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Towards a criticism of generic art

Peter Osborne in conversation with Christoph Haffter

Anywhere or not at all.¹ Under this title, the philosopher Peter Osborne published a set of ideas on contemporary art that spurred an immediate debate in the international art scene. For Osborne attempts to answer a dangerously innocent question: What is art? The answer to this question would be an ontology of art. However, Osborne is aware of what happened to art in the last hundred years: that it has become self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident any more. The question therefore has to be understood as one that asks for a historical ontology: What has art become? Osborne's answer can be reduced to the strikingly short statement: contemporary art is post-conceptual art. This definition is far from applying to all objects or practices which pretend to be art today; it is a critical definition, a formulation of the historical, but nevertheless necessary condition which, according to Osborne, a work has to comply with if it is to be regarded as a work of art today. We wanted to know how Osborne conceives the task of the art critic in this specific contemporary situation, and that led to the following discussion.

Peter Osborne (PO): I have a conception of criticism that is in various ways an extension of an early Romantic conception of art critique. Criticism is a completion of the work of art. So criticism is internal to the work itself, it completes the structure of reflection inherent to the work. It renders discursive, intelligible the work's own logic of production and places it into various public spaces of discourse, be they artistic or even political ones. In this way, criticism is trying to represent the truth of the work, but this truth is always historical: the critic attempts to discover the truth of the work in the moment of its criticism. So there are two sides to the critique: one is the idea of publicity and completion, the other is the question of the historical present. I follow here the tradition of Walter Benjamin within which the art critic attempts renew the after-life of the work of art. This means that criticism is, in a way, changing the work itself in the course of its history.

Christoph Haffter (CH): *In your book **Anywhere or not at all**, you wrote that “intellectually serious criticism of contemporary art remains in the grip of a constantly renewed, self-declared crisis”. What are the reasons for that crisis of criticism?*

PO: This has primarily to do with the institution of criticism in contemporary art. Today's criticism is squeezed between market-based journalism and academicisation, there is the discourse of the market and the discourse of the universities. Most of the art journal writers are either elaborating the press release or quoting the artist. This has

led to a depressing revival of the Romantic vision of art: the individualist vision of the artist whose discourse becomes the voice of the work, the artist as an authority. And on the other side, serious criticism in the public sphere regresses into the academy where writers now try to make a living. This was the fate of the second and third generation of the art review *October*: whereas the first generation of writers were still outsiders in the university – people like Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh didn't start in the academy – their students have never been anywhere else. So they don't really write criticism any more, instead they invented a new discipline inside the academy which is called “history of contemporary art”.

CH: *Isn't there, more fundamentally, a conceptual problem? It seems to me that there is no substantial conception of art history any more that would orientate criticism. At least in contemporary music, it is not easy to get a clear picture of what has been happening for the last forty years ...*

PO: I agree, and part of the point of my book was to pose the notion of “the contemporary” in its historical meaning. So that the notion of “contemporary art” rather than being an anti-historical concept, as it is normally understood to be, becomes a historical one.

CH: *You suggest understanding contemporary art as “post-conceptual”. This means that the intervention of conceptual art in the 1960s is the historical rupture, the breaking point where what we call “contemporary” begins: No*

contemporary work of art can ignore the questions which were posed by Conceptual Art. At the same time, you underline that conceptualism was not only a success but also as a failure.

PO: My overarching idea is that the last 200 years of Western intellectual discourse about art has taken place within a Kantian framework and its opposition of concept and aesthetic. Art has been associated with aesthetic, sensual experience and opposed to concepts, conceptual thinking. I was trying to look back to early Romantic theory from the standpoint of conceptual art, to create a new lineage, which I call 'ontology of art' and which is opposed to Kantian aesthetics. Whereas aesthetics reduces art to sensual experience and perception (to feeling), the ontology of art calls into question *what art is*, what it means for something to be an artwork; and this question naturally involves concepts and discourses. Since those discussions and concepts – like art practices themselves – transform over time, the ontology of art is always a historical one, it is related to the historical meaning of art.

