The Power of Imagination? Aesthetic Autonomy and Critique in Contemporary Art

Tünde Varga

The Power of Imagination? Aesthetic Autonomy and Critique in Contemporary Art

Tünde Varga

The Hungarian University of Fine Arts

In contemporary discourses, there is a growing relevance to the question of what role art is supposed to take in culture or in society. What presuppositions—historical, cultural, social, political, material—form or determine it in a cultural scene still dominated by the West, but which is more and more prone to facing the plurality of values emerging due to the activities of artists, curators, and art writers outside the Western cultural heritage?[1] How do these practices change the conceptual framework of art? How do definitions of art and aesthetics alter or traverse through time, and what social relevance, if any, can art still bear today? These questions are not novel, yet they have gradually become more transparent from the 1990s on with the fall of the bipolar world order, which happened to be the time when a global "network society" emerged to progress towards its present form.[2] Since I do not think there is a definitive answer to these questions, I would like to show a few approaches that help to reframe and detect the changes of the concept of art in the past two decades.

Revisiting the concept of art and aesthetic autonomy

The urge to re-examine the concept of art does not only emerge from the contemporary art scene, where the inherited framework of the Western notion of art seems to be too narrow to account for its present scope and varied forms. A few years ago, *Cultural Sociology*, *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, and *Arethusa* all published studies which challenged the "dogmatic" acceptance of Paul Oskar Kristeller's thesis on the formation of the modern system of the arts.[3] The studies reflected on the Western terminology of aesthetics (on the notion of art, artistic autonomy, or the artist-genius[4]) in a socio-historical context, and raise the question of whether art is a 'historical invariant'.[5] In Michael Squire's view, 'only in the past twenty-five years or

---

[1] For an analysis on the question of culture studies focusing on these aspects, see Tony Bennet, 'Making culture, changing society: the perspective of "culture studies"', *Cultural Studies*, 21(4-5) (2007), 610–629. See also Tony Bennet, *Making Culture: Changing Society* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013).

[2] See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of The Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000).

[3] For this debate, see: Michael Squire, 'The Art of Art History in Greco-Roman Antiquity', *Arethusa*, 43(2) (2010), 133-163; James I. Porter, 'Why Art has Never been Autonomous', *Arethusa*, 43(2) (2010), 165-180; Jeremy Tanner, 'Aesthetics and Art History Writing in Comparative Historical Perspective', *Arethusa*, 43(2) (2010), 267-288; Peter Kivy, 'What Really Happened in the Eighteenth-Century: The Modern System Re-examined Again', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 52(1) (2012), 61-74; and Jeremy Tanner, 'Michael Baxandall and the Sociological Interpretation of Art', *Cultural Sociology*, 4(2) (2010), 230-256.

[4] In his introduction to the thematic issue of *Arethusa*, Michael Squire poses the question: 'if modern systems of "the arts" are anachronistic, what language should be used to analyze the qualities and experiences associated with viewing images—or, indeed, responding to other media—in ancient Greek and Roman historical perspective?'. Squire, (p. 133).

[5] Kivy, (p. 70).

so have sociologists and cultural historians seriously engaged with the larger stakes of Kristeller's thesis'.[6] As a consequence, Squire detects a countermovement in the field of art history. He claims that, 'while the late twentieth century witnessed these increasing clamors for a new mode of "ideology critique", the early twenty-first century has seen a slow but sure interest in the sorts of aesthetic frameworks banished only a decade ago'; thus, in his opinion, the present crisis is a 'call for the reinvention of aesthetics'.[7]

For James I. Porter, whose study fuelled the debate, the main problem was that the modernist concept of aesthetic autonomy is mistaken.[8] In his view, it is very unlikely that antiquity had no concept of art. He claims that 'the ancients knew the distinction [of art and craft] even if they lacked the terms'.[9] The fact that autonomy was not considered in its post-eighteenth-century sense does not imply a crucial difference in viewing the term in its historical continuity. In Jeremy Tanner's view, Porter claims that 'the notion of aesthetic autonomy is a kind of "illusion" generated in reductive academic summaries of Kant in the period between 1790-1951', which Tanner finds 'unpersuasive'. More importantly, in his view, 'both the concept of the Fine Arts and the norm of autonomy of art were central components in the creation of institutions of the modern art world', and thus fine art was subject to 'creating the legal and institutional frameworks that guarantee such autonomy'.[10] The point is that, as Tanner also notes:

