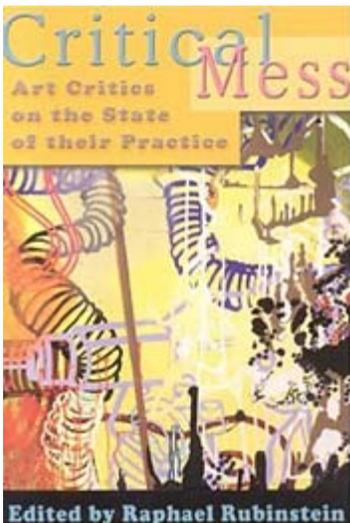




Posting from the "Brokers With Hands on Their Faces" blog, Jan. 23, 2009



*Critical Mess: Art Critics and the State of Their Practice* (Hard Press Editions, 2006)

## CRISIS AND CRITICISM by Ben Davis

It may feel a bit odd to return to the well-worn theme of the "crisis in criticism" at a time that is colloquially referred to as the "Worst Economic Crisis since the Great Depression." Ruminating on the relative merits of descriptive vs. prescriptive criticism while art critics are being unceremoniously shit-canned left and right would seem to be, you know, a bit of a tangent.

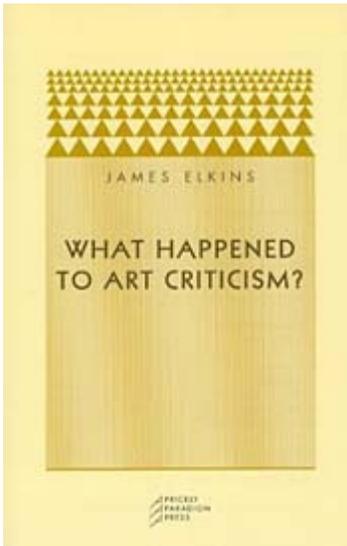
And yet, at the very least, it gives some new urgency to the topic -- does art criticism have the sense of purpose to make it through hard times? Does it have anything to say about its own plight?

I have to say: I do not personally feel in crisis. But I was on a panel a few months ago where the topic came up, so I decided to review the relevant literature (Raphael Rubinstein's collection *Critical Mess* is a good primer). It turns out that, while everyone seems to agree that there is a "crisis in criticism," no one agrees what that crisis is, or what it means.

Take Thomas McEvilley's essay in *Critical Mess*. McEvilley declares the problem for criticism today is that "the lingering dominance of the issue of quality and of the value judgment seems to outsiders to render our discourse elitist and irrelevant." His advice for critics is "stress analysis, not appreciation." Now turn the page to Michael Duncan's essay. "Academic theory can be held largely responsible for the impotency of contemporary criticism," he states. "Personal commitment to tastes and values seems largely missing in critical writing today."

In other words, Duncan's problem is McEvilley's solution, and vice versa. Elsewhere, James Elkins suggests the "crisis" stems in part from "the lack of restraint that is granted to art critics by the absence of an academic home"; Carter Ratcliff, on the contrary, argues that the problem is academic-minded "critic-theorists," who "address those who want to be told what to think." Apparently criticism is at once too scholastic and not scholastic enough. You get the point.

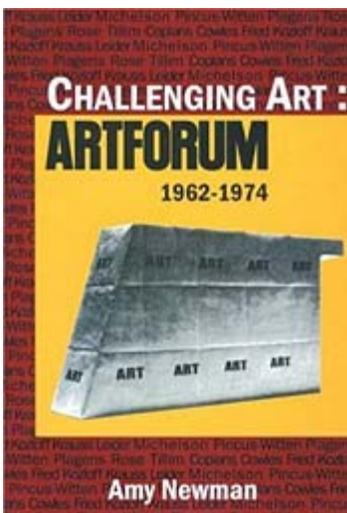
Moving past this unpromising circular firing squad routine, what is most striking is the lack of any kind of well-developed explanation, on all sides, for *why* there would be a crisis; why now and not some other time? It is all explained either via some kind of crowd psychology -- Rubenstein cites "a general unwillingness to get into artistic tussles, or even dialogue" -- or by vague references to the power of the market, as in Benjamin Buchloh's much-repeated declaration that "you don't need criticism for an investment structure, you need experts." Or the so-called crisis is given the coloring of pop sociology. On the panel I was on, Jan Avgikos asserted that the problem was "pluralism," and seemed to say that Cai Guo-Qiang -- an artist who lived for 10 years in New York, and was successful abroad well before he was accepted at home -- represented something radically unassimilable to Western thinking about art.



