

Grant Kester  
**The Device Laid  
Bare: On Some  
Limitations in  
Current Art  
Criticism**

e-flux journal #50 — december 2013 Grant Kester  
**The Device Laid Bare: On Some Limitations in Current Art Criticism**

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Monologism ... denies that there exists outside of it another consciousness, with the same rights, and capable of responding on an equal footing ... the other remains entirely and only an *object* of consciousness and cannot constitute another consciousness.

– Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1961)<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Criticism and Monological Thinking

For several years now I have written about a new area of dialogical artistic practice, in which the conventional relationship between art and the social world, and between artist and viewer, is being transformed.<sup>2</sup> Frequently collaborative in nature, this work is being produced by artists and art collectives throughout the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. While otherwise quite diverse, it is driven by a common desire to establish new relationships between artistic practice and other fields of knowledge production, from urbanism to environmentalism, from experimental education to participatory design. In many cases it has been inspired by, or affiliated with, new movements for social and economic justice around the globe. Throughout this field of practice we see a persistent engagement with sites of resistance and activism, and a desire to move beyond existing definitions of both art and the political.<sup>3</sup> How do these practices redefine or transform our understanding of aesthetic experience? And how do they challenge preconceived notions of the object of art? I have identified this work with an underlying paradigm shift in the nature of contemporary art practice, in which norms of aesthetic autonomy are undergoing a process of renegotiation. These shifts have significant implications for the critic or historian who writes about this work as well. In particular, they require new methodologies and new ways of thinking through modes of reception and production. I've found that it's often difficult for conventionally-trained critics to address what we might broadly term social or engaged art practice with any analytic clarity. In this essay I want to explore several features of contemporary art critical discourse that have prevented a deeper understanding of this work. I will also suggest some ways in which we might reframe critical discourse in response to the particular challenges that it poses.

I'll begin by outlining some more general considerations related to the status of theory within contemporary art criticism. In its most



Jack Lang and philosopher Jean-François Lyotard attend the opening of "Les Immatériaux," curated by the latter, Centre Pompidou, 1985. Copyright: Centre Pompidou.



Judy Olausen, *Rosalind Kraus*, c. 1978.

familiar form, the art critic or historian today takes on the role of a “subcontractor,” in Sylvia Lavin’s memorable phrase, importing theories developed by scholars from very different intellectual traditions into the analysis of specific works of art.<sup>4</sup> While this can, on occasion, be accomplished with some nuance and sophistication, the more typical approach involves a straightforward exegesis, in which a given theory, reduced to a set of notional principles, is simply juxtaposed with a given work of art, as if their sheer coexistence within the space of the essay constitutes meaningful evidence of their analytic co-relevance. While the proper names vary over time, the gesture has remained remarkably consistent for the nearly three decades of my own involvement in contemporary art criticism. Because the art critic or historian can typically claim no substantive expertise in the area of theory they invoke, this material often comes to function as a kind of master discourse. They rarely subject the theory itself to any significant interrogation, nor can they challenge the foundational premises or the interpretations of earlier philosophical works presented by the theorist in question. As a result the critic simply and unproblematically reiterates the key points of a given theory, eliding the deeper textures of thought, as well as any engagement with the contradictions and tensions of the theory itself. The theory functions as a self-contained and self-evident apparatus, which can be brought onto the scene of critical engagement to perform the work of deep analysis or political demystification.

At the stylistic level this approach involves variations on the same basic grammatical structure, familiar to us from countless art reviews, exhibition catalogs, and books in which the phrase “According to Žižek,” (or Badiou or Deleuze or Rancière or Nancy or Agamben or Derrida) is followed by the recitation of some pithy truth about the inherent evil of collective forms of identity, the limitless capacity of an undifferentiated state or capitalist system to co-opt dissent, or the intrinsically transgressive nature of ambiguous or indeterminate forms of meaning. What had once been cathartic insights into the contingency of transcendent knowledge have been reduced to a kind of catechism, to be repeated as an article of faith, regardless of context or relevance. The effect is to promote a model of art criticism in which primary importance is assigned to the ability to explicate theoretical texts in more simple or accessible terms than those in which they were originally conveyed. I give as an example a recent essay in Art and Education’s online journal devoted to Tania Bruguera’s *Immigrant Movement International* project in Corona, Queens. Over half

of the essay is taken up with a description of Wendy Brown’s analysis of “rights” discourse in political theory.<sup>5</sup> Because Bruguera’s project engages with the discourse of rights and addresses the legal and political status of immigrants, it is thereby exposed as complicit with a broader logic of subjugation described by Brown. Here the artist can be shown to have naively wandered into vexed political waters, doing more harm than good in her simpleminded attempt to help immigrants, but inadvertently supporting the iron logic of neoliberal humanism.