> the autonomy of art (however contested the definition of that concept) is similarly a socially constructed reality, with socially real entailments. These institutional developments from the late eighteenth century onwards are, pace Porter, of central concern to classical art historians because they provide the context within which the discipline of classical art history developed and significantly shaped its concepts, presuppositions, and interpretative practices.[11]

This system made it possible to conceive art as having value on its own while also being produced for institutions of art.

The debate points at an unresolvable question: how to define or frame works (of art) which were not made with the intention of creating "art" in the sense post-eighteenth-century aesthetics considers the term.[12] Such argument might seem futile when one argues about antique art, but aesthetic autonomy is a problem in arguments on the art/artefact dichotomy, as well as a problem in contemporary art discourse.[13] In Alfred Gell's view, 'the desire to see the art of other cultures aesthetically tells us more about our own ideology and its quasi-religious

---

[6] Squire, (p. 139).
[7] Ibid., (pp. 141-42).
[8] James I. Porter, 'Is Art Modern? Kristeller's "Modern System of the Arts" Reconsidered', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 49 (2009), 1-24 (p. 13).
[9] Porter, 'Why Art has Never been Autonomous', (p. 166).
[10] Tanner, 'Aesthetics and Art History Writing', (pp. 281-282).
[11] Ibid., p. 283.
[12] See, for instance, Kivy, (p. 72).
[13] See Bennett, *Making Culture*, p. 14.

veneration of art objects as aesthetic talismans […] than it does about these other cultures'.[14] Thus, as Donald Preziosi observes:

> one has only to consider the organization and underlying motivation of so-called histories of art, which typically are grounded in an evolutionary idea: the underlying progress (or regress) of the idea of art as such over time and space, which makes it possible to imagine a teleology or evolutionary growth of the spirit of artwork. Truly a Bildungsroman.[15]

In this line of argument, the legacy of Cultural-, Gender-, and Postcolonial Studies is equally important. These schools did not only pose similar problems, and long ago subverted ruling concepts of art questioning their claimed universality and aesthetic autonomy, but also placed the notion of culture in an expanded field, taking the socio-material world, cultural policy, economics, and everyday practices into consideration.[16]

How can we, then, reinvent aesthetic? The need for the flexibility of 'aesthetic frameworks' in contemporary art have become more emphatically transparent in the past decade even at major shows and institutions, which expand this framework beyond the Western notion of autonomy and/or universality. These shows challenge the Western concept of art as a universal given, and also pose the question how widely understood the boundaries of "art" can be before it dissolves into 'everyday practice'.[17] This is an urging issue, also because, as James Elkins observes, the differentiation of art and non-art, as well as that of "high" or "fine" art, is still maintained in practices that tend toward the denigration of such differentiations. In Elkins's view:

> contemporary international art […] nearly always aspires to the level of 'high' or 'fine' art: the artist and their galleries want the art to be shown in nationally and internationally prominent venues of fine art. […]. International contemporary art is strongly aligned to the long history of art that has been taken to represent nations and regions.[18]

What is more problematic, he goes on to note, is that 'art history, as it is currently practiced, is itself an *impediment* to thinking about worldwide ways of telling art's history'.[19] As Paul Goodwin observes: 'in relation to questions of taste—what kinds of aesthetic judgements and criteria are to be made that can accommodate both western and non-western art in the same

---

[14] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 3.
[15] Donald Preziosi, 'Curatorship as Bildungsroman: From Hamlet to Hjelmslev', in *Curatorial Challenges: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Contemporary Curating*, ed. by Malene Vest Hansen, Anne Folke Henningsen, and Anne Gregersen (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 11-21 (p. 14).
[16] Works of scholars like Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, or Tony Bennett bear relevance as these authors examine the notion and the role of art in society and culture. See, for instance, Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), Clifford Geerzt, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), and James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Harvard University Press, 1988).
[17] A recent book on the question is by David Joselit, *After Art* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013).
[18] James Elkins, 'Why Art History is Global', in *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, ed. by Jonathan Harris (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 375-386 (pp. 375-76).
[19] Ibid. Emphasis added.

