

From the Media towards History: Zones of Contention

This panel addresses the role of criticism, media, and the relationship between local art history and the larger process of validation of a certain artistic context.

The process of writing contemporary art history is aided by the chronicle, the art review, and the exhibition essay, amongst others.

However, what are the steps taken to interpret day-to-day criticism and turn it into history? What kind of influence does international media have in the making of a local art history? And, what happens when we try to write the history of a particular region and period when there has been little or no criticism or media documentation of the movements, artists and tendencies in general? What kind of impact do external interpretations have over a local art scene?

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Something came home to me some time ago, when a friend and colleague said to me, with a hint of irritation, “Oh, Thierry, you’re really like an artist.” I had done something a decent professional art historian wasn’t supposed to do, and her exclamation was a friendly blame but I took it as a compliment. Only later did I ponder what she might have meant, and whether I deserved the compliment even if she hadn’t intended it as one, and how embarrassing it was to have been made self-conscious about something I would rather have ignored. In any case it was too late. I couldn’t erase what I’d heard, and my friend’s remark has stayed with me, prompting me to respond probably much too personally to your invitation to reflect on the activity of the art critic, the art historian or the art theorist, in relation to contemporary art practice. Keeping to my own, occasional practice of art criticism, I feel bound to dissect what I do (or what I think I do—the risk of self-delusion is enormous), and this is what I would like to share with you.

There is a kind of art critic—the poet-critic—who can legitimately claim to be an artist, but I’m not it. I would never call what I do art or poetry; I wouldn’t even call it art criticism proper. My writing is theoretical, which means that I expect some scientific or philosophical “truth” from it. This inevitably means that when I approach a work, I come to it equipped—and encumbered—with a combination of knowledge and ignorance inherent in the theoretical apparatuses that I’ve learned to use or have partially forged myself. My work is situated within the boundaries of a practice that seeks explanation, not invention; critique, not “poetry” or “art”.

What is it, now, that prompts me to write on a given work or body of work? I need to like it, that’s the first thing. O perhaps not. “To like” is too weak. “To love” is better but a bit misleading. What I mean is that I need to feel that the work calls me. I’m sometimes tempted to write on works that I have a strong relation to it (as it is for most critics, I suppose). But to decide that a work calls me strongly enough to give it a lot of time and energy is a complex process. Love at first sight usually doesn’t last, unless it turns out *not* to be just love at first sight. Most often, once a minimum level is reached, the works that trigger the desire to write about them are those I really don’t know whether I am in love with or not, and from which I get strong enough conviction that this is precisely what draws me to them. Without the sense that the work breaks the consensus that I have with myself, the impetus to write is just too weak.

This first step is intuitive, a gesture of surrender to the work. Yet it is at the same time utterly self-conscious and reflexive. When I approach a work. I try to do this without pretending that my taste is unprejudiced but, on the contrary, keeping the prejudices of my taste in check by adding to the another prejudice: my taste for works that compel me to go against the grain of my taste. Call me a perverse formalist, if you want. I prefer to say that ethics enter the picture, here. Prejudices are totally instinctive and are pervaded with biases of all sorts, and mine include the prejudice that controls the others. The ethical move is to trust them all, with no outside watchdog.

Having decided that I’m definitely drawn to a given work; a second requirement must meet before I set out to write on it. I must feel it is going to teach me something theoretical. Contemporary art is full of

works with explicit theoretical content; they usually bore me to death. These works are readily understood provided you know the right code. They generate easy consensus among people who speak the right jargon, and more often than not they stake their markers' claim to a position of power in Academia or in the marketplace. To understand them out of hand is already to loathe them, as far as I'm concerned, because they merely illustrate some existent theory—as sophisticated and interesting as that theory may be. I'm interested only in works I don't understand, and these may include works that I don't like, even works I hate. Interest in art is distinct from the love of art; but when there is love, it comprises interest. This is so because not knowing whether or not I like a given work, and deciding that "therefore" I am drawn to it, has everything to do with not knowing what the work means, and deciding that "therefore" it ought to be significant. Not all works that escape my understanding achieve this, of course. There are those that are simply dumb and meaningless; there are those that *I am* desperately dumb about, or blind to; and there are those that I feel may be of genuine interest to other people, but that fail to trigger in me the kind of excitement I need to write.