*What Happened to Art Criticism?*  
(Prickly Paradigm, 2003)



Cai Guo-Qiang making his gunpowder drawing, *Bird of Light* (2004), at Fireworks by Grucci in Brookhaven, N.Y. Photo by Chris Smith



*Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974*  
(Soho Press, 2003)

At their most systematic, these attempts to express the "crisis of criticism" do reflect a tiny sliver of an inkling that "discourse" might in fact float on top of something material and historical -- but this notion remains fairly impressionistic, and nobody seems to have much heart for delving into such connections.

Let's take a theme that comes up a lot as a symbol of the "crisis," "the loss of the old, exciting *Artforum*" (as Katy Seigel sums up the meme), a starting point that has the benefit of directing us to a specific institution. What can we say about the actual historical circumstances that gave birth to the "*Artforum* mode" of criticism? Here are some actual facts about the magazine:

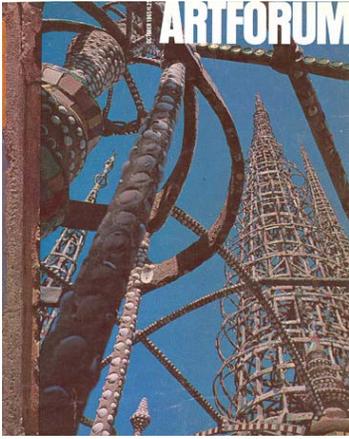
1) The Market: As laid out in *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974*, Amy Newman's interesting oral history of the magazine's early days, *Artforum* became the leading art magazine sometime after it moved to New York in 1964, pioneering the practice of concentrating on the newest, most up-to-date art rather than covering everything, from Old Masters to Abstract Expressionism, as its rival *ARTnews* did. Its context was therefore the later part of the "Great Boom" of the Post-War period in the U.S., a time of historically unprecedented economic expansion, which in turn led to an "art boom" by the 1960s, symbolized by the teeming Pop art scene. This was the first period when relatively young American artists could hope to achieve star status and make money off of what they did (Jasper Johns set the stage when he sold out his debut show in 1958 at Castelli gallery, an unprecedented achievement).

2) The University: The other distinctive contribution of *Artforum*, of course, is its heady theoretical language. This was designed to amp up art criticism's importance by giving it a more intellectual ring -- its explicit antagonist was what Barbara Rose termed the "mental doodling" of poet-critics (whose redoubt was, again, *ARTnews*). If, however, the success of *Artforum* was to create "a kind of art magazine that seemed to be sustained, respectable, serious enough to gain admission to academic territory" (Robert Rosenblum's words), such a feat was only possible because the "Great Boom" also entailed a rapid expansion of the educational system itself. This created the base for the shift to the new criticism, as well as the climate for an expanded discourse about art in general. Pretty much all of *Artforum's* early star writers were creative types who went into academia and found a calling there.

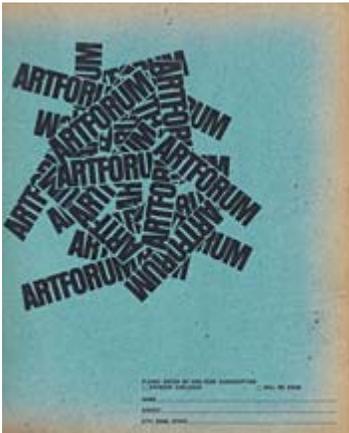
3) The Government: Lastly, if the "*Artforum* mode" of criticism -- first strident formalism, and later the muesli of psychoanalysis, deconstruction and critical theory we know today -- served partly to establish some seemingly objective criteria to examine brand new work that had no established historical worth, it is also the case that there was every reason to feel that art had a new, more "objective" importance for U.S. society in this period. In 1965, the National Endowment for the Arts was founded, putting the stamp of official recognition on a field formerly perceived to be pretty out-there. Any artist who labored in the beatnik days of the pre-NEA period can describe the shot of self-esteem that this gave the visual arts (even if the NEA's goal was -- in the words of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. to JFK -- "attaching a potent opinion-making group to the Administration" and "transforming the world's impression of the United States as a nation of money-grubbing materialists.")