gallery spaces on equal terms?'[20] To put it more radically, 'art history cannot diagnose its westernness without taking on other perspectives and without being willing to see itself *dissolve*'.[21] Silvia Kolbowski formulates the problem from another perspective, but with a similar conclusion, in claiming that the reaction to the 'split between art and political action' generates a shift towards the 'non-definition [of art] altogether'.[22]

Reconsidering the role of imagination and aesthetics

In searching for new modes of expression, its theoretical basis updated with political science and contemporary questions of economics or pedagogy, the discourse of recent art allows for further perspectives with which to view art practices. While the problem of aesthetics for scholars of antiquity was that of aesthetic autonomy standing forth from the Western institutional system of art, the question of aesthetics in contemporary art is about the loss of such autonomy, on the one hand, and the loss of the imaginary on the other. In contemporary art, this emerges from the fact that the work, and therefore its "aesthetic" dimension (meant as formal and imaginary properties likewise), can stand forth as a production of a collective act (through participation), not only in the abstract but also the literal sense.

In reviewing contemporary art, Vered Maimon, Nato Thompson, and Claire Bishop conclude on the necessity of turning again towards the *aesthetic* dimension of art, or towards the reconsideration of what we understand by the term "aesthetic".[23] They call attention to the loss suffered by multifaceted works upon the dismissal of the imaginary (or of the aesthetic) in conceiving art projects in favour of direct engagement, and corollary to social and/or political interference. However, whether aesthetics is understood as the form itself, the imaginary dimension of a work, the affective response to it, or that of the ethical or the political—or either/all—is an issue seemingly suspended in these texts.

For Bishop, the question of aesthetics is posed through projects with wide audience reach but which do not correlate with the traditional (e.g. Greenbergian) requirements of quality, that is, with the elaborate complexity of the work of art which is created for the learned, imagined-ideal "viewer- interpreter". Reviewing Soviet art, she points at the contradictions of the practice of socially engaged art in the framework of what she calls 'artistic value': namely, where there is a 'tension between quality and quantity, artistic and social goals', as the Soviet example shows, and where the principle of collective composition is 'ideologically desirable but artistically premature'.[24] For Bishop, the danger is that art does not necessarily gain much with

---

[20] Paul Goodwin, 'Confessions of a Recalcitrant Curator', in *The Persistence of Taste: Art, Museums and Everyday Life after Bourdieu,* ed. by Malcolm Quinn, David Beech, Michael Lehnert, et. al. (London and New York: Routledge 2018), pp. 174-186 (p. 176).

[21] Elkins, (p. 379). Emphasis added.

[22] Silvia Kolbowski in Matthew Friday, David Joselit, and Silvia Kolbowski, 'Roundtable: The Social Artwork', *October*, 3 (2012), 74-85 (p. 76).

[23] See Vered Maimon, 'The Third Citizen: On Models of Criticality in Contemporary Artistic Practices', *October*, 2 (2009), 85-112.

[24] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 63.

participation either; the work can just as well become formulaic, the interaction preset, and the result not too interesting either for participants or for viewers. In short, in this example, tthe (aesthetic) qualities of the work are lost in favour of the ethical or political outcome.

A similar observation is made by Kolbowski, who states that, although she would not 'rule out affective immersion' from participatory art, 'collective reception is not guaranteed by physical proximity and a dizzying lack of differentiation among physical traces'. In her view, 'the only conditions for critical spectatorship are analysis and evaluation'.[25]

A further problem, as Nato Thompson points out, is the fact that socially or politically engaged art is 'vulnerable to state instrumentalization', and can thus 'easily be used as advertising vast structures of power, from governments to corporations'.[26] To this, Gregory Sholette's view adds how social art practice is one tool of crisis management, which seemingly tames some damages of neoliberal economics on a local level; as he notes, 'small in scale but high in visibility, such projects keep at arms' length difficult ideological questions about the role that state and municipal agencies might play in moderating deleterious effects of capitalism'.[27] Thus artists, as '"change agents"':