While the writer bases her reading of the IMI project entirely on Wendy Brown’s theoretical work, she fails to meaningfully engage with the numerous criticisms of this work (they are cited only in passing), presenting it instead as a heuristic *fait accompli* that can be applied without question. There is more to be said about the specific form of these criticisms, and the bearing they have on any potential analysis of Bruguera’s work, but I want to focus on a second issue that is more directly related to questions of research methodology. Thus, while the writer spends several paragraphs explicating Brown’s theory, she never, in the course of her essay, provides a substantive account of Bruguera’s actual work. The fact that Bruguera’s project employs the terminology of rights in its descriptive language is taken as sufficient evidence of its failure in the terms outlined by Brown’s theory. It may well be that Bruguera’s work *does* succumb to forces that can be accounted for by a critique of rights, but we have no way of knowing this in the absence of a detailed explication of how Bruguera’s work functions as a practice. The author’s research, such as it is, consists entirely of excerpts from statements posted on the IMI website, along with a single anecdote, gleaned from a public lecture in which Bruguera discusses a cab ride she took to Queens. Certainly this material is part of the work of IMI, but in no way does it provide a meaningful indication of the nature of the project as a whole.

Instead of taking the time to examine the IMI project in some detail, observing the changes that occurred in the social organization of the project over time, the modulations of agency, the moments of creative insight and stasis, and the ways in which the participants accommodated or challenged the authority of state or public agencies and Bruguera herself, the critic reduces the critical act to a kind of syllogism (Brown tells us that rights-based language is problematic, Bruguera uses the concept of rights, therefore her project is problematic). As a result, she ignores the complexity of what happens at the site of practice when a set of abstract propositions associated with the condition of

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immigrants take physical, social, and institutional form; when they become answerable as actions rather than simply asserted as axiomatic statements (about rights, immigration, and so forth). It's possible that the members of the IMI project addressed at least some of the issues raised by Brown in their deliberations and dialogues, thus evincing the self-reflective capacity that the critic herself hopes to provide. It's also possible that the actual performance of this project, as it evolved over many months, engaged issues that extended well beyond the sphere of "rights," in ways that transcended the artist's intentions and expectations. In either case we have no way of knowing, since the critic's knowledge of the project itself, as represented in this essay, remains superficial. I present this less as a criticism of a specific writer (as critics and historians it's not always possible for us to personally witness every project we write about) but as a reflection of a certain problematic within the conventions of art criticism when applied to dialogical practices. In writing about object-based practices the critic need simply be present before the work of art for a limited period of time (a few hours, a day) in order to acquire at least a basic understanding of it. At the very least, one can easily enough find a high-resolution reproduction of a given painting or sculpture that captures something of the nature of the actual work. Complex, long-term projects like the IMI require a different, and more extensive, form of research if they are to be engaged with any clarity.

## 2. New Criteria

The quasi-transcendent power attributed to theory in contemporary art criticism can be traced in part to the founding of *October* magazine in 1976. As described in its editorial mission statement, *October* sought to provide a forum for "intensive critical discourse" with a "strong theoretical emphasis." It presented itself as a rebellious, even revolutionary, outsider, challenging the hegemony of insufficiently rigorous art criticism found in over-specialized journals such as *Artforum*. According to *October*'s editors, existing art magazines had sacrificed their "intellectual autonomy" to a form of "pictorial journalism" characterized by "lavish illustrations" (hence the austere, picture-less expanses of *October*'s page layouts). It is also symptomatic that *October*'s editors, in their mission statement, sought to distance themselves from overtly activist art practices, which they equate with the worst excesses of Stalinism and "Socialist Realism." Specifically, they cite an antiwar mural produced in New York City by an artist who had the misfortune to be

both white and liberal, as evidence of the dangers posed by works of art that take as their frame of reference the surrounding social world, rather than the conventions of art itself.<sup>6</sup> Here, at the *locus classicus* of what would become contemporary academic art criticism, we are presented with a characteristically modernist opposition between an autonomous, quasi-aesthetic critical agency and the corrupting influence of capitalism (or advertising) on one hand, and activism (or political propaganda) on the other. Only an unbending commitment to critical theory, combined with a strict proscription of imagistic pleasure, would prevent backsliding into the dismal swamps of Mary Boone advertisements and reactionary muralism.



Cover of *Artforum*, February 1964. This cover features artwork by Tony DeLap, titled *Milo*, from 1963.

The *October* brand achieved its apotheosis during the 1980s, with the publication of Krauss's *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths* and *The Anti-Aesthetic* anthology, by Krauss's student Hal Foster.<sup>7</sup> The coterie associated with the early days of *October*, which included other Krauss students such as Benjamin Buchloh and Craig Owens, did much to establish the particular relationship between art criticism and critical theory that continues to define academic writing on contemporary art in the United States to the present day. It's less a question of specific influences (although these have remained remarkably consistent), than the broader sense of a discipline in crisis and dependent on the insights provided by

