

# SPEAKEASY: WRITING AND CONTEMPORARY ART<sup>1</sup>

ELI BORNOWSKY ON  
SPEAKEASY: WRITING AND CONTEMPORARY ART

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A commitment to criticality unites manifold art practices of our time. Recently, while I was enjoying a dinner with writers, artists, poets, activists, and musicians, an argument of aesthetics was settled around the table when it was agreed that the judgment of a work of art must originate in and be receptive to the works' critical intentions. If a work is seen to be critical, it is worthy of investigation. This consensus informs a wide spectrum of contemporary art. Documenta, the largest international exhibition, has been presented as a "constellation that open[s] up a critical review of processes of a range of knowledge production."<sup>2</sup> At university graduate programs in visual art, learning is "enhanced by research into critical art discourse on advanced contemporary art."<sup>3</sup> Exhibition press releases plot the critical interventions of emerging and established artists while periodicals privilege artworks with critical agendas and largely omit works without. The rhetoric of this critical movement is couched in two proclamations. One, that global capitalism is at its peak and artists have a responsibility to produce work that exposes and denounces the capitalist machine. Two, that art is a historical culmination of social and material conditions and that the articulation of these conditions fuels the critical potential of art.

At a 2008 lecture at the University of British Columbia entitled "The Contemporary Misadventures of Critical Thinking," Jacques Rancière denounced the privilege afforded by artists and academics to diagnose the problems of the world. Rancière argued that the privilege given to artists and thinkers creates a division between those who are

entitled to make critical observations and those who are not. In this way, Rancière reasoned, the critical tradition has borrowed from a very common logic of domination, that which reserves a place for a select few to think and rule (and formulate criticism).

This privileged position of artistic criticality comes into tension with a very common notion about art: that art is completely open to interpretation. The freedom of interpretation is simultaneously presented as a vernacular defense for ignorant viewers and as a support for what critical art and theory forward in concepts such as multiplicity, potentiality, and difference as antidotes to conservative thought and capitalist logic. Thus criticality is caught in a paradox that both encourages and negates the possibility of critical engagement. Arguably, this paradox serves to debilitate the "potentiality" and "difference" of art, and distance us from our psychic and affective experiences of the work. Further, I would contest the notion that my profession as an artist puts me in a better position to make critical observations than any other profession. It is precisely the forcing of criticality onto certain disciplines such as art and writing that disempowers others from their own critical work. Following Rancière, anyone is capable of critical engagement and self-reflection regardless of their profession and social position.

That said, this text was commissioned by Artspeak within the framework of *Speakeasy*, a series of lectures and readings on the relationship between writing and contemporary art. Presentations were given by writers, artists, and academics who employ writing as part of an interdisciplinary praxis. Criticality was posited as the foundational link between art and writing, and pointing out the assumption with which criticality was deployed seems almost silly. Nevertheless, over the course of the series it became apparent that the relationship between criticality and art is understood primarily as a discursive operation. It is within this discursive art-critical milieu that my own artistic education has been fostered, yet it is only recently that I have been able to see the otherwise transparent field of criticality that envelopes me and my peers with its special emphasis on discourse, especially writing. I have heard enough artists complain that they have difficulty writing to know that they feel pressured to do so, and I know artists for whom the number of

invitations they receive to write, give lectures, and attend symposia greatly outnumber their invitations to exhibit actual artwork.

From my point of view as an artist, if there is anything special about art, it is the problems it poses for our ability to speak, while not stopping us from speaking. The sensations it provides confuse our thoughts, and the difficulty it presents to our sensibilities can be embraced in our experience as complex human beings. Anyone is capable of this embrace and the tropes of criticality and discourse are only one way to come to terms with the undertaking of art. I do not mean to dismiss criticality outright. Rather, I would like to propose some interconnected dangers I perceive with the current emphasis on discursive criticality in contemporary art.

The first danger, and the most common criticism leveled at discursive art, is that this emphasis reduces art to the mere illustration of theory. In a recent issue of *Texte zur Kunst*, edited by Isabelle Graw and Andre Rotmann and dedicated to painting, reviewers annotate contemporary paintings with detailed lists of how the works address the most important critical issues for painting: self-reflection on the medium of painting and its history, critique of the marketplace, awareness of the gallery context, and the understanding that art should illustrate the complex network in which it partakes. The correlation between the installations of paintings discussed and the criticism is so exact that one begins to imagine that a clever artist need only plant the correct signifiers for viewers, critics, and

historians to "uncover," thereby reducing art to the research of savvy juxtapositions and self-reflexive critical nuggets. These "correct" signifiers are then subject to the trends of intellectual fashion and reviewers make judgments as to what degree the constellations of signifiers are arranged to be critically effective. Criticality of this kind de-existentializes art, reducing the specificity of artistic experience to a generic realm of ideas and diagrams.

