

All Art Is Propaganda

Ben Davis sums up art, class, and criticism in *9.5 Theses*

By **Christian Viveros-Fauné** Wednesday, Aug 21 2013

George Orwell inhabited a certain counterfeit Chinese curse like a silk kimono: He lived and wrote in interesting times. Having experienced world wars, ideological smackdowns, intellectual lunacy, and what George Packer (editor of an Orwell collection from which this column's title is filched) called "dilemmas over the role of the writer in a period of partisan upheaval," criticism's white knight took stock of his combative role. "In a peaceful age, I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books," Orwell confessed. "As it is, I have become a sort of pamphleteer."



William Powhida

Ben Davis's *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*

Details

9.5 Theses on Art and Class

By Ben Davis Haymarket Books, 224 pp., \$16

Such is the fortune today of many doggedly contrarian critics of art and culture; the "professional shit-stirrers," in the words of critic Robert Storr (himself a charter paddler), who ply their muckraking with an eye not to tilting against windmills, but to ripping back veils and exposing the occasional bare-assed emperor. Ben Davis, executive editor of the oddly upmarket publication *artinfo*, is a prince among this company. The substantial intellect expended at his day job is sort of like having Voltaire edit *Vanity Fair*.

The author of a new collection of 19 essays brought together under the Bolshevik title *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* (Haymarket Books, \$16), Davis dialectically dissects a rash of pressing subjects. Among these are

the great recession, student debt, income inequality, laissez-faire economics, Occupy-style activism, the war on terror, as well as art's often ambivalent or, alternately, concupiscent responses to all this and more. His central thesis—or hobbyhorse—is class. Whether you agree with him in its every application is beside the point. Like watching an expert pole-vaulter ply his craft, witnessing this critic reach for first principles in this day and age constitutes its own reward.

A dedicated Marxist who consistently (if sometimes too readily) applies Marx's critique of capitalism to the intersections of art and life, Davis's hard-hitting art criticism adheres to an ultimately constructive view of how "visual art has preserved middle-class values of independence and creative autonomy," while also celebrating the discipline's unique ability to voice ideas "when you need to say something but haven't quite figured out how to say it yet." That noted, Davis's more gimlet-eyed claims are all about dispelling the romantic smog that obscures the actual circumstances of living artists. Visual art, he argues— independently of its newfangled status as a luxury good—is a form of "middle-class labor." Even if artists don't recognize this fact, their own relationship to their cottage industries puts them in the same thrall to the larger society as lawyers, doctors, and small business folks.

Using history, statistics, and plenty of scholarly data (unlike most art critics), Davis steadily establishes the kind of evidence that would, in another, better-informed time, be head-slappingly obvious: There exist, he says, complex connections between the forces of industry (the classic "base" in Marxist lingo) and the institutions, forms, and fashions that make up society's politics and culture (the superstructure). A centerpiece of this approach appears in the book's namesake essay, which Davis taped to the door of a friendly Chelsea gallery in 2010 in imitation of [Martin Luther](#). A set of daring formulations that spell out art and class's structural seesaw—"Inasmuch as art is part of and not independent of society," class "will also affect the functioning and character of the sphere of the visual arts"—*9.5 Theses* is also characterized by a tendency toward Marxist boilerplate. "Style," as [Martin Amis](#) put it, "gives moral direction"—this goes double when quoting the prophet of the God that failed, or adopting sentence constructions that smother the brain like anesthetic. But these are quibbles, really, especially when Davis enlivens Trotskyite run-ons with gems like this: "Framing [Vanessa Beecroft's](#) art as an act of critique would be like calling ketchup a vegetable."

A bigger issue to consider: Davis's faith in existing political activism as a guide to art. Here the author ignores the shelter provided by art since the 1980s to those disgusted by identity-sourced, American-type lifestyle politics. But that's an argument for another day. On *9.5 Theses*, the verdict is crystal: This is one helluva pamphlet.