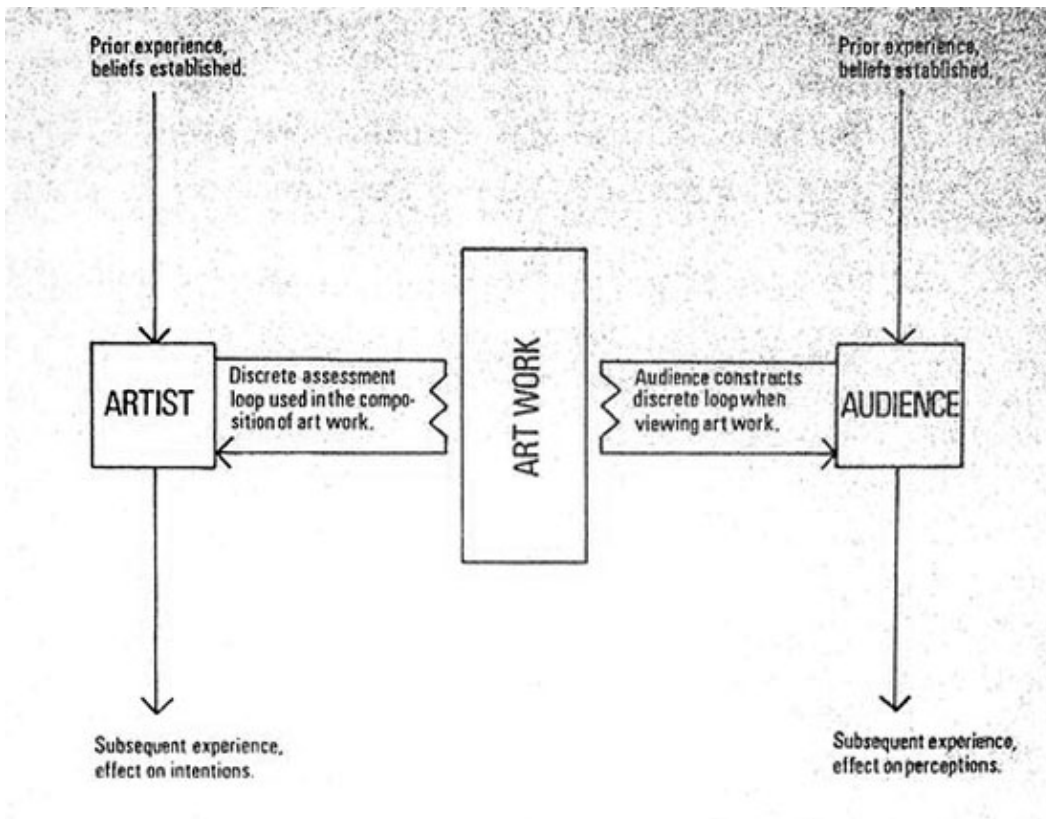
continental philosophy for new inspiration. Krauss captures this emblematic moment in her bellwether 1980 *October* essay on the “Paraliterary,” in which she defends Barthes and Derrida against the uncomprehending conservatism of Morris Dickstein and other cranky guardians of traditional literary criticism. The new paradigm of postmodern literature, in Krauss’s words, “is the critical text wrought into a paraliterary form,” dedicated not to revealing layers of meaning but to opening up the play of interpretation (“drama without the Play, voices without the Author, criticism without the Argument”).<sup>8</sup> For Krauss the key move, necessary to restore some theoretical gravitas to art criticism, was to transpose the paraliterary as a form of hermeneutic undoing associated with writing onto the work of visual art, which would constitute a kind of physical embodiment of the poetic/theoretical text (laying bare the apparatus, making strange, and generally confounding closure, stasis, and fixity in all their many guises).

The enduring influence of this textual paradigm is evident in Krauss’s most recent book (*Under Blue Cup*), in which she acknowledges the central role played by the Russian literary critic Viktor Shklovsky in her own intellectual

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development.<sup>9</sup> As *October*’s mission statement suggests, any artistic practice that participates in concrete forms of political resistance will inevitably be subsumed into a debased, propagandistic cultural form. As a result, contemporary art can maintain its purity and autonomy only by confining its critical powers to a virtualized field of resistance that is protected from the deforming political and social forces that operate beyond the gallery walls. Krauss, evoking Greenberg, calls this field the “technical support.” As she notes in a recent interview, “My whole concept of technical support, relates to Shklovsky’s concept of ‘laying bare the device’.”<sup>10</sup> The immanence of Greenbergian formalism (which sought to identify a condition intrinsic to modern art that could differentiate it from kitsch and propaganda) was thus linked with a new mission, derived from literary theory.

For Shklovsky, of course, the act of laying bare entailed a reconstruction of poetics as a form of counter-hegemonic de-naturalization. This view was based on the assumption that poetic (and, we might say, aesthetic) forms have as their job the deferral and disruption of normal cognition through the thickening and opacity of language. In the presence of a poetic text the reader comes to realize that the device of



Stephen Willats's Model of an Existing Artist-Audience Relationship, 1973 was published in the book *The Artist as an Instigator of Changes in Social Cognition and Behaviour* (London: Occasional Papers, 2010 [1973]), 28.

language is not simply a neutral medium for the transmission of an *a priori* truth about the world, but in fact produces its own, new, meaning. Now art (and theory itself) would inherit this poetico-critical capacity, and a hidebound Greenbergian formalism would be re-infused with revolutionary vigor. This self-reflexive capacity, the discourse of disclosure and revelation, would easily enough migrate beyond the formal constitution of art genres or media and re-engage with the world at a second order. For many *October*-supported artists during the 1980s, the new device to be laid bare was identified with the mass media's construction of gender, the truth of the photographic image, or norms of authorship and self-expression in the arts.