> orchestrate redundant populations (viewed form capital's perspective) and discarded assets (unrealized profit) into art projects that symbolically resolve racial and class-based maltreatment by police and abandonment y city planners in post-industrial regions.[28]

In the wake of these socio-political questions, another approach focuses on creativity and imagination in search for a more inclusive common denominator for art practices. While the issues of socially and politically engaged artforms put more emphasis on matters of social and political interest and on creating new forms of non-disciplinary mode of knowledge production through participation, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak urges for the recognition of *social imagination*. In her view, this would mean the reinterpretation of imagination and the imaginary dimension of art.[29] Spivak urges the rehabilitation of the imaginary as a realm for a possible 'epistemological change that will *rearrange desires*'.[30] The problem she addresses is similar to the concerns of contemporary art but with a difference which stems from the fact that she does not consider the reader-interpreter to be passive. She claims that criticism is indispensable, as it is tightly connected to education and institutions, and thereby can generate institutional change.[31] In Spivak's view, 'change in the human mind supplements institutional change' and

---

[25] Kolbowski in 'Roundtable', p. 81.

[26] Nato Thompson, 'Living as Form', in *Living as a Form? Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed.by Nato Thompson (New York: Creative Time Books, MIT Press, 2012), pp. 18-33 (p. 30).

[27] Gregory Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism* (London and New York: Pluto Press, 2017), p. 148.

[28] Ibid., p. 128.

[29] See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Other Asias* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), and, more recently, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[30] Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education,* p. 2. Emphasis added.

[31] She has previously dealt with the question in her book *Outside the Teaching Machine*, but it is also a recurrent topic of *Other Asias* and *An Aesthetic Education*. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside the Teaching Machine* (London: Routledge, 1993).

brings about epistemic change—a process that presupposes a mutual exchange in both directions.[32] For her, 'the ethico-political task of the humanities has always been the rearrangement of desires', and although "imagination" as a term has strong eighteenth- and nineteenth-century (Kantian) resonances, it is a term at hand (especially for the literary) since it is 'the terrain where the ability to think absent things has free reign'. As she confirms, there is no guarantee that imaginative thinking will be the outcome of the humanities (or art), but one can hope 'that an active and robust imagination cannot not engender possibilities that are not necessarily contained in dominant versions, radical or conservative'.[33]

Okwui Enwezor similarly calls attention to the possible renewed role of imagination. He claims, referring to the books edited by Jerome Rothenberg, that the visionary poets and poems these books collect are examples of 'reimagin[ing] reality' without the constraint of geography or cultural tradition.[34] For Fredric Jameson, the imaginary surfaces as a possibility to imagine a different social reality; as he argues, this is what utopias are all about.[35] Contemporary art—as the examples of the Whitechapel Gallery's exhibition, *The Spirit of Utopia*, the documenta 14 (2017), the Venice Biennalé, *Vivia Arte Viva* (2017), or the statement of ruangrupa, the arist-curators of the 15th documenta (2022) all show—manifests the tendency to posit probable but not necessarily possible ways of different imaginary social orders, which consider alternative legal, economic, and geopolitical relations, is still present in contemporary major art shows.[36]

The Role of Critique?

This points to a further question: the role of critique in contemporary art.[37] One form is the so-called "institutional critique", which focuses on the role of art institutions reflecting on their ideological basis emergent from the nineteenth-century, and on their present status in influencing cultural formation or art dissemination.[38] The problematic point of this type of critique, however, as David Joselit observes, is that "institutional critique" is a 'mode that sometimes seems to take the museum too seriously as the determining condition of art'.[39]

---

[32] Spivak, *Other Asias*, p. 3. This change, she implies, can be promoted by the 'responsibility of writing that thought may become textual blank for others'.

[33] Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education,* pp. 3-4.

[34] Okwui Enwezor, 'The Predicament of Culture', *Artforum*, 9 (2013), 326-329 (p. 327). See Jerome Rothenberg, *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas* (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1972) and *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetry from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

[35] See Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), especially p. 15.

