

Critical Dys-course

The proliferation of visual culture in the late twentieth century has continuously challenged art to rethink its definition. Moving away from its broad definition as an essentially aesthetic project, contemporary art is now largely perceived as a critical discourse. Clearly, criticality is a vital element of contemporary art: the discourse only remains interesting while it is animated with effective criticality. Without it, contemporary art's discourse becomes closed and static. However, 'criticality' is a slippery term, meaning any number of different things. Moreover, the specific culture of the Sydney artworld compounds this already fraught question. Almost invariably, criticality in our current conditions is garrotted by political power cables.

It is no use trying to nail down a semantic jelly such as 'criticality'. No single definition or model of criticality is truer than another. Nevertheless, there are critical models that animate the discourse, just as there are others which allow it to stagnate. Seemingly, critical engagement entails evaluation. However, I would argue that all criticism should also entail a degree of metacriticism, an active awareness of the values and criteria being applied. In the case of art reviews, this entails being explicit about values being employed so that an audience can, in turn, engage with them.

It is often assumed that criticism must come from either an objective or a subjective position. I contend, however, that for criticism to have common value to a discourse, it must come from a position within the context of the discourse. On the objective model, the task of the critic is to achieve *critical distance*, and assess work according to static, supposedly neutral criteria. This model is incapable of understanding the morphic character of contemporary art. Conversely, with subjective view, a critic is to act as a translator for the artist, as though the review is the literary equivalent of the artwork. This assumes that the discourse is amorphous, that it has no common values, only interesting but unrelated contrasts. Both these models fail to address the shared critical interests, histories and traditions, which are the currency of contemporary art. I would like to argue that criticism, to be relevant, needs to situate itself within this discourse of shared meanings.

Contemporary art's discourse is not simply an exchange of fire between the poles of artist and critic. The discourse is far more complex, and the

relationship between its participants are much more diverse: critical discussions are just as likely to take place amongst art students over coffee. Nevertheless, the gallery circuit and art reviews are commonly regarded as the principle sites where audiences engage in the discourse. These critical spaces significantly mould the conditions within which art is produced and engaged.

Compared to fifteen years ago, Sydney's critical print now has a fairly strong infrastructure of newspaper reviews, and national and international magazines. In the very first issue of *Art & Text*, in 1981, Paul Taylor's editorial comment expressed his frustration with the critical paucity of most of the art reviewers of that time. For instance, Taylor noted "such list-makers attribute artistic success by listing the number of exhibitions an artist has had...or by noting the number of works sold in a show. Properly speaking, such writing is barely criticism at all"¹.

It is hard to tell whether we now have a greater level of critical engagement in art reviews. There are many more venues for art reviews, ostensibly opening up the flow of critical discourse. However, with greater opportunities for artists to be written about, the critical value of reviews is increasingly problematised by their value as publicity. The editorial endorsement that is stamped onto a favourable review is infinitely more valuable than any paid advertising space. In the Sydney artworld, reviews have become the currency in which egos and power cliques trade. Hence, it is not uncommon for an artist to get a reliable advocate to write their review. The resulting piece possesses the critical authority of a review, combined with the shining advocacy of a catalogue essay. This does not merely pass up an opportunity for critical engagement, but, in attempting to redefine a 'review' as a kind of advertorial, ensures dubious criticality.

Power cliques, which no doubt exist in any field, play a large and determining role in the life of Sydney's contemporary art. From the outside, it must seem an unlikely milieu in which cliques could bear any critical influence. In this field there is little to be gained in terms of finance or kudos. Yet, the potential sanctions of ostracism and retaliatory bad press assure that many reviews are never *too* critical. With such interests at work, there seem to be few writers immersed enough in contemporary art to understand the complexity of its discourse, while remaining critical of it. Thus, many reviews tend to be

acritical, variating between hagiography and bitchery, determined by underlying allegiances.

All these factors contribute to a culture which, despite the importance of criticality to its discourse, has largely forsaken effective criticism. This retreat from criticality is well illustrated by the reaction of many in the Sydney artworld to Rex Butler's "Nixon's Watergate". Published in *Agenda*, this interrogation of John Nixon's work was powerfully critical, yet it was generally perceived that by publishing it, Butler had committed some unspeakable faux pas. It was not merely that Butler did his James Herriot to Nixon's sacred cow that seemed to have caused offence. In fact Butler seems almost apologetic in his conclusion, stating "none of this says that Nixon is wrong, but rather opens his work up to discussion and debate"². By daring to open up debate at all, Butler had somehow upset the status quo.

In stark contrast to the compromised criticality within the scene, John McDonald has attempted to assert himself as contemporary art's renegade, ready to cut through the politics and pretension with a razor sharp critical eyeball. McDonald's contempt for "that glamorous club we call Contemporary Art"³ is broad and consistent. His reviews echo Peter Fuller's haughty tone and disdain for contemporary art ("Duchamp was the start of all the trouble and there's nothing I would wish to say in his defence"⁴) mixed with the zealotry of an evangelical visionary. McDonald's writings descend from a lineage of connoisseur taste-masters, from Fuller and Kenneth Clark. Central to their writings is the philosophically modernist notion that all art can be empirically and objectively judged against a universal template of excellence. Thus, truly great art is made by genius masters, and the best a mere mortal can hope to achieve, is a close approximation of this ideal. Accordingly, artists who diverge from this prescribed task are deemed to be impertinent, and their work to have missed the point. This is McDonald's greatest criticism of contemporary art: that it fails to measure up against this particular criteria.