This would prove to be a decisive shift in the evolution of contemporary art and art theory. It replaced the idea of a formal art medium (as the resistant field against which the artist works within the technical apparatus of painting, sculpture, and so forth) with the idea of an *ideological* medium defined by a set of rules that constrain and predetermine the consciousness of individual viewers without their knowledge.<sup>11</sup> The ability to engage creatively with the boundary conditions of a given art form is replaced by the ability to comprehend, and reveal, the existence of this ideological apparatus to an unwitting audience. The artist stands at a critical remove, safely protected from the forms of compromise and complicity that would result from any more direct engagement with mechanisms of social change or resistance. And the autonomy of art is preserved because the artist only ever addresses the social world second hand, through a critique of the (underlying, implicitly hidden) mechanisms of ideological control. Moreover, these interventions were staged within art world institutions and for art world audiences. Once the artist wandered too far beyond the protection of this contextualizing field, the authenticity of their work as art was at risk, as we see with the purging of Douglas Crimp from *October*'s editorial board in 1990, due to his interest in art associated with AIDS activism.<sup>12</sup>

The influence of *October* was, in many ways, empowering. It brought a much-needed infusion of intellectual energy to art criticism during the 1980s. At the same time, as I've suggested, it became conventionalized in turn, and would eventually exercise a stultifying effect on art critical discourse. What had been a necessary and invigorating challenge to the norms of art criticism became over time a set of conventions, to be taught and codified in art history graduate programs around the world. The underlying assumptions of this model have become almost

entirely naturalized in contemporary art practice and criticism. Its constituent elements are quite familiar to us: the viewer who enters the gallery space to be confronted by a work that challenges his or her normative assumptions about the world, and the artist who possesses a singular ability to recognize and lay bare the hidden ideological devices which govern our routine lives without our knowledge. Because both artists and critics are often working within the same pre-conscious horizon, any detailed investigation of the actual experiences of specific viewers or audiences can easily enough be dispensed with, and the meaning of the artwork simply read off this pre-established script. At the same time, the hermeneutic labor previously performed by the critic or historian through a close reading of the work of art was increasingly off-loaded to the theorist. There are two variants of this approach. In its sympathetic form a given artistic practice is justified on the basis of its capacity to illustrate a specific theoretical brand concept ("states of exception" in Agamben, the "Sinthome" in Lacan, the partition of the sensible in Rancière, "Minor" literature in Deleuze, "signature" in Derrida, and so on). And in its critical variant, the work of art is read symptomatically, as the merely epiphenomenal expression of some broader discourse of power, which can only be revealed via the proper theoretical tool (as in the reading of Tania Bruguera's work I introduced above).



Tania Bruguera, *Immigrant Movement International (IMI)*, ongoing project. Photo: Latoya Ruby Frazier.

### 3. Duration and Finitude

While the critical approach I've outlined here may have certain limitations, it has the virtue of being methodologically consistent with conventional artistic practices in which the work of art, whether a performance, object, image, or installation, is developed by the artist

independently and then presented in a gallery, museum, or other exhibition space. The act of production in this case is distinct and clearly separate from the subsequent reception of the work by viewers, during which the artist is often not present. The critic's task in this case often entails a speculative, quasi-philosophical engagement with the propositions presented by the artist through a given work.<sup>13</sup> These propositions (for example, arguments about the value of human life and labor in Santiago Sierra's work) are not meant to be tested per se, but rather, are offered in the form of hypothetical statements about the world, embodied in physical and spatial form. The creative work occurs before the exhibition opens, when Sierra first plots out a particular affect generation scheme, via the planned deployment of bodies in the gallery space. My potential reactions (philistine outrage or guilty reflection in the case of Sierra) are already anticipated by the behavioral apparatus of the piece itself. In addition, the work is finite: the object or event has a clearly demarcated beginning and end in time and space. It is meant to be complete within itself, and its form remains fixed at the moment of its initial conceptualization by the artist (i.e., the script governing the disposition of bodies in a Sierra performance, like the physical form of a sculpture, is predetermined).

With the development of participatory and collaborative art practices, especially with their exponential growth over the past decade, we begin to see a fundamental disconnection between the conventions of art criticism and a form of artistic production that challenges many of the conditions I've just described. The most threatening aspect of this work involves the decision of a growing number of artists and art collectives to deliberately engage publics, and institutional networks, well beyond the confines of the conventional art world. The result has been a series of largely unproductive debates over the epistemological status of this work, most of which entail variations of the same simplistic opposition between a naive social art practice, associated with the evils of humanism or pastoral sentimentality, and a theoretically rigorous, politically sophisticated avant-garde artistic practice. These debates are typically conducted at a high level of abstraction, and rely on an *ad hominem* defense of a generalized concept of aesthetic value, which is in danger of being heedlessly cast aside by an equally vague concept of engaged art.