[36] Compare: <http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/the-spirit-of-utopia> and documenta 14 <https://www.documenta14.de/en/> [accessed 1 December 2019].

[37] One must keep in mind what Hal Foster notes: that there is a slippage between "critique", "criticism", "critical theory" and "critical art". See Hal Foster, 'Post-Critical', *October*, (2012), 3-8 (p. 8).

[38] See Andrea Fraser, 'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', *Artforum*, (2005), 278-283; see also *Art and its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critiques, and Collaborations*, ed. by Nina Möntman (London: Blackdog Publishing, 2006).

[39] David Joselit in 'Roundtable', p. 80.

Moreover, as Irit Rogoff argues, the term itself is complicit with the institution and has long been institutionalised as it became yet another tactic of the art world.[40]

Critique as it is understood by Hal Foster also bears relevance in this respect: for him, it is not only the function of the institution or the social aims of art practice, but the legitimacy of traditional criticism which has been put to the test in the past decades.[41] In a surprisingly familiar argument, Foster, through citing Walter Benjamin, underlies that the detached standpoint which guarantees the privileged distance of the critic is not a reality to be believed, and nor has it ever existed as anything but a lost wish of romantic thinkers.[42] Indeed, for Benjamin, criticism 'was at home in a world where perspectives and prospects counted and where it was still possible to adopt a standpoint'.[43] But this perspective, which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars long dreamt of, was appropriated by the learned "elites" in believing themselves sole possessors of the right to educate the "vulgar masses"—an idea that has long been a point of criticism, not only for its claim to be a detached, non-ideological stance, but also for being a relevant point of view that can be extended to or expected by all by the "abstract power of civilizing".[44]

Tony Bennett subsumes this idea of cultural education under the rubric of *Bildung*: where, instead of being a 'purely mental set of self-reflexive practices', it emerges from the 'networks connected to the programmes of bourgeois self-management, to the formation of administrative cadres, to the extension movements intended to extend the action of culture to the working classes, or to civilizing programmes in the context of colonial regimes'.[45] For Bennett, culture, including art, is a field which has a role in 'distributing the capacity for certain forms of self-governance unequally across different sections of the population'; its importance in liberal ideology is the redistribution of power: 'it is the capacity of self-governance that qualifies those who (claim to) posses it to govern those whom they judge to lack it'.[46]

Foster's text points at the pitfalls deriving from this inherited lofty standpoint of the critic. Although Foster is very 'critical' in dealing with the approaches of the two major critics— Bruno Latour and Jacques Rancière—whose texts he encounters, he also tries to find a possible

---

[40] See Irit Rogoff, 'Infrastructure', 20 March 2013. <http://www.formerwest.org/Contributors/IritRogoff> [accessed 1 December 2019]. She argues for a completely new institution outside institutional critique, as the very term itself is complicit with the institution and has long been institutionalised.

[41] See Foster, 'Post-Critical'; see also *Judgement and Contemporary Art Criticism*, ed. by Jeff Khonsary and Melanie O'Brian (Vancouver: Fillip Editions, 2010).

[42] The critic's role, and thereby critique, has been a political agenda since Romanticism and its privileged role was believed (as suggested by their texts) by modernists like Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, and somewhat later by Clement Greenberg—even if the hope of privileged distance evaporated soon, earlier than Greenberg's writings were published, as can be detected in Benjamin's text.

[43] Walter Benjamin, 'One-Way Street', in *Selected Writings, vol. 1., 1913-1926*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 444-88, p. 476.

[44] In Tony Bennett's view, this claim for the need of redemption derives from the standpoint of the learned intellectual, or elite, and appears as a lofty, unmarked position. See Bennett, 'Making Culture', (p. 610); see also Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics,* (New York: Routledge, 1988), and Peter de Bolla, *The Eduction of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

[45] Bennett, 'Making Culture', (p. 610).