The problem with McDonald's position is that it unquestionably assumes that it is no position at all: that it is the true and correct centre, the bullseye, from which all other criteria erroneously deviate. For McDonald, this natural, universal, human aesthetic order is constantly under threat from the contaminant of *low* culture embodied in contemporary art. This is explicitly manifest in his Saturday reviews in the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "For those not

inducted into the elite hierarchies of contemporary art, those without a degree in gender studies or pop culture, it must be a never ending source of wonder that art which is self-evidently bad is held to be vital and important, while art that looks pretty good is deemed inconsequential.”⁵ It is against the universal template of excellence, privy to McDonald’s eye, that some work is “self-evidently bad”. McDonald’s verdicts offer readers no explanation of the criteria by which the work is either *good* or *bad*. Consequently, readers are offered little opportunity to engage with, or interrogate, the evaluation. With no room for negotiation, McDonald leaves readers the option either to accept his silent thumbs-down, or dismiss him altogether. It is not discourse, but monologue.

Ultimately, one has to question the value of McDonald’s criticism to this particular discourse. This is not because his sympathies are not with contemporary art. Indeed, criticism made with no particular interests within the scene can be very generative. Rather, it is that with McDonald’s criticism of this field, as with Fuller’s, “there are two incommensurate discourses operating”.⁶ McDonald is so wilfully blind to the values specific to contemporary art that his criteria and expectations are entirely incongruous. He applies a yardstick in a metric world.

Although far from being exhaustive, these are some of the major factors which form critical conditions in Sydney. For the artists represented in the *Critical Spaces* project, this critical context is mainly negotiated from the circuit of artist-run initiatives (ARIs). The relation of the ARI circuit to the critical discourse is continuously changing, as is its relation to other gallery institutions. It seems that in the past, particularly during the predominance of commercial galleries in the 1980s, ARIs were run, and largely regarded, as alternative spaces. Self-marginalised, ARIs ran as a sub-culture to the wider critical discourse. Yet, more recently, both their character and their relationship to the discourse has changed.

The perception of the ARI circuit as a talent-pool for commercial galleries is no longer feasible. It is not merely that most commercial stables are full, but rather that, to many emerging artists, commercial galleries are not seen as their most likely destination. In the current impoverished art market, there are no real prospects of ever being supported by the commercial system. Consequently, the ARI circuit is experiencing a boom. To this emerging generation, artist-run

initiatives are not so much alternative spaces, but a central arena of contemporary art activity, a substantive element of the discourse.

An important characteristic of ARIs is the potential curatorial independence which their non-profit status affords them. An underlying critical agenda shapes the curatorial program of any gallery. Despite having to exist on low finances, most ARIs have a degree of financial independence which other types of galleries do not have. Unlike commercial galleries, they do not have to exhibit work which is likely to sell. Therefore, the artists they show are not necessarily well known, and are freer to make unsaleable work. Moreover, most ARIs are allowed greater freedom by not having to placate funding bodies.

The fact that ARIs are artist-run makes them a unique kind of critical institution. An ARI is often directed and run by a small group of like-minded artists with a definite, focussed notion of what their gallery represents. In addition to their curatorial autonomy, ARIs are free to adopt critical agendas based on the particular interests of the directors. Representing just four of Sydney's many ARIs, *Critical Spaces* demonstrates that each gallery proposes different forms of practice. Each holds a position in relation to the others: one gallery would seem to agree more with the propositions of some galleries, and more vehemently oppose others. Their independence allows them to declare their interests more readily. For instance, Mishka Borowski is the sole director of Pendulum, so the gallery's agenda parallels her concerns as an artist with a kind of material poetics. The works of the four artists which Pendulum represents in this project seem to take this as their main tenet. Combined with the selection of artists, the work produced often corresponds to the director's concerns.

As a consequence of their focussed agendas, ARIs characteristically have not been compelled to exhibit a broad representation of concerns. This narrowness could be seen as being negative. Indeed, in the case of an institution which is required to present a survey of artistic heterogeneity, such as the Art Gallery of New South Wales, this would amount to cultural fascism. But for ARIs, this is their most important characteristic. The current boom-time for ARIs means that there are now many galleries, with significantly different agendas. The sum of their focussed programs creates the potential for a broadly polyvalent discourse.

I have argued that criticality is a vital element of contemporary art, and that an animated, interesting, discourse depends on it. Much of our critical press fails to provide effective criticality. In Sydney, there is a need for greater criticality in both reviews and the gallery circuit. The diversity of the ARI circuit goes some way towards creating a much needed critical space.

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¹ Paul Taylor, "Editorial: On Criticism", *Art & Text* #1, Autumn 1981, p. 5-11.

² Rex Butler, "Nixon's Watergate", *Agenda*, #37, July 1994, p. 9-12.

³ John McDonald, "The familiarity breeds content", *SMH*, Saturday, April 15 1995, p. Spectrum 12A.

⁴ Peter Fuller, "But is it art?", in *Peter Fuller's Modern Painters: Reflections on British Art*, 1993, edited by John McDonald.

⁵ John McDonald, "This time it's not the Poms whingeing", *SMH*, July 23 1994, p. Spectrum 13A.

⁶ Ross Gibson, "Paranoid Critical Methods: A Response to Peter Fuller's The Australian Scapegoat", *Art & Text* #26, Sept-Nov 1987, p. 58-66.

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