The sense of not understanding a work is not enough; what matters to me is a certain quality of puzzlement, of bewilderment, that sets the intellect in motion. I happily claim the word "quality", here together with all its aporias. "Quality" is something you feel inside you, and that therefore is merely subjective, yet that you ascribe to the work you are dealing with as if it were objective. I called it excitement a minute ago, and I know it when I feel it, but I cannot convey to you a sense of what it is, even though I presume that you know it for yourself; I'd have to show you a work I deem exciting and ask you if you feel the same way. Even if you answered yes, you and I might be talking about quite different experiences. I stress this because I want to make the point that even though I approach art out of intellectual curiosity, the arousal of that curiosity is itself aesthetic. To me, it is even *the* aesthetic experience, the one I value the most, the one that gets me going; it is the feeling that the work contains knowledge unknown to me.

The feeling and its quality are highly personal, yet the presumption is that the work—I say the work, not the artist—"knows" something I don't know yet, and that my task is to unearth and make explicit the theoretical thinking that's implicitly going on in it. Of course I realize that objects don't think, and that whatever thinking I draw from the work must be attributed either to the artist or to me. Not only methodologically but also ethically speaking, however, this isn't how I proceed. The work is the site of the thinking—that's my rule of thumb, but also my postulate. Without this postulate, the thinking in question would not be aesthetic, and it has to be aesthetic if the object under scrutiny is to be a work of art.

Far from guaranteeing the objectivity of my reading, this postulate renders it vulnerable to my prejudices. Again, the ethical move is to trust them: better admit that you aren't universal, and that your ability to pose questions is limited, provisional, and sometimes utterly circumstantial. Yet if, as an intellectual, you don't trust the questions you ask yourself, you might as well quit. Caring about your own doubts is what readies you for particular encounters with particular works of art. When they arrive, a flash of recognition

occurs, sometimes immediate, more often delayed, *nachträglich*, and what you recognize, without “cognizing” it, is your momentary blind spot. I had never approached an artwork, or a body of work, or for that matter a cultural phenomenon, without a theoretical question in mind—usually one having to do with some historical transformation in the notion of art. On the other hand, those questions, though framed by the concerns I share with my intellectual community, are never pressed on me from some theoretical heaven, but are proffered by individual works. In this I find the “proof” that I am not erring totally.

Once I have decided I love a work enough, and feel it “knows” something I want to know badly, I’m ready to start. What happens is a dialogue: I address theoretical questions to the work, and the work answers, or refuses to answer. The way it does or doesn’t answer leads me to pursue my line of questioning or to shift ground, to refine the hypotheses I’m working with or to abandon them, to summon certain references and to dismiss others. That’s the exhilarating part of my job, the time of truth and dare, the time when I’m really in bed with Madonna. (*Truth or Dare* was distributed in Europe under the title *In Bed with Madonna*. It’s a love affair and a struggle, a ceaseless intercourse with the work. And, like intercourse, it’s all about touching and being touched. I mean, if you aren’t moved by the work nothing happens, you aren’t theoretically aroused. You go through the motions of theoretical lovemaking, but you’re numb; you simulate pleasure, perhaps, but your writing is dull. If the work moves you, touches you, then every theoretical question you address to it is a caress under which ones touch the G-spot, which ones hurt, which are merely irritating. Enough lyricism—if the lovers and art lovers of this world are still with me I’ve made my point, even if they don’t get their kicks out of *theoretical* caresses of and from works of art, as I do.

The point is not to claim the right to my own little perversions, but to convey a sense that I both am and am not talking metaphorically. I said “dialogue”, and then “intercourse”. I said, “It’s all about touching and being touched.” Now I add: “It’s all about talking and being talked to.” “Touch” and “talk” are equally metaphors when it comes to our relations with things. But, as everyone knows from looking in philosophical bewilderment at a readymade or an Andy Warhol *Brillo Box*, works of art are not mere things. They do touch and they do talk (which is why incidentally, all cultures tend to treat at least their own artworks as quasi-living beings, quasi-persons, and why the *defacing* of a work of art is always a barbaric act). The “unreality” of the dialogue/intercourse between work and critic, then, is not the conventional distance between reality and metaphor; it has to do with the fact that only through the interplay of dialogue *and* intercourse do I access the works’ otherness and remoteness, in other words, the work inasmuch as I don’t understand it. This interplay could be described as a second-degree dialogue or as intercourse at a remove, but these images are misleading, for they suggest a plane of metalanguage where dialogue and intercourse are kept apart. In fact, it is the talking that does the touching, and vice versa. This is what makes art criticism such a strange and unique activity, full of risks.