Now let's ask ourselves, 40 years on, what has changed?

Well, for one thing, the economic background is totally different. By the '70s, the pseudo-Keynesian, big government model of economy that reigned during the Great Boom, with its mantra of "labor-management partnership," entered into crisis on the teeth of its own internal contradictions -- U.S. industry, heavily burdened by taxation



Artforum, October 1965



Subscription card for Artforum, 1963

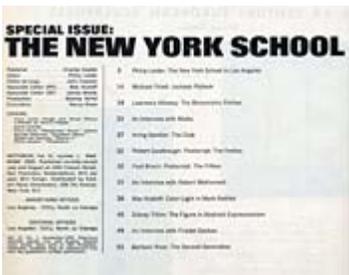


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**Ben Martin**  
Jasper Johns, Age 29, at Castelli Gallery  
with Target Painting  
1959  
Smithsonian Institution

in the Cold War, faced intensifying competition from export-oriented economies in Japan and Germany, yielding a decade of painful global stagnation. The "art boom" ebbed. There is probably a lot to say about what happened to criticism during the '70s (if, as Hal Foster writes "theoretical production became as important as artistic production" by the mid-'70s, my guess is that this has to do with the fact that theoretical production had a tenured position in academia, while art production was working a series of dead end jobs.) But the important thing for the present topic is how art today reflects the deep systematic changes since the '80s.

The anti-government orthodoxy which today goes by the jargony name of "neoliberalism" presented itself as a solution to '70s-style stagnation. Its doctrines were: cut taxes for the rich; cut working-class living standards to raise the profit rate for corporations; cut or privatize government programs and services; deregulate economies to let capital move freely. These policies were a stable feature of the establishment for this entire period, for Reagan ("government is not the answer, it is the problem") as much as for Clinton ("the era of big government is over"). And at the end of 30 years of such developments, here is where art criticism finds itself:

1) The Market: The neoliberal boom did create a tidal wave of new wealth (despite such excesses as the S&L bailout and the dotcom crash, which had their effects on the art market). A 2005 RAND study of the art market sums up the outcome for art: "the combination of a surging stock market and the proliferation of digital millionaires, real estate tycoons, and entertainment stars (whose incomes are in the top one percent of all households) created an unprecedented increase in the number of potential art buyers." However, unlike the earlier '50s-'60s art boom, which took place in the context of a much more general rise in living standards, this new art boom took place in the context of escalating inequality, with most benefits geared to the top. There has been a strong lure, therefore, for new art to take the character of a tradable luxury product. The "Art Newspaper mode" -- topical, factual, breezy, business-oriented -- has grown up against the background of the insular "Artforum mode" in very much the same way that the latter developed against the mushy "ARTnews mode," to fit the mood of a different period (I've always thought of Artforum.com's "Scene & Heard" column as something like the return of the repressed in relation to the paper mag.)

2) The University: According to the same study, "museums have had less success in raising interest levels among the various educational groups, especially those with less education," adding as explanation that "large sections of the population feel uncomfortable with the atmosphere of museums and believe that museums are not welcoming to those who are not knowledgeable about the arts." In fact, "holding education and population constant, the overall rate at which individuals of different education levels attended museums actually declined" between 1982 and 2002, "primarily because of slightly lower rates of attendance among the less educated." Indeed, if the earlier rise of theory-crit coincided with a boom in education, the neoliberal expansion of the '80s-'90s-'00s coincided with an assault on the idea of education as a right. Education is more expensive and more stratified than it was when *Artforum* hit the scene. In this context, the academic leanings of the discourse around art would seem to be increasingly an objective hindrance to promoting art, rather than a boon -- I remember well a British museum director extolling the virtues of Martin Creed to me: "You don't need to read Foucault, you don't need to read Baudrillard. . ."