One of the main problems with these debates, from my perspective, is that they've been conducted with almost no reference to the specific conditions of the art practice itself. And this brings us back to the question of art

criticism and its limitations. I want to identify two related problems posed by the textual paradigm outlined above, when applied to collaborative or dialogical art practices. First, it conceives of the work of art as a behavioral apparatus, based on a highly mechanistic view of human cognition. So long as we think of the work of art as a monological proposition or expressive statement in the space of the gallery, this is less significant. But when we are dealing with projects in which the viewer or participant answers back and in which those responses have the potential to reshape and transform the work itself over time, we require a more nuanced understanding of reception.<sup>14</sup> This leads to the second, related problem with this model, which is its reliance on a form of ventriloquism, in which the critic imagines the effect of the work on the consciousness of a hypothetical viewer, attributing to them various mental states, capacities, and responses. This is typically expressed through a semantic structure in which the work of art is endowed with the capacity to reveal some discursive system that was previously hidden by the mechanisms of ideology.

A recent essay in the journal *Ephemeria* on Santiago Sierra's work provides a useful example of the kind of shorthand, intentionalist art criticism that many writers, myself included, can lapse into on occasion.<sup>15</sup> According to the critic, Sierra's installations "problematize assumptions," "question logic," "reveal conditions," "highlight traces," and "make evident imbrications" of, variously, "capital," "capitalist interests and desires," "capital exchange," "practices of individual subjugation," "economic marginalization," and, finally, the "prevailing economic system." All this, it should be noted, in an essay that never offers a substantive definition of capitalism, or even a frame of reference within which the author's use of the term can be fully understood. In each case we have a process of disclosure that is intended to link an often amorphous referent ("interests," "desires," "exchange," "practices," and so forth) with an equally abstract viewer ("reveal conditions" to whom?). While I have no doubt that Sierra intends for his work to provide some form of revelation, this description tells us very little about the complexities and contradictions of its actual performance as a work of art. The act of laying bare the device implies an audience for whom the device was already concealed: a viewer who would be made suddenly aware of the existence of some structuring ideological mechanism that regulated what was previously experienced as his or her autonomous thought and action in the world. Thus, for Sierra, there must always be a viewer who is prepared to be

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surprised by the violence of capitalist exploitation. But this viewer is, as I've suggested, necessarily hypothetical.<sup>16</sup> The responses of actual viewers may bear little or no resemblance to this perceptual schema, nor does the critic or artist feel obliged to demonstrate the efficacy of this revelatory act for individual viewers.

In dialogical practice production and reception co-occur, and reception itself is refashioned as a mode of production. As a result, the moment of reception is not hidden or unavailable to the artist, or the critic. Moreover, the experience of reception extends over time, through an exchange in which the responses of the collaborators result in subsequent transformations in the form of the work as initially presented. Thus, we require new models of reception capable of addressing the actual, rather than the hypothetical, experience of participants in a given project, with a particular awareness of the parameters of agency and affect. What is the relationship between language, utterance, physical gesture, and movement in these encounters? This would also necessitate an analysis of the gathering together and disaggregation of bodies within a given project, and the ways in which these varying proximities inflect the meaning of the work and the consciousness of the participants. And this requires, in turn, new research methodologies and what I've described as a field-based approach, in which the critic inhabits the site of practice for an extended period of time, paying special attention to the discursive, haptic, and social conditions of space, and the temporal rhythms of the processes that unfold there.<sup>17</sup>

A second set of concerns, which I've alluded to already, has to do with the perceived spatial and temporal limits of the work of art. Textual or object-based practices are clearly finite; they exist for a fixed period of time (the duration of an exhibition or commission, for example), and then end. Moreover, the spatial field for such practices is also, generally, fixed (the space of the gallery, for example, or a series of discrete stations or sites organized through the commissioning process). Because the boundaries of the work are finite, and often predetermined by the particular limitations of a given exhibition space or venue, the critic can easily enough identify the object of analysis (an installation, painting, or performance which begins and ends at clearly marked points in time). Dialogical practices, on the other hand, can unfold over weeks, months, and even years, and their spatial contours or boundaries typically fluctuate, expand, and contract over time. As a result, this work confronts the critic with a very different set of questions. When does the work begin and when does it end? What are the

boundaries of the field within which it operates, and how were they determined? At the most basic level, can we even agree as to what constitutes the object of criticism? Because we are dealing with an unfolding process, rather than, or in addition to, a discrete image, object, or event defined by set limits of space (the walls of a gallery) or time (the duration of a performance or commission), these questions become decisive in the analysis of the work. The unfinalizable quality of dialogical production requires us to understand the bounded-ness of the field of practice, and how these boundaries have been produced, modified, and challenged. This would include an analysis of the artist or art collective's entry into, and departure from, the field itself, as well as the decisions that led them to define a given social context as a field of practice in the first place.<sup>18</sup>

This work also requires a very different understanding of duration in aesthetic experience. The critique of Bruguera's work I presented earlier tells us nothing about how the project evolved over time, how the perceptions of the various participants and Bruguera herself were altered, and how they responded to moments of resistance, antagonism, or conciliation. Time, in the textual model I've discussed above, is always synchronic; new insight is transmitted to the viewer through a singular and a-temporal moment of shocked recognition (the decisive moment at which the device is laid bare). This model of reception assumes a viewer who is operating under the enforced thrall of an imposed ideological system, which can only be broken by a countervailing moment of homeopathic violence. As a result, there is no understanding of receptive time beyond the moment of disruption itself, no account of the sustainability of this transformed consciousness of the world. With dialogical art practices, temporality is both extensive and irregular, marked by a series of incremental subdivisions within the larger, unfolding rhythm of a given work. As a result, it's necessary to develop a system of diachronic analysis and notation that can encompass the project as a whole in its movement through moments of conflict and resolution, focusing on the productive tension between closure and disclosure, resistance and accommodation.