The first risk to be overcome is the extraordinary narcissistic pleasure of the activity. That’s inevitable, since art criticism is reflexive. The work is after all a thing, so when I ask it a question, I’m actually talking

to myself; and when it answers, I'm actually listening to myself deciphering messages of uncertain origin; and when the work touches me, I'm reveling in my own emotion. That's not romanticism, that's fact—an embarrassing fact, I agree, but one that is a lot more interesting to acknowledge than to deny, because you can then see art criticism as involving a constant self-conscious reflexivity on what you're doing. Critical reflection is not a metadiscourse on your practice, it is immanent to it. You have to be constantly on guard against excessive identification and projection: you don't want to lose yourself in the work and you don't want to take the work hostage. Here ethics once again enter the picture: you have to know that you can't possess a work of art anymore than you can possess a person; you have to respect its otherness, keep yourself from wanting to assimilate it into yourself or to project yourself uninhibitedly onto it. The difficulty is that the ultimate safeguard against the risk of bathing in your own feelings *is* your own feelings, and that it is up to you to draw the line between legitimate narcissism and self-indulgence.

Theory, a theoretical framework, a set of shared theoretical assumptions, a common theoretical language: these of course, are the other safeguards, and the ones I rely on the most—or the most-consciously. But here several new risks arise, the main one—to me, at least—being over interpretation. As I said, when I interpret a work, I approach it with a theoretical question in mind. I was only half honest when I said it was the work itself that proffered the question; it would be truer to my experience to admit that more often than not, the question is prompted by theory. Though my rule of thumb, or my postulate, is that whatever theoretical thinking the work stirs up must be in the work, I obviously bring a lot of theory with me. I bring it from the books I've read, from years of study, from my own earlier work, whatever—a hell of a load. Theory is heavy, that's the problem. It carries the weight of all the important people you quote, or who are at the back of your mind when you write; it is laden with the sediments of their thinking. It has authority, and authority can too easily be used to empower yourself, to intimidate the reader, and, ultimately, to silence the work. The risk of over interpretation is that in lending the work the authority of theory you end up crushing it under theory's power. Works of art stand fragile before a theoretical question, not because they are intrinsically too frail for the confrontation—on the contrary, the better the art, the more theoretical questions it summons—but because they don't answer those questions in the language of theory, translation is necessary. The problems of translation and translatability put the finger right on the wound. This is where all the difficulties and risks of art criticism as I see it are compounded.

They start with the very first question I must ask myself: how do I know that a given work summons a given theoretical question, and that I'm not just bringing my current obsession to the work? There's no way I can know this for a fact. I sense it, I feel it, I go at it intuitively, how else? The risk of self-delusion and narcissism is at its greatest here. The problem is not one of subjectivity versus objectivity; it is that the only road to the objectivity of theory is a subjective control of the subjective use of theory. I simply have no one else at hand to keep my subjectivity in check, least of all the theorists whom I quote and whose authority I invoke. For to be concerned with art theory (as opposed to "theory" applied to art) is to ask

works of art to validate or invalidate a theoretical hypothesis, either way. As in science, you must always be ready to abandon a theory, to change it, to make it move. As in art, however, you produce theory in your own name, you take personal responsibility for the theoretical thinking the production of which you nevertheless ascribe to the works on which you're writing. Thus what I personally call theory (but which I stubbornly refuse to call "my personal theory") is nothing but the present stage of the questions I ask myself—the questions for which I'm ripe, and for which I preposterously assume that the world is ready. Here again the ethical move is to trust those questions, that is, to trust that they aren't just mine. They are my link with other people's work, and when my questions are indeed shared by others, I find proof therein (objective proof this time) that I'm not erring totally.