This first danger leads to a second, where discourse becomes the force that legitimates art. For many, critical discourse is presented as a mode of legitimation preferable to what is perceived as the dominant legitimation of art by the marketplace. However, it is by default that the market need not be considered a legitimate force in judging art—something musicians and music lovers have always known. The market will enjoy both critically acclaimed and discredited artists, which raises questions about the role and value of criticality. This should be obvious when we consider artists like Damien Hirst and Takashi Murakami, whose work is easily dismissed for occupying a completely excessive and decadent world apart from the majority of artists. Nevertheless, criticality is positioned as art's redemption from the debased market and popular spectacles of our time as if there were no other alternatives. What the position of criticality tends to neglect is that the experience of art, in both its creation and its reception, is not necessarily born of a direct relation between art and discourse. If anything, it is a confused relationship where sensations and intellections are embroiled. Yet critical discourse seems capable of accounting for the human experience of art, strictly as signifiers for socially and materially composed meanings. Here art enters into tension with the varieties of Marxism and other forms of materialism that define the terrain of criticality in art and connect us to the first danger described above.

As the poet Charles Bernstein observed during *Speakeasy*, one does not simply sense or feel art, one reads it. What one reads, of course, are the material conditions that inform the work, from the architecture of art galleries, the codes of behavior inside of them, the significations of artworks' components, to the language that attempts to understand them. This kind of reading, while very

important, runs the risk of implying that art is a system of codes used to generate messages. Whether artists are aware of the codes or not, those engaged in criticality are in a position of power to crack the codes based on the material "facts." As an artist, I find this incredibly disempowering. If my intuition in the studio is merely the result of mappable, material trajectories and codes then I am always obliged to illustrate them or otherwise appear ignorant. What if our experience of art is not entirely composed of these codes? What if the viewer of a work of art is capable of his or her own modulations of sense? I would argue that the standard materialist maps are useful for describing a context, but reach their limit with individual subjective experiences.<sup>4</sup> I agree with Rancière when he says that we don't so much create theories about art but rather *create our own poems*.

Which brings us to the third danger, where discursive emphasis tends toward the neglect of experience.<sup>5</sup> Critical models for art are limited to the scope of experience they engender; it is precisely the discursive mode that is skeptical of experience. In a way this is correct. Skepticism about the experience of art developed in response to the instrumentalization of the pure sensorial and transcendent experience of art, an experience that continues to be associated with the darkest problems of modernism. Today, the dogma of critical art endlessly constitutes the pure experience of art as a straw man for critical models to tear down, while criticality is posited as the virtue that all artists must strive for. Here we remember the second danger, for if artists are either legitimated

by the market or by criticality, how can experience be presented as a legitimate mode?

Giorgio Agamben has suggested that experience is no longer something we are capable of, that we can no longer locate our authority in experience. The destruction of experience, according to Agamben, was concomitant with the birth of modern science where the difference between experience and knowledge was recast as a single subject, the Cartesian cogito: *I think therefore I am*.<sup>6</sup> According to Agamben, our experience has been expropriated from us in a movement towards knowledge. If this is true, then the question is whether or not new forms of experience will be available to us in the future? Agamben imagines that our future experience will be found in language itself; and the experience of art, I believe, will be no exception, though it will not be in the language of criticality we are at this point too accustomed to. Instead it will be in a rich opening up of language, where artists and viewers alike are capable of their own thoughts and feelings, their own ability to subjectively maneuver with works of art, taking advantage and playing with the oscillation between sensation and intellection. It is not a matter of taking sides, of opposing the sensual against the intellectual, or vice versa. Rather, it is a matter of simultaneously enjoining the two and drawing them taut. If language is a foundation for art, it is not because we can refer the experience of art to words; it is because art expands language to be other than words and meanings. While language is capable of opening art to our understanding, art opens language to our experience and puts language in a new place.

It seems to me that exploring this new place for language is the root of the *Speakeasy* series and more broadly defines the historical relation between Artspeak and the poets and academics interested in the visual arts. Yet this way of understanding the relation between art and language is difficult and when it errs, tends toward keeping art subservient to certain forms of language, in this case the tropes of criticality. Artists are obliged to propound the unique possibilities of art that do not have discursive equivalents. Artists are able to dedicate themselves to the exploration of perceptual, intellectual, and spiritual mysteries, not to resolve them alongside critical agendas, but to make their great difficulty available for the experience of reality.

Whether this comes through the opening up of language, or through other aspects of being, artists have the vocation to risk their intelligibility on the chance that there is value in art that may never be measured.

## Notes

1 *Speakeasy*, a semi-annual series of talks and presentations, interrogates Artspeak's mandate to encourage dialogue between visual art and writing. The 2010 six-part series took place at Artspeak from January 9 to April 17.

2 Available online at <http://www.documenta12.de/archiv/d11/data/english/platform1/index.html>

3 Available online at <http://www.ahva.ubc.ca/>

4 Undoubtedly, there are materialist thinkers who would feel similarly, such as Walter Benjamin.

5 Of course, there are strains of materialism and other thought that theorize, value, and mourn the "loss of experience." My point, however, is that when it comes to art, experience is something that can be considered on terms separate from theoretical analysis.

6 Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2007).

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