mandate for that change, much less a general climate of ferment and debate. The issue is whether serious cracks and serious dislocations in the society are really in the offing, and whether those frictions will produce energies and ideas that will then allow institutions or platforms for criticism like *October* to be the place where the ideas in contention are sorted out.

Joselit: But this is the object of criticism on many levels. There has been a dismantling of the critical function that goes well beyond the art world. We, as critics, can think about the erosion of criticality and what causes it, and ponder how to address it through our particular competencies, without being unduly limited by the disciplinary boundaries of art history. In my own work, I point to television as one of the fundamental means of engineering consent. The question becomes: How can new public spaces be developed within commercial spaces of communication? This question encompasses many current art practices but is not limited to them.

I think that our culture has gotten very good at diffusing crisis, so to imply that we have to wait for one is foolish. Maybe one has to make one, but that is extremely difficult.

Storr: I'm not saying one has to wait for one at all. I'm really saying that absent the perception of crisis—and I think there really is a crisis in progress—there's only so much one can do. Now you can, in fact, try to increase that perception by acting as a critic in certain ways. But there are limits, and before one despairs

and says "the future is foreclosed," one has to look at the bigger historical cycles in motion. America has had a run of prosperity like none other, and because of that prosperity it has been able to manage all the tensions that might otherwise have produced a significant upheaval and the kind of reexamination of its cultural and social realities that would inevitably follow. But this is not going to go on forever. So I'm not saying that one waits quietly for something to happen; doubt and challenge should be constants of critical thinking. But if you look at history in the twentieth century, there have been many times when people have forcefully taken on the conventional wisdom of the day and clearly articulated more radical positions, and yet there was no traction, no way fully to engage the public they hoped to reach. We've been in a period like that for quite a while. But rather than resigning ourselves to the sense that nothing can be done, we simply have to recognize that we are not operating independently of bigger events.

Foster: Art may not be a place where traction is found.

Storr: It has been in the past.

Foster: But it might not be in the present, it might not be in the future.

Storr: Who knows? I hope it is.

Foster: Your suggestion, David, is that we take our competence as art critics into other spheres?

Joselit: Well, that's what I'm interested in doing myself. I'm not proposing a program for everyone. But if art is more and more marginalized, visual culture has become evermore crucial in defining virtually every dimension of our experience, from leisure activities to politics. Knowledge is produced as much through images as through texts. I'm interested in thinking about this condition, both in terms of how artists address it, and how it is manifested in commercial culture.

Baker: There might be a contradiction between those two last directions. And perhaps the marginalization of critical art is not best analyzed through the very lens that renders it so. Certain artistic dynamics can continue and have not been exhausted and are not over. The critical engagement with them is still crucial. At least for me.

Foster: So George and David represent two different models. You, George, want to hold onto the function of the critic as the advocate of artistic practice, and David wants criticism to open onto a critical analysis of visual culture.

Joselit: But I don't see these models as contradictory, and in fact I have learned a lot from artistic practice on this issue. One can follow a number of strategies at once, some of which may seem to contradict others. I've done exactly what George has done with certain artists who I think deserve attention. But I also think that there are other possibilities. It is naïve to look for a single solution. I don't think that is possible anymore.

—New York City, December 14, 2001