

## IN CONVERSATION

# BEN DAVIS with Wendy Vogel

Brooklyn-based writer Ben Davis sat down with Art Books contributor Wendy Vogel on a Sunday morning at the Rail Headquarters to discuss his book *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* (Haymarket, 2013), elaborating on the connections between art and radical political action, middle class creative labor, and hipsters.

**Wendy Vogel (Rail):** Can we start by talking about the pamphlet you wrote in 2010 called “9.5 Theses on Art and Class”?

**Ben Davis:** I had been thinking about the issue of art and class, or artists’ relationships with the economy and politics, for a long time in a fragmentary way. Then, in 2010, there was a controversy around *Skin Fruit*, the show at the New Museum of Dakis Joannou’s collection, which wasn’t curated by a member of the staff, but by his favorite artist, Jeff Koons. The *Brooklyn Rail* was involved because William Powhida did a graphic for the November 2009 issue called *How the New Museum Committed Suicide with Banality*. There was a lot of energy around this discussion, and out of that, the artists William Powhida and Jennifer Dalton organized a sort of counter-show called #class to the New Museum exhibition. Having written about those issues, I thought that was something I really ought to support. But talking to them and looking over the contributions to the show, I was struck by how jokey they were. People didn’t actually have a language of class to talk about class, so I tried to systematize my thoughts. I wrote the pamphlet over the course of a weekend and passed it out at the show. That text, which was sort of written on the fly, and not actually published except for on the website of the #class show, was easily one of the most read and talked about things that I had ever done. It became the logical



the term I prefer to use. As a category it just means anybody who does something creative. There are plenty of laborers in a capitalist world who are paid to sell their creativity for a wage, and there's a working class form of creative labor, too. But visual artists have a unique relationship to the creative product—the product is something that represents the artist as an individual. They might even do it if they didn't sell. But it's not purely that, either. We think about artists as people who get to make money doing what they love, and that is the classic middle class dynamic—the overlap between some kind of individual stake or buy-in and also a professional relation. That relationship clarifies a lot of the questions about the way artists function economically and politically. They're not attached to an institution in an ongoing way, but they have a lot of creative autonomy. People think about art and commerce in a binary way and it's because you don't have that category that encompasses the relationship visual artists have to have, either because they're clearly exploited or they aren't actually making their living from what they do. So they often identify as exploited—which is partly true—but at the same time, as laborers, artists obviously have a lot more creative freedom to produce what they want than a Starbucks worker does, for instance.

**Rail:** Do you hope your book will complicate the idea of artists' identification with the working class—a notion that goes back to the 1960s and the Art Workers' Coalition, to folks like W.A.G.E. [Working Artists in the Greater Economy], who are now trying to raise consciousness about those issues?

**Davis:** Those are two examples that I talk about. Julia Bryan-Wilson's very good book *Art Workers* describes how artists organized in the late '60s and early '70s and how they created this category of "art worker" as a way to identify with the struggles of labor that were going on. What you see in that book is a way of talking about art as organizing zigzags around this missing vector of this third term I'm proposing: swinging to one side and over-identifying with workers, and when that proves to be a difficult alliance, zigzagging the other way and saying, "We don't have anything to do with them." So my hope is that having the category of middle class creative labor helps people look at what's actually going on. And once you can do that, you can start figuring out what to do with it.

**Rail:** In the first chapter of the book you target two abuses of Marxist theory

and aesthetics: the Frankfurt School's eagerness to "align the working class's struggle against capital...with the artists' struggle with the baleful effects of commodification" and Hardt and Negri's theory of immaterial labor, which lumps artistic production together with a variety of service labor. How have these two misapplications of Marxist theory affected art criticism?