The historical movement of conceptual art is the paradoxical breaking point of this line of thought: conceptual art asserted the anti-aesthetic claim, it attempted to absolutise the non-aesthetic character of art. That attempt failed and the failure of absolutising the anti-aesthetic leads to the view that all modern art is involved in a dialectic of the aesthetic and the conceptual. Thus, the critic has always to question the relationship between these components of the work of art, the work's strategic use of the conceptual and the aesthetic to position itself in the history of these traditions.

CH: Where would you see the place of music in this history?

PO: Music is paradoxical, because in some sense the aesthetic tradition wants to posit music as the most aesthetic of all arts, because of its purely temporal nature. But on the other hand, one could claim that music is the most conceptual of all arts...

CH: Because of its systematic character?

PO: Yes, and because of its relationship to language. This is where Adorno becomes essential to that debate. I had a strange experience in relation to music recently: I went to a conference in Stuttgart² and I had assumed that New Music had been constituted by its own problematicity, since the late fifties and Adorno's *Aging of the New Music* essay. But what I found there was a very insular and self-assigned tradition of New Music. They have traditionalised their initial historical moment into convention: you encounter people who have only composed for the electric toothbrush for twenty years. It seems that the tradition of New Music has become critically insular. But other people tell me that this is just a kind of strange Stuttgart thing.

CH: In fact, the artists and thinkers associated with the theme of this conference – Diesseitigkeit, Neuer Konzeptualismus, New Discipline – are quite close to you, stressing

Kritiken von einst – critiques d'antan

George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950)

Corno di Bassetto on London Music

Erstdruck in: *The World*, London, 28. Februar 1890.

Sozialist, Satiriker, Dichter, Tierrechtler – dem viktorianischen London war G. B. Shaw ein unliebsamer Zeitgenosse; soll er doch Musikkritiken schreiben, dachte sich ein wohlgesinnter Zeitungsredakteur, dann bringt er sich, und mich, wenigstens nicht in Schwierigkeiten. Unter dem Pseudonym Corno di Bassetto publizierte Shaw so wöchentlich Kommentare, in denen es, auch, um Musik ging ...

Zu meinem Glück war ich am Montag im Volkstümlichen Konzert, so dass ich Joachim hörte. Ich muss jedoch vorweg klarstellen, dass ich Joachim nie für einen Orpheus gehalten habe. Wie alle Mendelssohn-Schüler hat er mit einem Allegro selten etwas Besseres anzufangen gewusst, als den Versuch einer Sinndeutung durch fingerfertige Behändigkeit zu ersetzen. Jetzt, da er sich dem sechzigsten Lebensjahr nähert, beginnt die Geschwindigkeit auf Kosten der Klangqualität und Tongenauigkeit zu gehen, und das Ergebnis ist, milde ausgedrückt, häufig befremdlich. Am Dienstag spielte er beispielsweise im Konzert des Bach-Chors in St. James' Hall die Sonate in C-Dur von Bach. Der zweite Satz des Werkes ist eine Fuge von etwa drei- bis vierhundert Takten. Nun kann man natürlich eine durchgehend dreistimmige Fuge nicht richtig auf der Violine spielen; doch vermittelt Doppelgriffen und Hinundherspringen zwischen den Stimmen lässt sich der unheimliche Geist einer Fuge beschwören, der indessen niemandes Ruhe stört, solange Bach und Joachim die Beschwörer sind. Eben das geschah am Dienstag. Joachim jagte wie toll durch die Partitur und kratzte Töne hervor, denen gegenüber der Versuch, eine Muskatnuss unter einer Stiefelsohle zu zermalmen, sich wie der Wohlklang einer Äolsharfe angehört hätte. Die Noten, die musikalisch genug waren, eine bestimmte Tonhöhe zu besitzen, waren unsauber. Es war entsetzlich – abscheulich! Wäre er ein namenloser Künstler gewesen, der das Werk eines unbekanntenen Komponisten vorgestellt hätte, so wäre er nicht lebend davongekommen. Statt dessen waren wir alle – ich selbst nicht weniger als die anderen – des Lobes und der Begeisterung voll. Wir klatschten wie besessen Beifall, und er verbeugte sich mit würdevoller Selbstverständlichkeit. Joachims glanzvolle Karriere und Bachs strahlender Ruhm hatten uns derartig hypnotisiert, dass wir widerwärtigen Lärm für Sphärenmusik zu halten geneigt waren.