Back to Madonna's bed. Here I am, with one or a number of theoretical questions in mind, addressing them to the work. At first, free association is the rule. The work—the general impression it gives me, the feeling it yields and how I name them, its thematic content, its form, its technique, shape, and color, sometimes a single detail—all these evoke other works, pull references out of my memory, call in others' commentaries, drive me to the library to consult books that I have a hint might contain a clue. I soon realize I'm not alone in bed with Madonna. Though I have nothing against group sex, the issue is now to keep a few partners in and to let Madonna kick out of bed those who have nothing to do there. In less metaphorical terms, I have to feel I have more interpretive material than I can use, and that I can rely on the work to do the selection.

Finding the way into the actual writing is sometimes immediate, sometimes excruciatingly long, but the first sentence, isn't something I sense I can return to for latent meaning. I know that sooner or later I'll be stuck. If all goes well, I'm able to write. There are moments when the work I'm talking about is vividly present in my mind, and when the words I'm groping for need to stick to the work, in meaning, in mood, in tonality, in intellectual precision; and there are moments when theoretical issues carry me miles from the work, often into an imaginary discussion with theoretical opponents: Never underestimate the polemical dimension of art writing, it is essential. But if you manipulate or simplify theory in order to knock down an opponent, or if you get seduced by your own theory to the point of betraying your aesthetic experience of the work, it shows. Such is my own rule, anyway: if I feel that I've been led astray by my desire to win an argument, or that I've followed a theoretical insight to a point where the theory overshadows the art, I assume that the reader will feel it too.

Once again it's a matter of ethics, but "ethics" might be too big a word. Let's say "tact", the appropriate non-metaphor where it's all about touching and being touched. Tact is a striving after the right distance—the distance at which the truth-value of your theoretical interpretation hinges on the justness of your aesthetic judgment. If you're too much in love, and your readers feel they can agree with your theoretical interpretation only if they adhere unconditionally to your aesthetic judgment, you're too close. If your relation to the work is a one nightstand on the basis of which you concoct a whole theory that readers feel you could have

constructed at the hand of virtually any other work as well, you're too far away. Finally, if you manage to convey the impression that you have cracked the enigma of the work, ripped open its secret, said all there was to say about it, you're doomed. It's true, in which case you shouldn't have written about the work in the first place, or it's not, and you'll lose your readers. They want art to resist interpretation, and they're right.

The real issue about translatability turns out to be untranslatability. Good theoretically inclined art criticism should achieve two contradictory goals at the same time: it should seek theoretical enlightenment and should respect the work's enigma, its resistance to the language of theory, its otherness. Though the drive behind my work as a critic/theorist is to discover what I sense the art "knows" that I don't, and to translate that into the language of theory, my aim is not to violate the work's secret but to circumscribe it with a tight network of tangents that make it appear right there in the middle, as if in a clearing, yet as dark as ever. The work's enigma is my blind spot. If I can see it now, I've learned something; if I understand that I've simply displaced it, elsewhere, to wherever the next theoretical question will come from, I've learned a lot more. For I haven't forgotten that objects don't think. To produce theoretical thought from the work is to start from the *feeling* that the work thinks and *knows* something, and, moving from that feeling, to probe the work with a theoretical question; then to let theoretical labor answer the question and produce knowledge; then to check again with my *feeling* as to whether the *knowledge* I've gained sounds pertinent, whether it strikes the right note, whether it resonates. And so on, back and forth. That's what I earlier called the interplay between dialogue and intercourse, and would now call: thinking theoretically on the aesthetic mode. You use the knowledge you gain *from* the feelings the work gives you (it's called insight, or intuition) in order to produce theory, and you use the feelings you have *about* the knowledge you produced in order to check its relevance to the work.