**Davis:** I'm critical of those traditions, however, I think they are useful in a certain way. There's fertile ground to have this discussion because some of these creations exist. That said, I agree with the analysis of Perry Anderson in *Considerations on Western Marxism*. He points out how, from the Russian Revolution to the '60s and '70s, there were western Marxists—including the Frankfurt School and Althusser—who were looking at the messed-up capitalist world and trying to locate themselves within it. At the same time, they had to contend with the idea of the Soviet Union, which speaks in the name of the Marxist international working class, but is actually an oppressive dictatorship. Not just for intellectuals and art theorists, but for generations of activists, it was a very confusing situation. The reaction to it produced some strange distortions, and what Anderson calls Western Marxism is a form of coded, or explicit, disillusion with the language of the working class itself. For Adorno and Horkheimer, for instance, the concept of class almost vanishes from their writing. Because the language of class and politics seems to have been hijacked, thinkers who are trying to come up with a progressive way forward deflect a lot of energy into artistic questions. So in my analysis, artistic questions become over-coded with political meaning, and at the same time, they become further and further removed from the central Marxist question of class and class struggle. And I think that's had some obvious distorting effects on art criticism, including the fact that it's just made the so-called political wing of art theory seem pretty joyless. They seem to not be interested in art, but only questions about how art is commodified and the political rhetoric of art. The entire political question rests on art itself.

**Rail:** As a self-identified feminist, I found it refreshing that you pinpoint the re-emergence of concerns about gender inequality in Chapter 9 ("White Walls, Glass Ceiling") as the starting point for percolating your thoughts about art and inequality. This is the expansion an essay you wrote in the mid-2000s. Do you think that the dialogue around those issues has changed at all since you wrote

that original text?

**Davis:** I think the renewal of Marxist thinking is very important in the present. Obviously any renewal of Marxist thinking will have to be Marxist-Feminist, anti-racist thinking. As I say in the chapter you talk about, really, I started out writing pretty conventional reviews. In 2005, people started talking about and protesting the fact that the group show “Greater New York” at PS1 had a very low number of female artists. That touched off a much wider discussion, because most of the mainstream art world would consider itself to be at least conversant with feminism. So the question then is: Why is this a persistent problem? And it was one of the first things that lead me to expand the way I thought and wrote about art to consider systematically...how art becomes valued and the way the art system works. And of course, the art world doesn’t stand independently of sexist politics in the world. So you have to connect the inter-art politics with the bigger politics.

**Rail:** Let’s talk about some of the bad examples in your book. You discuss a couple of writers championing certain kinds of art that they support through a kind of weak political argumentation. Can you talk about how your approach overturns some of these strategies?

**Davis:** There’s a big tendency within art writing towards a kind of political formalism—and artistic forms do have political properties. They are produced in certain periods as a reaction against certain tensions, but there’s no form or language or rhetoric or object that is ever loaded with any political, inherently progressive meaning.

Now, my sense is that a lot of people use art theory which comes out of this Western Marxist tradition: that old politics failed, and then after that, class politics are no longer relevant. These theorists then try to posit this smart analysis as its alternative. The gesture serves to validate art, to make art seem like a battle. So it gets this intellectual status as an alternative form of thought, and at the same time it feeds a vertical pessimism. I think that’s true even in really, really good cases. For instance, the Yes Men: guerilla activism, pretty good politics, and pretty forward-thinking. Nonetheless, sometimes people engage with it as if, “This is the new thing. Old politics is boring. We need

something that engages people and is media savvy.”

But, I would just argue that as great as the Yes Men are, that sort of gesture is not going to change the world on its own.

If you’re going to get justice for the Bhopal gas disaster—one of their greatest stunts—it’s not enough to just embarrass Dow Chemical on television. You’re going to need other pieces that aren’t, strictly speaking, creative. It’s that tension that I come back to in the book, the point where art sort of replaces politics, instead of working with it.

**Rail:** Speaking of the new thing, what about the hipster aesthetics chapter? If I were teaching an undergrad art class I would definitely assign it.

**Davis:** A lot of fire in the book comes from a kind of cultural criticism that turns critique of cultural forms into a political critique. So the hipster essay is an extension of that, because the conversations about gentrification and the politics of young people—seeing them as a bunch of hipsters—is in fact a political critique. It’s not substituting an identification for a certain set of signifiers, a certain kind of aesthetic, a certain kind of sensibility. There are some objective political conditions that determine what “hipsterism” is, but I don’t think you can just say that just because someone likes ’80s cartoons, vintage clothing, or women with bangs.