In: George Bernard Shaw, *Musikfeuilletons des Corno di Bassetto* (aus dem Englischen übersetzt von Ernst Schoen und Klaus Udo Szudra), Leipzig: Reclam 1972, S. 92–93.

the importance of the Conceptual Art tradition. But they conceive it rather in opposition to the Adornian tradition, to the idea of working on musical material.

PO: That could be, paradoxically, because they want to maintain music as a medium. They seem resistant to the idea that one needs to think the category of music within the domain of a generic concept of art. Music is a historically received set of artistic materials, practices and conventions, so there can only be a historical ontology of music, but the very category of 'music' is problematized by the generic concept of art. There is a break there, I think, which they are reluctant to accept.

CH: *How would you relate this generic concept of art to the question of the critic? In practice there is still a institutionally fixed distinction between music criticism, film criticism, art criticism and so on, which differ in style, in vocabulary, and of course – even if the ideal critic should not have a pre-established set of criteria – they have different ideals of what an artwork should be like. Wouldn't your concept of art suggest that there are no such differences any more, that there is only one critic of all contemporary art today?*

PO: Well, yes, it would. When Jeff Wall returned to thinking of himself as a medium-based photographer, when he disavowed his own conceptual legacy and came back to conceiving himself as a kind of neo-Friedian³ practitioner of the *métier* of photography, he wrote an article entitled "Depiction, Object, Event"⁴ in which he argued that the whole artistic field is bifurcated and that there are two fundamentally different types of practices, two types of discourse: medium-based and generic art. The continuation of the medium-based practice has critical criteria derived from the history of the medium and so there is no critical crisis in writing about photography, film or painting. He argued that, on the other hand, the generic concept of art gives you no critical criteria for the practice, with the consequence that it becomes subsumed to the market. Whereas I would argue, on contrary, that the market is a stronger force in medium-based art: if you want to sell something, you'd better have a painting or a sculpture or even a video. But if you have something that is conceptually generic, if you practice in a way that does not allow you to construct any kind of signature style, the market cannot really recognise you and cannot regulate the distribution of the objects left over by your practice. What I was doing in my book was trying work towards a criticism of generic art – and that is why it had to be philosophically based.

Osborne defends a generic concept of art. After Concept Art, a work of art cannot be regarded any more as a formal reflexion on the traditional artistic media or disciplines – painting, music, literature, theatre, photography, film, sculpture, dance, etc. Rather, a contemporary work of art is typically realised in a plurality of media, it is distributed over a series of different materialisations: the same work of art exists as a distributed unity. Thus, such a serial unity is malleable in time. This is

*a consequence of the conceptual character of art: a work of art is not defined by the aesthetic qualities of a fixed object but by conceptual operations and ideas that renegotiate – for each work – the distinction between art and non-art. On the other hand, Osborne argues that artworks are inevitably materialised in some kind of aesthetic form, there can be no purely conceptual work of art. But in order to be a post-conceptual form, the aesthetic dimension of the work must embrace the conceptual critique of the aesthetic: the aesthetic material must be used in a way that puts itself into question. This is, in short, the post-conceptual condition of contemporary art.*⁵

CH: *You suggested a number of conditions a work of art has to fulfil in order to be contemporary. One of these conditions you call the "anti-aestheticist use of aesthetic material". In the context of New Music, this sounds like the dogmatic rule of the post-Lachenmann tradition: do whatever you want, but never let them play the violin normally.*

PO: What the condition expresses cannot be turned into a dogmatic rule on the level of a particular material: as soon as you do this, the allegedly anti-aesthetic aesthetic materials become aesthetic. The model here is Duchamp: his principle for the early ready-mades was "aesthetic indifference". But of course, even this becomes an aesthetic. The principle of the anti-aestheticist use of aesthetic material has to be construed at a higher level of abstraction. For what is "aestheticist" changes at each moment of the history of a particular practice. So Duchamp's *Comb or The Fountain* end up being reappropriated aesthetically as minimalist sculptures, in discourse as in artworks, which I find quite comic. The turn in Conceptual Art was at *documenta 5* where *Art & Language* showed their *Index Project*. This work clearly reveals itself as exhibiting an aesthetics of administration – Benjamin Buchloh suggested this interpretation.⁶ The fact that the primarily anti-aesthetic Conceptual Art puts forward a specific aesthetics of administration, forced the *Art & Language* group to rethink their practice: they realised that in some way they have fallen into a trap, that they were overtaken precisely by what they were trying to escape. Post-Lachenmann music has the same problem.