3) The Government: Finally, to sell a pro-corporate agenda, Reagan detonated the "culture wars," appealing to the wingnut right as his claim on mass appeal. The NEA's modest artist grants program was finally defunded in 1995, after a series of scandals. The whole thing



ARTnews, Sept. 1964



Poet Frank O'Hara, critic for ARTnews



Roger Stevens, first director of the National Endowment for the Arts, being sworn in as special assistant to President Johnson on the arts May 1964

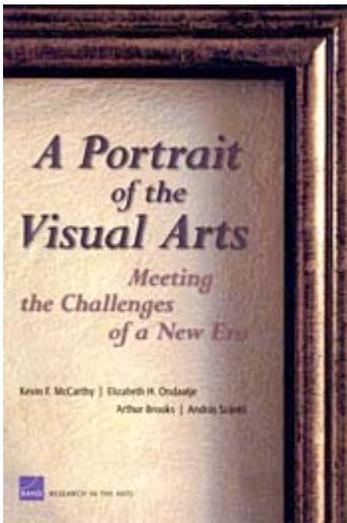
was a political kabuki show: The artists who got the program in trouble, Robert Mapplethorpe and Andreas Serrano, had benefited from the NEA's grants for institutions (which were kept), not individual grants (which were gutted). As Michael Brenson points out in his history of the NEA, *Visionaries and Outcasts*, exactly the feature that was once justification for launching the program -- that it symbolized the public sphere's capacity to tolerate diversity and individualism -- was what was now under assault. Such political attacks open up a rift for criticism. They produce pressure towards traditionalism and quiescence for anyone with a popular platform, on the one hand, and sharply underline the impotence and cloistered nature of academic criticism, on the other.

All this is not meant to be an exhaustive list of factors weighing on art writing. Nor do they swamp the subjective component, the ability of individual voices to push against the tide. But the point is this: The diverse "crises" perceived by assorted, apparently contradictory viewpoints today actually coalesce out of a common background noise. The idea that popular writing about art has become less rigorous -- more cheerleader-ish, more money-obsessed, less "big picture" -- hits home for the same reason that charges that theory-crit is out of touch are more likely to stick. Both are true, which means that people looking for something meaningful ping pong between the two sides without finding anything satisfactory. Both have a common root in the contradictory changes in the economy over the last 30 years. (The same could be said of other takes on the "crisis" -- "pluralism," for instance, is really just a codeword for globalization, one of neoliberalism's signatures.) These changes have taken the form of an erosion, an incremental but relentless shifting of the balance of forces, which is why the "crisis of criticism" has manifested itself in the form of a nagging, recurring, but ever-more-insistent theme, rather than a sudden revelation.

All of this is not just intellectual sparring. It is of real importance *right now*. For if a neoliberal boom has been the context for the "crisis of criticism" debate heretofore, the current, stomach-turning collapse represents the implosion of that economic model. Trickle-down economics has morphed into a shrieking economic super-hurricane. Our new president begins his term junking decades-old wisdom that even he himself touted a short year ago, under dual pressure from desperate bankers and an angry electorate: "the question we ask today," he said at his inauguration, "is not whether government is too big or too small, but whether or not it works" (better still was the sight of Pete Seeger and Bruce Springsteen reclaiming the full verses of *This Land is Your Land*). Mainstream ideas about what makes sense for society are in flux. Shouldn't criticism be too?

Me, I'm hopeful. In the year-end *Artforum*, editor Tim Griffin paints a picture of his team trying to grapple with the changed reality -- "one can sense the unease in the most modest of prose," he writes. Museum director Charles Esche has a solid, manifesto-like piece in that issue about how art might respond to the financial collapse. And yet Esche's ultimate conclusion is that artists should take their cues from philosopher Jacques Rancière, and that art can now serve society by providing an alternative model of political thought -- a program which, if you ask me, writes checks for art that society cannot cash [see "*Esthetic Politics?*," Sept. 5, 2008]. Meanwhile, you have to admit that *Art + Auction* is still a much better starting point for practical information about how the recession is affecting the art world -- even if its ambition is to be (as one of its writers once told me) "the *Vanity Fair* of the art world."

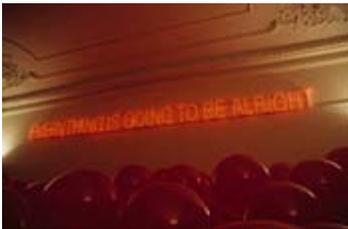
So, how to coordinate the sense of purpose of theory-crit with a sensitivity to art's actual social reality? How to avoid the choice between random subjective assertion and blind theoretical



*A Portrait of the Visual Arts: Meeting the Challenges of a New Era* (RAND Corporation, 2005)



Curator Okwui Enwezor reading the *Art Newspaper's* "gossip" page at a café on the Messeplatz during Art 37 Basel  
Photo by Walter Robinson



**Martin Creed**  
*Work No. 205: EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT*  
1999  
Installation at Alberto Peola Arte Contemporanea, Turin

correctness? In its broad strokes, the debate about the "crisis in criticism" seems a proxy for a real political debate: popular types defend some kind of humanist vision of the individual imagination against the art-theory bureaucrats; theory-heads clamor for art that has a didactic value, that doesn't capitulate to popular wisdom, that takes a stand. This, it should be noted, is one of the all-time classic false oppositions.