Feelings and knowledge don't mix—this is both an ethical and an epistemological role, with aesthetic consequences. When I write, there always comes a point where my main concern is the form that the piece will take. Though what I want to say determines how I want to say it, it is the "how" that shapes the "what". Speed, rhythm, tone, echoes, choice of words, construction of sentences, length of paragraphs, all matter enormously. Where to shift gears abruptly, how to alternate emotion with cool argumentation, where to be academic and where to be colloquial, and so on: these are the means with which I try to weave the theoretical threads I hold in my hands into a fabric of some consistency and pliancy, while purposefully leaving some of them dangling. All these decisions, which are aesthetic, belong, in my opinion, to the subject matter of the written piece; I want them to contribute to the labor of extracting knowledge from the work of art under discussion. Yet they should have a life of their own. At stake is to expose the work's enigma *qua* enigma, i.e., to make that enigma "visible", to make it somehow aesthetically perceptible, to others. Most art critics and theorists probably proceed similarly; I don't think I've described anything exceptional. I wouldn't have insisted on this aesthetic dimension of art writing if it hadn't been for this exercise in critical reflection, and also, I suppose, if it hadn't been for my friend's amicable blame: "Oh, Thierry, you're really like an artist."

Now, I don't really believe her. Artists, I suspect, don't operate in exactly this way. Aside from the fact that all artists don't operate in the *same* way, I believe that the mode of thinking embodied in a work of art is extraneous to the theoretical mode, extraneous, even, to what I just called "thinking theoretically on the aesthetic mode." Though artists may sometimes speak the language of theory, they don't in their work. How do I know? Again, I have no proof. Again, it's a matter of otherness and untranslatability. All I know is that the word's enigma is *my* blind spot. And my blind spot isn't necessarily the work's enigma. I can't assume that what presents itself to *me* as a theoretical stumbling block has presented itself in the same way to the person whose thinking process the work embodies. It's not just that art isn't totally translatable into theory, it's that the issue of untranslatability isn't the same from the vantage point of the critic and from the vantage point of the artist. And I don't have the vantage point of the artist at my disposal, that's the trouble. I can only surmise. The best approximation I've found is to say that the way artists seem to think, in their work, is akin to the mythical mode of thought of the pre-Socratic thinkers, say, at the time of Parmenides' *Poem*, just before the rift between poetry and philosophy. This is embarrassing to suggest, less because it makes the thinking of artists seem so archaic than because it automatically puts me in the position of the rational philosopher for whom the pre-Socratic mode of thinking is already irredeemably lost. *Traduttore traditore*. Being couched in—and thus translated into—the words of someone familiar with theory (philosophy in this case), my approximation is already a betrayal of the artist's mode of thought, and thus an avowal of my definitive blindness.

Two last things. First, the worst self-delusion, for a critic, is to believe you can put the vantage point of an artist at your disposal by interviewing him or her. Second, the greatest challenge for a critic is that artists can talk back. The one relevant difference, according to me, between art criticism and art history—whether theoretically inclined or not—is that art critics write on living artists whereas art historians write on dead artists. The rule I apply to myself is to neglect this difference. I must write as if the living artist were dead and the work, severed from its maker, belonged to art history. I won't pretend that I never interview artists, or that I don't make use of what artists have said to others. I may even have abused such "source material", as it is unfittingly called. But I don't necessarily take what artists say to represent their vantage points. I'm more like Lacanian psychoanalyst, listening to the signifier. To talk about the artist's work is to relate what the work says about itself (and other things) and to presume that the work explains the words at least as much as the other way around. But remember: what the work says about itself is accessible to me only through the dialogue that I claim to have with the work but that in fact I have with myself. Since I'm after my own blind spot, the work, or the work's enigma, is so to speak "the Other". And as Lacan said, there is no Other to "the Other". Otherness is nonreciprocal.

To interview the artist—exchanging small talk, information and opinions, or discussing theory with the artist—is one thing. Like all human exchanges, this one rests on the convention (that is, the illusion) that vantage points are interchangeable. To communicate *to* the artist what I've written *about* the artist's

work is an altogether different thing. It is a face-to-face in which we both stare at each other's otherness, an unmediated face-to-face, even though two objects—the artist's work and my text—lie between us, pretending to be vessels of communication. The work was not addressed to me in particular, but when I felt that it called me and that it had something theoretical to teach me, I acknowledged receipt of it as if it had been addressed to me. My text is not addressed to the artist either. Fortunately, most artists want to know what's written about their work. I fear and love this—it's the real test. I don't consider myself to have passed the test successfully if the artist agrees with my interpretation of the work—that's not the point. But I'm happiest when the artist feels compelled to talk back, with words or with works. In this I find the sign that I haven't erred totally.