[46] Bennett, *Making Culture, Changing Society*, p. 10.

sense of or place for critique.[47] He seems to look for a tentative answer to what role is left for intellectuals and artists in the era of the 'post-critical'. It is an urging problem when, as he bitterly notes, 'the sheer out-of-date-ness of criticism in an art world that could not care less seem evident enough', and this partly because, as he notes, 'most of its agents are dependent on corporate sponsors more than ever'.[48]

Foster wittily enumerates a few reasons why critique 'has run out of steam', or why critique seems suspicious today. These are, consecutively, the 'rejection of judgment', the 'refusal of authority', and 'skepticism about distance'. All three are interrelated and prevail in today's critical thought as well as in Rancière's works, which seem to be Foster's hobbyhorse for targeting scholarly *hubris*. For the latter, it is a problem when the critic vindicates himself the position of the 'ideological patron', the one who has the privilege to 'speak on behalf of others', who conceals his drive of 'will to power' and is blinded because his discourse is 'not reflexive about its own claims to truth', who falls prey to 'his own fetish of demystification'.[49] This ideological patronage on behalf of others is not in a better position than these 'others' are; to the contrary, this scientific search might turn out to be no more than narcissistic self-adoration for being in the position to preach about truth.[50]

In order to narrow down his argument to the discourse of contemporary art practices, Foster turns to Rancière's theory, or, to be more precise, to the contradiction inherent in Rancière's claim that *critical art*, like critique, is awareness raising, while its reality is the confirmation of its very object of criticism, the *modus operandi* of capitalist production that is the 'transformation of things into signs'.[51] Foster's tart sarcasm in a like manner blames Rancière's 'redistribution of the sensible' to be a new 'panacea' or the 'new opiate of the artworld left', which virtually accounts for nothing new and against all odds does not mean much redemption from the above mentioned 'transformation of things into sings'.[52]

Yet these problems or contradictions, as Foster seems to claim, do not suffice to dismiss criticism as the realm of the aesthetic. Interestingly, both Foster and Spivak attempt to shelter or even save the last remnants of critical reason in the age of utter indifference and distrust, but in two different ways: Spivak is less disillusioned, and vindicates this role to education through the literary, whereas Foster is less optimistic with the launching of such projects. Thus Foster,

---

[47] Bruno Latour's text was written for the debate initiated by the *Critical Inquiry* in 2004—also on the question of criticism. See Bruno Latour, 'Why has critique run out of steam', *Critical Inquiry*, (2004), 225-48, and Jacques Rancière, 'Aesthetics and Politics', in *Aesthetics and its Discontents,* trans. Steven Cochran (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), pp. 45-60.
[48] Foster, 'Post-Critical', (p. 3).
[49] Ibid., (p. 3).
[50] A somewhat similar argument was previously outlined by Foster in his 1996 study on contemporary art practices. See Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer', in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the end of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 171-204.
[51] Rancière claims that 'in its most general expression critical art is a type of art that sets out to build awareness of the mechanisms of domination to turn the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation'. Rancière, (pp. 46-47).
[52] Foster, 'Post-Critical', (p. 6).

on the one hand, returns to Latour (whose theory he had already demystified) to cite how the critic 'offers the participants arenas in which to gather'.[53]

For Foster, critique itself is intervention; it 'intervenes what is given, somehow turns it, and takes it elsewhere'. It turns and modifies given or received ideas (even that of the notion of art, for instance). Thus, his problem seems to stem from the contradictory nature of certain art practices (that is, critical art or social practice art) and not from critique itself. As he notes:

> rather than hold the two terms together, such rubrics tend to release a given practice from the criteria of either social effectivity or artistic invention; the one tends to become the alibi for the other, with any pressure from the one side dismissed as sociological and any from the other as aestheticist—and so the announced resolution breaks down again.[54]

Contrary to Foster, the importance of critical art in Rancière analysis manifests as the 'metamorphosis of the political "third"'; that is, the metamorphosis of 'the play of exchanges and displacements between the art world and non-art world'.[55] In his view, since art is 'encouraged to intervene' in order to substitute political function, critical art, in the final analysis, turns out to be political art, and as such, despite unpredictable outcomes and effects, nevertheless demonstrates the will to intervene. His final point is to note that it is an open question whether art's present role of *intervention* can substitute 'political function' with the opening up of a new public arena (what Latour vindicates for criticism) or whether it can only parody 'political spaces'.[56] So, as Foster also observes, but I think does not stress enough, Rancière argues for an art that reaches 'beyond mere awareness' and beyond the 'passive spectator in need of activation'.[57] This is why transformation does not come with spectatorship (or understanding through spectatorship) only, but simultaneously needs action in the form of political activism as art; not spectators but actors in a literal sense, with art that is an artistic and political project at the same time and which can take the form of political-revolutionary action.[58] *Intervention*, which was vindicated to the act of criticism by Foster (or Spivak), turns into the need of direct intervention for Rancière. To cite him at length:

> the paradox of our present is perhaps that this art, uncertain of its politics, is increasingly encouraged to intervene due to the lack of politics in the proper sense. Indeed, it seems as if the time of consensus, with its shrinking public space and effacing of political inventiveness, has given to artists and their mini-demonstrations, their collections of objects and traces, their *dispositifs* of interaction, their *in situ* or other provocations, a substitutive political function.[59]

---

[53] Foster, 'Post-Critical', (p. 6). See Latour, (p. 246).
[54] Foster, 'Post-Critical', (p. 8).
[55] Rancière, (p. 52).
[56] Ibid., (p. 60).
[57] Foster, 'Post-Critical', (p. 6).
[58] For instance, non-violent public demonstrations like the Occupy movement, or even violent political acts like the "Arab Spring". It is no accident why both these movements are also reviewed and exhibited in art contexts.
[59] Rancière, (p. 60).

As I noted, Rancière leaves it an open question whether this art will 'reshape political spaces'. Enwezor, however, is more straightforward about the role of political art. He claims that 'one of the central principles of contemporary art that unambiguously effects a political stance is its engagement with bio-politics'.[60] It is telling that in the revised version of 'Post-Critical', Foster also argues for this political engagement of contemporary art, which for him, as for Spivak, is the possibility of imagining 'new accounts of citizenship'.[61] Rancière calls for intervention as a proper form of contemporary critical art, whereas Spivak and Foster offer a more intellectual, yet not less active approach: for Spivak, change begins with reflected and accessible knowledge that is always achieved actively whatever form it may take; for Foster, art is about 'turning' what is given and 'begins with critique'.[62] As Foster elucidates elsewhere:

> one sometimes becomes a critic or an art historian for the same reason that one often becomes an artist or an architect—out of discontent with the status quo and a desire for alternatives. There are no alternatives without critique.[63]

The point of whether such art is an independent realm, or if aesthetic autonomy is of importance in terms of these practices, seems to be a problematic yet moot question. One way or another, the reconsideration of the aesthetic, and the role of art in shaping social and political spaces, is a recurrent question in contemporary art. The will to intervene on the part of artists is ever stronger with the recent narrowing of political spaces, even if it might only be wishful thinking to imagine or invent new forms of citizenship. In the age of 'utter disillusionment', the imaginary dimension of art, as Spivak or Enwezor suggest, can still have this capacity to show probable ways for alternatives. This, however, would require democratic and inclusive modes of art practice, ones which allow for a global or planetary mode of conceiving art and aesthetics.

---

[60] One of Enwezor's examples in this text is the German group 'Kein Mensch ist illegal'. What Enwezor emphasises here is that the group, 'both in its work and in its configuration, has moved beyond the traditional framework of being purely and artistic or activist group', and claims to be both artistic and activist. Okwui Enwezor, 'Documentary/Verité: Bio-Politics, Human Rights, and the Figure of Truth in Contemporary Art', in *The Green Room: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, ed. by Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl (Berlin: Stenberg Press, 2009), pp. 62-103 (pp. 72-73).
[61] Hal Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), n.p.
[62] Foster, 'Post-Critical', (p. 7). I would mention such attempts of critical-political art which could generate public action: Rosler's series *Bringing The War Home*, or recent examples of criticism on the Afghan or Iraq war such as Omer Fast's *5000 Feet is the Best* and Jeremy Deller's *English Magic* at the 2013 Venice Biennial.
[63] Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex* (London and New York: Verso, 2011), p. xiii.