CH: *You were saying that your concept of art critique goes back to early German Romanticism. Now one of the key ideas of these thinkers was that the act of criticising a work of art is itself an act of artistic creation: the art critic is a second author, he is co-creating the work he talks about. Do you want to actualise this idea: can a poem only be criticised by a poet?*

PO: Well, one could say that a poem can only be criticised by another poem, rather than by a poet ... There was a convergence of art and criticism in the Romantic movement around 1798, but I am following Adorno here, who received some of the Romantic ideas on art, but who refused this simple convergence. Or rather he accepted the convergence but still retained the ultimate negativity of the relation between criticism



A distributed unity: Joseph Kosuth, One and Three Chairs, 1965 © Joseph Kosuth



Appropriate? Sherrie Levine, Fountain (Madonna), 1991 © Sherrie Levine



Aesthetic of Administration: Art & Language, Index 01, installation view documenta 5, 1972 © Art & Language

and art. So he accepted that the question of form, the question of presentation is essential to criticism but he would not give the practice of criticism the name of art. Adorno never really gave a strong argument for this, perhaps because he would have had to evoke artistic ontology, and he was famously adverse to the word 'ontology', of course; he never conceived the possibility of 'historical ontology', that is the great lacuna in his work. I think you can maintain this distinction only by thinking of art in terms of a historical ontology, which is also a social ontology, in which institutional spaces and discourses are constitutive of the objects that circulate within them. As the critical institutions and the artistic ones are separated, you have a historical-ontological distinction between the practices.

CH: *But there are clearly tendencies since the sixties where critical discourse on art is a substantial part of the work of art...*

PO: Of course, but this still happens within something that you have already declared as a work of art: some works have components that are indistinguishable from art criticism, but you have to place criticism within the space of art. That's what the early conceptual artists did. They began to produce a critical discourse on art in order to render their work intelligible and they integrated it into their works, but there is still a separation: there is a distinction between Sol LeWitt's *Paragraphs on conceptual art* and his artwork, between Josef Kosuth's famous essay *Art as philosophy* and his artworks.

CH: *As Sol LeWitt says: "these sentences comment on art, but are not art"...*

PO: Precisely. The deeper problem is actually more recent and comes from the post-digital situation of the museum. Museums are increasingly not defined by the physicality of the objects that circulate through them, and their programs are more and more driven by educational goals, to the point that the museum looks as if it might become completely discursive. There is this new space that is called "art writing" which is blurring the boundary between critical discourse and art practice. This related to the fashion for poetry in the art space. This has been driven by the poets, whose work increasingly lacks social actuality within the more narrowly defined institutions of poetry, so poetry has revived itself by connecting itself to art space. Art writing is close to 'creative writing' (an educational genre), but often it is creative writing by people who don't know, and don't want to know, how to do it, technically. It's a space where you can be an artist by being a bad writer. That may work, or it may not...There is a bit of a crisis there, but this is not going to happen in music, or is it?

CH: *Well, there are composers who emphasise the discursive or conceptual component of their work. But the institutional framework of contemporary music normally separates composition from interpretation: so it's up to the musicians to speak, act and write on stage...*

PO: But isn't this just early Fluxus? It seems to be very orthodox, post-Cagean stuff... Only that now it is inside, instead of outside the institution.

CH: *It is certainly a kind of renewal of that moment. To return to the question of critique: when art discourse becomes part of the artwork in this way, it is normally in quite an affirmative way. Texts are explaining, rendering intelligible, defending the cause of the work of art. Isn't there a lack of negativity in this kind of critique?*

PO: Well, the notion of criticism that I am defending and which Benjamin developed was one that rejected the idea of criticism as 'evaluation'. Negative and positive evaluation are not part of the critique, critique is about the truth of the work, its historical 'truth-content'. 'Untrue' is a judgement, of course, which looks like an 'evaluation', but it is supposed to be the work itself that shows it, rather than issuing from the critical subject, in its separation from the work. And once you dialecticize the true and the false in a Hegelian manner, as Adorno does, even the false tells its own truth – a decisive truth about the falsity of the society from which it derives.