### **Conclusion: Consciousness and Action**

I want to conclude by drawing together a set of three observations regarding the position of the critic relative to dialogical and collaborative art practices. The first concerns the status of theory. While I've expressed some skepticism about the role played by theory in current art criticism, this certainly doesn't mean ignoring the many

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profound insights that various forms of critical theory can provide into the operations of language, consciousness, and art itself. However, I do believe there has been a gradual drift away from closer engagement with the materiality of art practice as a result of the often-programmatic manner in which theory has been applied by many critics and historians. Too often critics use theory simply to provide intellectual validation for relatively unremarkable concepts or ideas that are already widely accepted within our discursive field, and which add little to our understanding of a particular project or work. I'd advocate here a more reflective and reciprocal understanding of the relationship between theory and practice in art criticism. I'd like to see the theorist treated as a genuine interlocutor in the unfolding of a given work, rather than a gray (or perhaps more accurately, white) eminence. In this scenario theory can bring insight, but it can also be challenged in turn, perhaps by the very experience of practice itself. The second observation concerns the issue of reception. I want to encourage critics of this work to remain open to the possibility that a given project will enact forms of reception that don't conform to existing models, which are typically based on the individual viewer's experience of a static or fixed object. Insight is generated in many different ways in artistic practice, aside from the established schema of singular disruption and simultaneity. This open-ness is all the more necessary in the case of dialogical works in which the processes set in motion by a given project can't be anticipated in advance by the artist, and which may move in directions quite different from those implicit in the original organization of a piece.

Finally, I want to note that dialogical practices suggest a very different understanding of the relationship between consciousness and action within the aesthetic. As I've noted above, it is a commonplace to criticize social art practices for sacrificing an authentically aesthetic (albeit hazily defined) experience to a reductive concept of political efficacy. But all modernist art, even that which most violently rejects any demand for utility, is functional, whether as a protest against the very utilitarianism of modern society, or as a repository of specific quasi-spiritual values that are associated with an intellectual or creative resistance to capitalism. The operative question is, how, and at what scale, this efficacy is enacted. In the conventional view, art can retain its cultural authority only so long as it operates through the incremental (and privatized) transformation of a single consciousness, in confrontation with a work of art. Once we attempt to extend this process (to make it social,

as it were), to understand the aesthetic as a form of knowledge that can be communicable within and among a larger collective, or in relationship to a set of institutions, rather than a single, sovereign consciousness, the autonomy of the aesthetic is endangered, and art is subsumed into its degraded kitsch-like variants. This is why we so often see theorists imposing a firewall between the experience of the individual viewer and any subsequent (practical and therefore non-aesthetic) action, which might be informed by this encounter in some way.<sup>19</sup> Aesthetic experience, understood in these terms, is essentially monological. It seems to me that both of these constraints are being challenged by new forms of social art practice, in which we find a commitment to a broader, social articulation of aesthetic experience, and an interest in the creative, transversal relationship between consciousness and action in the world. At the theoretical level we might say that these groups and artists are less concerned with locating the generative potential of aesthetic undecidability in the tension between the pure and the impure (art vs. activism, ethics vs. aesthetics, and so forth), than in the relationship among and between what had previously been seen as disconnected and singular aesthetic encounters – that is, in the social or collective form taken by aesthetic experience itself.

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1  
Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 293.

2  
See *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004) and *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

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It is perhaps not coincidental that this work has emerged at approximately the same time as an unprecedented expansion in the global market for contemporary art, and the monetization of contemporary art as a key site of capital investment for the upper class, especially among the newly rich of China, Russia, and Eastern Europe. This economic infrastructure sustains an interlocking network of major collectors, biennials, galleries, critics, curators, magazines, and art consultants invested in the validation of contemporary art. For many younger artists, the idea that the "art world" described above can offer any meaningful form of aesthetic or critical autonomy is less and less tenable.

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Sylvia Lavin, "The Uses and Abuses of Theory," *Progressive Architecture* 71:8 (August 1990): 113-114, 179.

5  
Ellen Feiss, "What is Useful? The Paradox of Rights in Tania Bruguera's 'Useful Art'." See <http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/what-is-useful-the-paradox-of-rights-in-tania-brugueras-useful-art/>.