Now is as good a time as any to return to the writings of Leon Trotsky on art. In 1938, deep into the wreckage of the Great Depression, he helped pen the manifesto "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art" with Andre Breton and Diego Rivera. It is, true to form, a polemic, informed by an analysis of the crisis of art in that moment, faced with assaults on the avant-garde by both fascism and Stalinism. Yet underneath this is a more general idea about art.

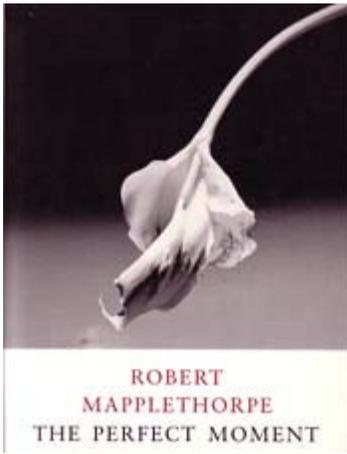
"To those who urge us, whether for today or for tomorrow, to consent that art should submit to a discipline which we hold to be radically incompatible with its nature, we give a flat refusal and we repeat our deliberate intention of standing by the formula *complete freedom for art,*" they write. And yet, later they continue, "It should be clear by now that in defending freedom of thought we have no intention of justifying political indifference, and that it is far from our wish to revive a so-called pure art which generally serves the extremely impure ends of reaction."

To realize oneself as an individual is one of the most cherished dreams that society holds out, and art is a major conduit for this desire. And yet this same society throws all kinds of roadblocks in the way. It suffocates the individual and degrades the imagination. Art is therefore not political because it adheres to some particular "critical" program. It is critical in its DNA. The esthetic flows into the political without the one being the other. Trying to assign art any particular program (even Esche's rather nebulous one that it "reimagine the future") is simply a recipe for narrowing its social significance. I don't care -- politically -- if artists want to make clay models of George Washington's head. They have a right to do it. This does not mean that art is tasked with being apolitical -- artists, like everyone else, are affected by what's going on in the news, and likely have something to say about it. What it does mean, however, is that the critic's job cannot be to stomp for any particular "aesthetic or political school," as Trotsky put it to Breton elsewhere.

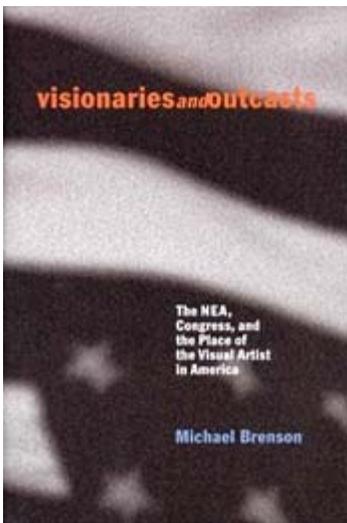
Art's social and economic context are subject to systematic analysis. It is even important to have an analysis of the world -- otherwise you end up with criticism that is eloquent when parsing esthetic influences, but falls back on the dopest conventional wisdom when politics or economics come up, as they will. Arguing that art benefits from theoretical knowledge of the world beyond the temperature-controlled confines of the white cube, however, is very different than saying that critics must be the Debbie Downers of the art world, demanding that art Get Serious. Criticism's goal should be, rather, to "oxidize the atmosphere in which artists breathe and create" (Trotsky again), to open the circuits between politics and art, and let them share their passions.

Politically engaged but defiantly in love with art for what it is -- that is what criticism has to be if its own "crisis" is not to turn into a crash.

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Catalogue to Robert Mapplethorpe's "The Perfect Moment," shut down at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. in 1989



*Visionaries and Outcasts: The NEA, Congress, and the Place of the Visual Arts in America* (New Press, 2001)



Left to right: Tao Seeger, Peter Seeger and Bruce Springsteen performing at the inauguration



*Artforum*, December 2008



Left to right: Leon Trotsky, Diego Rivera and Andre Breton, 1938