CH: *In the Romantic sense, a bad work of art cannot be criticized.*

PO: Yes, because it contains no truth. In that critical sense, it is not an artwork. Benjamin makes a strong distinction between commentary and critique: most of what we call criticism is commentary, it is giving you what Benjamin calls the material content [Sachgehalt] of the work, it is telling you about the conditions of production, the materials, about the artist and beside that it gives you a subjective judgement. But the task of criticism would be to reveal the truth content of the work: having established the material content, you have to show how the work exceeds its material content – if the work does not exceed its material, it has not become a work of art and in that sense is not criticisable. But in another sense, in the modernist tradition all critique is negative for, as Valéry said, new works kill old works. So the critique that affirms a work is always negating something else. The problem of the affirmative critique you've been talking about is that this more journalistic discourse is trying to affirm the art object in itself, in a non-relational way. It doesn't attempt to construct its case for the object in relation to other works of art, because as soon as you do that, there is negativity. But there is another sense in which criticism is negative: in the Adornian sense, the artwork itself is critical, as he says in the famous phrase that 'art criticises society just by existing'. That's a very different notion of criticism: it's about revealing the artwork's critique of society.

CH: *So there would be a strong connection between art criticism and politics... would you claim such a relationship?*

PO: Well, the theoretical problem is that in order to claim that, the historical ontology of art needs to be a critical ontology, which seems to be an odd phrase. There is a danger of circularity, because you are saying: the works that are

not expressing critique don't count as art. So your historical ontology becomes a critically self-fulfilling idea. You have to legitimate that concept of art philosophically, independently of the fact that an individual work can be read as a social critique. The general critical consensus since the 1980s has been that this is not possible, so the attempt to continue this Adornian tradition in my book is self-consciously anachronistic: keep going, try to be post-Adornian, because otherwise Jeff Wall is right and there is no criterion of art outside of the medium. This means that, as a critic, you often you have to interpret works against the grain of their producers.

CH: *Where do you see the potential for such a criticism today?*

PO: If you think of the key moments of art criticism – in the 1860s, 1920s, 1960s – in each of these instances where you have strong critical discourses, the institutional spaces that supported them were connected to new social and political movements, and they were connected to new forms of independent production: independent cinema, independent art spaces, new anti-institutional institutions that are connected to larger social projects. Think of how much came out of Black Mountain College from the early 50s to the 60s, and how much that rested upon the history of the Bauhaus. We need things like that, we need a new Black Mountain! But single individuals cannot create that, they depend on social movements, and also historically, paradoxically and ironically, on a splattering of very rich individuals that support them. There is a fundamental contradiction there. Today there is crowd-funding, so maybe there are possibilities that way... But anyway, new ideas won't come from academia. Today the university is dying as a place of intellectual production.

CH: *But you are still trying, aren't you?*

PO: I'm trying to produce students who won't just come back to the university! Who will see it for what it is: one of a multiplicity of cultural sites for intellectual work, with its own specific possibilities and limitations, which depends upon other sites for its fundamental productivity.

1 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or not at all*, London & New York, Verso Books 2013.

2 *WIRKLICHKEITEN Kongress Musik Interventionen*, 19 to 21 May 2016, Staatliche Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst Stuttgart, see the program: https://www.hmdk-stuttgart.de/fileadmin/downloads/Wirklichkeiten/Wirklichkeiten_Programm_Flyer_web.pdf. Peter Osborne's intervention has been published: Peter Osborne, "Die Idee der Konzeptkunst (und Musik)" in *MusikTexte: Zeitschrift für neue Musik* 151 (November 2016), pp. 44–50.

3 See Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Yale University Press, London & New Haven 2008, and *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago University Press, Chicago & London 1998.

4 Jeff Wall, "Depiction, Object, Event", in *Afterall*, Vol. 16 (Autumn/Winter 2007).

5 See Osborne, *Anywhere or not at all*, p. 48.

6 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions", in *October*, Vol. 55 (Winter, 1990), pp. 105–143.