In fact, people who are labeled as hipsters—who are artistically inclined, who come from a certain kind of background—have all kinds of political germs in them. At the conclusion of the hipster essay, I say you could look at Occupy Wall Street as radical hipsterism. I’m worried that could sound dismissive. But a lot of the stereotypes people have of hipsters—they’re white gentrifiers, they’re overeducated, they’re obsessed with the micro-language of symbols—informed Occupy Wall Street. The movement was a symbolic action; the demands were about student debt, inequality, and prospects, particularly for young people, though it came to encompass a lot of people. It’s an example to me of how people who get dismissed as apolitical nihilists can, in the presence of political action, embrace a meaningful opportunity to be a part of something bigger.

**Rail:** It's interesting to think about this chapter in relationship to your conclusion about rehabilitating the economic origins of post-modernism. The famous quote from Fredric Jameson is: "Postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism." But you write: "Postmodernism is the cultural ideology of neoliberalism." As a school of thought, postmodernism often gets dismissed because it's considered pure rhetoric.

**Davis:** People have written a lot about how the word "contemporary" has replaced postmodernism. And postmodernism, for all its weaknesses, is a historical and theoretical framework, whereas contemporary just means the hodgepodge that is—

**Rail:** "The contemporary" in many ways embodies the dangers of postmodernism as the ultimate pluralism.

**Davis:** And that is the sense that I want to recuperate. I think there are real excesses of some theories associated with postmodernism that are anti-historical and pessimistic and leading down all kinds of blind alleys. But even though postmodernism is not trendy anymore, when people try to characterize the present, they're still using a lot of the same rhetoric. Now they're talking about the Internet instead of the media, but the language is the same. To say that nothing determines anything else, we're just lost in a sea of images, you can't predict the future, your political agency has been dispersed—all of these are classic postmodernist tropes. They come out of the despair and confusion people felt in the '70s when communism became discredited, the language of Marx became discredited, and capitalism had its own crisis and started dismantling a lot of the progressive institutions that existed to cushion things within it. That intellectual despair penetrated art in all kinds of ways. I don't think we're beyond that yet. But I'm hopeful because there are signs of renewed environmental movement, the renewed feminist movement, and anti-racist movement around the prisons. And there are germs of people thinking about more systematic ways to address injustices and inequality.

**Rail:** You hope to address this book both to visual arts professionals and the activist community. What have the reactions been from these two groups?

**Davis:** I've had activist friends say it really makes them want to make art [*laughs*], and I've had artist friends say it really makes them want to be involved with political organizing. And that is the ideal reaction. I think the relationship between the two is really asymmetrical. The anecdotal reactions to the book have made me realize that art people are actually hungry to be associated with politics, because they're hungry for relevance, and it's a part of the established battery. So the book starts a conversation that people want to have. In the lefty reviews of the book, on the other hand—and this should be a sobering thing to people who are involved in contemporary visual art—there is a lot of resistance to thinking about contemporary art as anything other than decadence. The critique is that I engage too seriously with the art fairs and the museums where the big galas happen and that our reaction to all that should be, “Tear it down, burn it down.” I don't agree with that critique, because I agree that the art industry is fucked up, but we need to think of ways to move beyond it. On the other hand, it's a place that does have seeds of a political discussion, and you can't begin to think of alternatives unless you can actually talk constructively about the actual milieu that they find themselves engaged with. So the critique that you should just ignore it and start again is a bit like someone saying, “How do I get out of this maze?” and you're like, “It's easy, go to the end of the maze.” [*Laughs.*] We have to figure out what the maze looks like and what turns you can take to guide someone through.

*Editor's Note:* Although at the time Davis and Vogel conducted the interview they were both employed by Louise Blouin Media, this interview was commissioned before they were colleagues.

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**WENDY VOGEL is Associate Editor at Modern Painters and curates independent projects. Her writing has also appeared in Artforum.com, Art Lies, Flash Art, and frieze, among other publications.**