List of Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter, 'One-Way Street', in *Selected Writings, vol. 1., 1913-1926*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 444-88

Bennett, Tony, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics,* (New York: Routledge, 1988)

——, *Making Culture: Changing Society* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013)

——, 'Making culture, changing society: the perspective of "culture studies"', *Cultural Studies*, 21(4-5) (2007), 610–629

Bishop, Claire, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012)

Castells, Manuel, *The Rise of The Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000)

Clifford, James, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Harvard University Press, 1988)

de Bolla, Peter, *The Eduction of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003)

Elkins, James, 'Why Art History is Global', in *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, ed. by Jonathan Harris (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 375-386

Enwezor, Okwui, 'Documentary/Verité: Bio-Politics, Human Rights, and the Figure of Truth in Contemporary Art', in *The Green Room: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, ed. by Maria Lind and Hito Styerl (Berlin: Stenberg Press, 2009), pp. 62-103

——, 'The Predicament of Culture', *Artforum*, 9 (2013), 326-329

Foster, Hal, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (London and New York: Verso, 2015)

——, 'Post-Critical', *October*, (2012), 3-8

——, *The Art-Architecture Complex* (London and New York: Verso, 2011)

——, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the end of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996)

Fraser, Andrea, 'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', *Artforum*, (2005), 278-283

Friday, Matthew, David Joselit, and Silvia Kolbowski, 'Roundtable: The Social Artwork', *October*, 3 (2012), 74-85

Geerzt, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973)

Gell, Alfred, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)

Goodwin, Paul, 'Confessions of a Recalcitrant Curator', in *The Persistence of Taste: Art, Museums and Everyday Life after Bourdieu,* ed. by Malcolm Quinn, David Beech, Michael Lehnert, et. al. (London and New York: Routledge 2018), pp. 174-186

Hall, Stuart, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997)

Jameson, Fredric, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London and New York: Verso, 2005)

Joselit, David, *After Art* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013)

Khonsary, Jeff and Melanie O'Brian, eds., *Judgement and Contemporary Art Criticism* (Vancouver: Fillip Editions, 2010)

Kivy, Peter, 'What Really Happened in the Eighteenth-Century: The Modern System Re-examined Again', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 52(1) (2012), 61-74

Latour, Bruno, 'Why has critique run out of steam', *Critical Inquiry*, (2004), 225-48

Maimon, Vered, 'The Third Citizen: On Models of Criticality in Contemporary Artistic Practices', *October*, 2 (2009), 85-112

Möntman, Nina, ed., *Art and its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critiques, and Collaborations* (London: Blackdog Publishing, 2006)

Porter, James I., 'Is Art Modern? Kristeller's "Modern System of the Arts" Reconsidered', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 49 (2009), 1-24

——, 'Why Art has Never been Autonomous', *Arethusa*, 43(2) (2010), 165-180

Preziosi, Donald, 'Curatorship as Bildungsroman: From Hamlet to Hjelmslev', in *Curatorial Challenges: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Contemporary Curating*, ed. by Malene Vest Hansen, Anne Folke Henningsen, and Anne Gregersen (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 11-21

Rancière, Jacques, 'Aesthetics and Politics', in *Aesthetics and its Discontents,* trans. Steven Cochran (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), pp. 45-60

Rogoff, Irit, 'Infrastructure', 20 March 2013. <http://www.formerwest.org/Contributors/IritRogoff>

Rothenberg, Jerome, *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas* (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1972)

——, *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetry from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017)

Sholette, Gregory, *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism* (London and New York: Pluto Press, 2017)

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012)

——, *Outside the Teaching Machine* (London: Routledge, 1993)

——, *Other Asias* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008)

Squire, Michael, 'The Art of Art History in Greco-Roman Antiquity', *Arethusa*, 43(2) (2010), 133-163

Tanner, Jeremy, 'Aesthetics and Art History Writing in Comparative Historical Perspective', *Arethusa*, 43(2) (2010), 267-288

——, 'Michael Baxandall and the Sociological Interpretation of Art', *Cultural Sociology*, 4(2) (2010), 230-256

Thompson, Nato, 'Living as Form', in *Living as a Form? Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed.by Nato Thompson (New York: Creative Time Books, MIT Press, 2012), pp. 18-33

Williams, Raymond, *Culture and Society* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958)