6  
"October" is a reference which remains, for us, more than exemplary; it is instructive. For us, the argument regarding Socialist Realism is nonexistent. Art begins and ends with a recognition of its conventions. We will not contribute to that social critique which, swamped by its own disingenuousness, gives credence to such an object of repression as a mural about the war in Vietnam, painted by a white liberal resident in New York, a war fought for the most part by ghetto residents commanded by elements drawn from the southern lower-middle-class ... Long working experience with major art journals has convinced us of the need to restore to the criticism of painting and sculpture, as to that of other arts, an intellectual autonomy seriously undermined by emphasis on extensive reviewing and lavish illustration. *October* wishes to address those readers who, like many writers and artists, feel that the present format of the major art reviews is producing a form of pictorial

journalism which deflects and compromises critical effort." The Editors, "About OCTOBER," *October* 1 (Spring 1976): 4-5.

7  
Hal Foster's Seattle-based Bay Press, which published *The Anti-Aesthetic* anthology, played a key role during this period. For a revealing, albeit brief, history of Bay Press, see Charles Mudede, "The Mysterious Disappearance of Bay Press," *The Stranger* (January 24-30, 2002), <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/the-mysterious-disappearance-of-bay-press/Content?oid=9829>.

8  
Rosalind Krauss, "Poststructuralism and the 'Paraliterary,'" *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 40.

9  
Rosalind E. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011). In particular, Krauss employs Shklovsky's concept of the "Knight's move" to justify her analysis of art as a system of rule-based norms, against which any creative action must be waged. This gesture, of course, assigns a decisive authority to the critic or historian who is in a position to define precisely what those norms might be, and to differentiate properly productive artistic activity from random and aesthetically meaningless experimentation. This is an authority that Krauss is not shy to embrace. *Under Blue Cup* begins with her announcement that the book was "incited by over a decade of disgust at the spectacle of meretricious art called installation ..."

10  
Yve Alain-Bois, "Rosalind Krauss with Yve Alain-Bois," *The Brooklyn Rail* (February 1, 2012), <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2012/02/art/rosalind-krauss-with-yve-alain-bois>.

11  
The textual paradigm is premised on an underlying contradiction between an immanent formalism, as promoted by Greenberg, and a formalism that encompasses a range of ideological systems beyond the visual arts, which threatens to reduce art to a generic form of counter-hegemonic critique. This tension is evident in *Under Blue Cup*, where Krauss extends the repertoire of "devices" to be laid bare by art to accommodate such oddly dissimilar entities as "cars" and "photo-journalism." Here the concept of art as defined via a self-reflexive relationship to a specific set of rules or norms becomes so capacious as to threaten precisely the kind of disordered, non-aesthetic chaos that she finds so disgusting in much installation art.

12  
These tensions first came to a head around the special issue of

October that Crimp edited on AIDS activism in 1987 (#43, Winter 1987). He left *October* in 1990. Crimp discusses the climate at the journal at that time in a 2008 interview with Mathias Danbolt. See Mathias Danbolt, "Front Room – Back Room: An Interview with Douglas Crimp," *Trikster* 2 (2008), see <http://trikster.net/2/crimp/4.html>

MD: What did Rosalind Krauss and the other editors of *October* think about the issue? I'm wondering in relation to the fact that you left *October* just a couple of years later.

DC: The AIDS issue is, in fact, the reason I was pushed out of *October*. Of course on some level my fellow editors were pleased that *October* got so much attention. But in the end I think it got too much attention for their taste. You know, my name was suddenly up front. I had been seen by them as the younger one going to the office and doing the day-to-day work on the journal. Even after I became a full editor, I still essentially did the job of managing editor. I did all the proof reading, I did the layout, I did everything. By then it had gotten to the point where the other editors were not as hands-on with the journal as they were when I first got involved with it, so a lot was left to me. So when I said that I wanted to do a special issue on AIDS, they said OK. They never read any of the material before it came out, and I think they probably didn't read it at all until later, after it got so much attention. And then they didn't really like it. For them, it wasn't what *October* was about. And you can see from what they've done since I left what they think *October* is about: it's about a retrenchment around a traditional notion of high modernism. In the 1980s, *October* was thought of as the journal of postmodernism. But the commitments of Krauss and Michelson and the people now connected with the journal have always been much more high modernist in their orientation. But I wouldn't have been able to articulate that at that time. I think the fall-out felt more like it was about issues of sexuality and cultural studies. My interests are not in high culture specifically, but culture in a more hybrid sense.

MD: The book you co-edited with your reading group *Bad Object-Choices – How do I Look? Queer Film and Video* (1991) – wasn't that initially supposed to have been an *October* issue?

DC: Yes, that was the precipitating reason that I left. The papers of the conference that my reading group organized had been accepted by the editors for an issue of *October*, but when the texts came in they didn't want to publish them. There were two texts in particular that they rejected. It's

a long and complicated story – like any divorce – but I was forced out. That was in 1990. And luckily Bay Press published the papers as a book instead.

MD: There seems to be a huge split in the focus of *October* around that time. I'm thinking, for instance, about the roundtable discussion published in 1993 on the Whitney Biennial, where Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, Miwon Kwon, Benjamin Buchloh, and Silvia Kolbowski strongly criticize the issues of "identity politics" and "political art" that the show addressed. Compared to your AIDS issue of *October*, well, they're miles apart ...

