

Claire Fontaine
**Our Common
Critical
Condition**

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The fiftieth-anniversary issue of *Artforum* included an article by Hal Foster entitled “Critical Condition,” with the subtitle “On criticism then and now.” The adjective “critical,” which he uses here to define a condition, refers both to the medical sense of the term, as well as its philosophical sense, where “critical” comes by way of the Greek verb *krino*, meaning *to discern, to separate things by means of the intellect*. Having no need to remind us of this, Foster moves directly to the heart of his problem, which is also our own: he locates the historical moment where criticism lost both its prestige and power, and aims to describe, in as detached a manner as possible, the cause of this catastrophe. He evokes the motives and questions that inhabited the context and milieu of the arts before 1968, both in the pages of *Artforum* and elsewhere. He does so by recounting a series of essential memories from the past in order to produce an illuminating diagnosis of our present moment; the whole thing is so brief that we are left with the impression of having heard an important conversation suddenly cut off.

From the first lines of the article, we are transported to the heart of the impassioned debates surrounding minimalism and theatricality; the temperature of the conversations is summery, their tone fervent. Foster cites Krauss, Fried, Stella, Judd, and Greenburg, among others. The art world of the time, seen from where we now stand, seems small, fueled by authentic enthusiasm; the practices that artists experimented with back then aspired to an existential dimension, and were read as metaphors for attitudes, methods for figuring out ways to participate in the public sphere, or to distance oneself from it. The market was only one background noise among many, and not yet the endless, deafening throbbing we have now grown accustomed to. But Foster doesn’t stop here: the text is by no means nostalgic, but explains that art writing at that pivotal time was, as Fried himself confessed, terribly stressful; anxiety and ambition were its principal motors, and the fear of being unable, with art writing’s theoretical language, to equal the heights of art’s expressive power, reigned supreme. The entire aesthetic field, as Foster describes it, found itself under enormous strain; it was, he writes, “already breached from without and eroded from within.”¹ “As we know,” he continues,

the external enemy was called “kitsch,” “theatricality,” or simply “mass culture” (Pop was the open traitor here), while the internal enemy was the extended arena of artistic activities opened up by



Allan Kaprow, *Yard: Overhead View*, 1961. Gelatin Silver print. Copyright: Ken Heyman-Woodfin Camp.

Happenings, Fluxus, and Minimalism. These activities were problematic for late-modernist critics not merely because they exceeded the proper media of painting and sculpture but because they threatened to push art into an arbitrary realm beyond aesthetic judgment.²

The “arbitrary”: behold the name of the troublesome guest that was soon to invite itself into all art writing and every exhibition space around the world, with no plans to leave. Foster concludes his article by catapulting us into the present day, though not without bitter irony regarding the prophecies of the pre-’68 era that never played out. Speaking of the pairing (today obsolete) of art/criticism, he describes it as a means of accessing the past, which opens onto both the present and future:

Today this concept seems almost bizarre. We can call it what we like – naive, parochial, chimerical – and we can dismiss it as a petty expression of a will to power whereby art history is read forward into contemporary practice in such a way that an elect few are scripted in and everyone else is dropped out. Yet, forty years on, we should also acknowledge what was lost when this concept was junked.³

These final lines are all the more troublesome as they seem implicitly to condemn *Artforum* and the regions of the art world it has been exploring now for fifty years. But how can we judge something that deliberately abolishes its own limitations for good, all while remaining unhealthily attached to the need to be recognized as “art”? What other possibility could have presented itself?

If, in that moment of profound crisis, art had dissolved into life, or – which is much less likely – revolutionized life had transformed into a work of art, a radical transformation would have taken place, entailing a reorganization of labor, affect, economy; making – or not making – “work” would have become the true question of human life. Maternity, friendship, the labor of love, and care for each living thing would now be approached as works of art with a beauty as much ethical as aesthetic – approached as worthy sources of inspiration and imitation.

But that didn’t happen.

“When you do life consciously, however,” writes Kaprow in 1979, “life becomes pretty strange – paying attention changes the thing attended to – so the Happenings were not nearly as lifelike as I had supposed they might be. But I learned something about life and ‘life.’”⁴ This conscious, reproducible life, imprisoned by

quotation marks, can be imitated and disturbed by performance, but it cannot, even when liberated from these quotation marks, be as fascinating and intense as Happenings aspired to make it. Kaprow was reflecting here on the outmodedness and insufficiency of traditional art practices, whose ambition remained too modest to measure up to the concerns raised by the expansive practices in the arts. But he also made us face the impossibility of imagining a truly revolutionary art in the absence of radical change in life, which art was unable to produce, and which various social movements had promised but failed to realize.

It’s at this point that the debate on art had to laboriously enter back into the narrow (and vague) field of what is, at present, contemporary art. The “arbitrary” appeared then as the ideal analgesic for dealing with this failure, the adjuvant of a return to the confused order which could only occur under the sign of the progressive marketization of art and its inevitable loss of cultural relevance.

The alternative was certainly not – as history has sufficiently proved – a return to the paternalist dictatorship of modernism, with its ludicrous religion of the autonomy of art. But the avant-garde provided no credible counterpoint, for it had not adequately resolved its relationship to politics as the governing of men, as administration, and as repressive apparatus. This is how we have found ourselves in a present where everything is at once contained and forgotten, at least when it comes to our dominant aesthetic experiments and their accompanying commentaries; but given that in this present everything is possible at every moment, this analysis itself is incomplete and surely obsolete already.

The poignant lack of reference points, the feeling of being faced with both a virtually infinite field of possibilities and a fear of being unable to escape repeating, however unwittingly, something that has already been done – these are the consequences of this state of affairs; these are the demons with which every contemporary artist must converse, starting with their first experiments within school walls, up until the end of their days. Unbeknownst to them, the arbitrary has multiplied singularities, but made them *whatever singularities*: every artist develops his or her own language and nurtures the impression of being the only one to speak it. We no longer write or create in order to intensify life, for life is no longer something we all share, something in which we all accompany one another, but an individualized affair of accumulation, labor, and self-affirmation.

We live like this with no hope for political change (however necessary) in our lives, nor a

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common language capable of naming this need or allowing us to define together what is particular to our present. This condition is new, no doubt unique in Western history; it is so painful and engenders such a profound solitude and loss of dignity that we sometimes catch ourselves doubting the sincerity of artworks that are created under such conditions – for we know that their fate is uncertain, and will most likely disappoint.

Nevertheless, the field of art has never been so free, vast, and attractive to the general public – and this is perhaps precisely what makes our present condition a profoundly critical one.

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Translated from the French by Kit Schluter.

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1
Hal Foster, "Critical Condition: On
criticism then and now,"
Artforum, September 2012, 147.

2
Ibid.

3
Ibid., 148.

4
"Performing Life," in Allan
Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring
of Art and Life* (London:
University of California Press,
2003), 19.

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