13  
The tendency to associate creative agency primarily with an *a priori* (and usually solitary) process of conceptual ideation, rather than the activation of a given concept in and through practice, links two such disparate figures as Sol Lewitt and Thomas Hirschhorn, suggesting the ongoing influence of the Conceptualist paradigm:

"When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair ... To work with a plan that is preset is one way of avoiding subjectivity. It also obviates the necessity of designing each work in turn. The plan would design the work ... the fewer decisions made in the course of completing the work, the better."

– Sol Lewitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5:10 (June 1967): 79.

"My idea was that I wanted to make sculpture out of a *plan*, out of the second dimension. I said to myself, 'I want to make sculpture, but I don't want to create any volumes.' I only want to work in the third dimension – to conceive sculpture out of the plan, the idea, the sketch. That is what I want to make a sculpture with: the thinking and conceiving, the various plans, the planning."

– Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Interview with Thomas Hirschhorn," *October* 113 (2005): 81.

14  
Issues of reception, of course, are a point of significant tension in theories of avant-garde art. Adorno, for example, was notoriously hostile to any effort to understand the responses of actual viewers to a work of art. In "Theses on the Sociology of Art" (1972) and *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (1976) Adorno critiques the sociological "effects research" of Alphonse Silbermann, who interviewed audience members regarding their feelings about specific works of art. Adorno argues that

any attempt to understand the responses of actual viewers or listeners to a work of art will, inevitably, diminish its "aesthetic" value, which can only ever be pre-figurative – projected into a future in which society has overcome its subordination to administrative rationality. In this respect Adorno's aesthetic philosophy follows a familiar trajectory already established by Kant and Schiller, in which art is ultimately intended for a "viewer yet to be" rather than the viewer here-and-now. See Andrew Edgar, "An Introduction to Adorno's Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 30:1 (January 1990): 46–56.

15  
Andrés David Montenegro Rosero, "Locating Work in Santiago Sierra's Artistic Practice," *Ephemeria* 13:1 (2013), <http://www.ephemerajournal.org/contribution/locating-work-santiago-sierra%E2%80%99s-artistic-practice>. Sierra, in common with a number of successful contemporary artists, has developed his practice along two complementary axes. The first is a series of performative actions, usually provocative or nominally antagonistic in nature, produced in conjunction with a sponsoring museum, gallery or biennial. The documentation generated by these actions can then be marketed commercially (in Sierra's case, in the form of limited edition photographs that sell for up to 50,000 Euros each). His work is thus defined by two temporalities. The first involves the initial moment of presentation in a gallery or biennial, while the second, and more enduring, entails its after-life in the commercial market for contemporary art (where works of art are, increasingly, bought and sold primarily as financial instruments). It goes without saying, of course, that the dramatic expansion in the sale of contemporary art as a form of investment is a direct byproduct of the increasing concentration of wealth globally, which Sierra ostensibly deplures.

This saprophytic interdependence is now a conventional feature of the art market. Here the conspicuous public display of unproductive or "transgressive" creative activity (exhibitions, installations or performances with no salable objects; works of art that tweak the rich or court scandal) provides a kind of ethical indemnity for the private (profit-making) side of commercial gallery operations. As a recent article on art dealer David Zwirner notes, the exhibition of non-salable works is ultimately re-monetized, as part of the broader marketing process of "building the brand". It displays the gallery's underlying commitment to the serious intellectual or critical concerns of advanced art, which in turn, can be used to leverage future

sales. It's emblematic of the limits of contemporary art criticism that the vast preponderance of writing on Sierra's work continues to focus on its reception in the gallery by an imaginary viewer, while neglecting entirely the actual forms of reception and performative interaction set in motion during its commercial after-life. See Nick Paumgarten, "Dealer's Hand," *The New Yorker* (December 2, 2013), 49.

16  
I examine a variant of this displaced form of reception in the essay "Rhetorical Questions: The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public," published in the journal *Afterimage* (January 1993). The essay was reprinted in *Art, Activism and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 103–135.

17  
We are in the early stages of developing a set of protocols devoted to a field-based approach to the analysis of social art practice at UCSD. The term "field" reflects two main concerns. First, it indicates our interest in a body of artistic production that engages the broadest possible range of social forces, actors, discursive systems, and physical conditions operating at a given site. And second, it signals a concern with the questions that these projects raise about the "proper" field of art itself, as it engages with other disciplines and other modes of cultural production.

18  
It can be helpful here to differentiate between projects commissioned by biennials, in which many of the key decisions (regarding space, duration, and so forth) are predetermined by the sponsoring institution or curator, and artist-generated projects, in which the temporal and spatial parameters of the field of practice are fluid and indeterminate.

19  
Even an artist as securely established in the art world firmament as Thomas Hirschhorn still feels compelled to reassure critics that his work is "pure art," rather social work. See Peter Schjeldahl, "House Philosopher: Thomas Hirschhorn and the Gramsci Monument," *The New Yorker* (July 29, 2013): 76.