Defining Criticality as an Historical Object of the 1970s and 1980s

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That we have no definition or historical account of the term "criticality" is ironic, given the self-conscious skepticism that the term has roughly come to connote within contemporary art discourse. Since its invention nearly half a century ago, criticality has become, especially during the last quarter century, the dominant means of measuring aesthetic value and, moreover, even an absolute good, with an inherent morality implied. Its dual significance makes the need to examine criticality, including its aesthetics and ethics, all the more fundamental and our failure to have done so yet in equal parts surprising and intriguing. This essay tells the story of criticality's rise to prominence within contemporary art, tracing its etymology and focusing on the social, political and economic conditions and circumstances that were paradoxically favorable to this development—paradoxically, because these were in all cases formidable contradictions and crises overcome. What is to be gained, this study ultimately asks, from defining criticality as an historical object of the 1970s and 1980s? Not only is criticality not forsaken in this inquiry and on the contrary empowered, exponentially, as it were, into a heightened criticality of criticality, but the period that produced this value and good becomes a bit more coherent and less divided.

Invention circa 1970

Criticality was a concept whose invention facilitated an ideological shift within art criticism from the Greenbergian modernism, which had been codified at the start of the 1960s, to a position that took account of the revolutionary social and political movements of that decade. Clement Greenberg's account of modernism's essence in "Modernist Painting," which was first published in 1960,
nevertheless remained sufficiently authoritative into the late 1960s and early
1970s, so that even the next generation's ultimately most influential alternative
was couched in its terms. The origins of "criticality" can be found in Greenberg's
identification of modernism as the "self-critical tendency that began with the
philosopher Kant":

The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods
of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself — not in order to subvert it, but to
entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. Kant used logic to establish the
limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was
left in all the more secure possession of what remained to it.

Greenberg in Harrison and Wood 2003: 774; italics mine

The notion of criticality would inherit and later display the rigor, gravity and
oftentimes the rhetorical style of philosophical inquiry, however, precisely for the
sake of subversion within the larger world. In lieu of autonomy then, or self-
circumscribed entrenchment within the "self-critical," criticality would by
contrast call upon critics and artists to partake in militant engagement, in the
trenches, with the parallel task of revising the history of modernism, including
the traditions of the avant-garde, falling to art historians and inspiring what
would soon come to be called the New Art History.

While the origins of criticality can be traced to Greenbergian modernism,
Greenberg himself never employed the term "criticality." Indeed, although
Greenberg isolated and celebrated self-criticism as modernism's imperative, he
did not elevate this cognitive activity into a universal criterion of aesthetic value,
insisting instead upon medium-specific criteria, wherein each artwork, as in the
quotation above, would be evaluated according to its ability to define and refine
the properties unique to its medium. Self-definition or self-criticism was thus
only ever a means to the ends of purity and quality for Greenberg, these ends
being the critic's supreme aesthetic values.

In contrast, criticality would become, across media, an end in and of itself,
following especially Minimalism's collapse of the concept of the medium—
beyond repair—during the late 1960s. Notwithstanding the fact that Minimalism
has been considered among the least critical of postwar artistic movements, in at
least three respects, Minimalism anticipated and accelerated the emergence of
criticality. This stylistic movement was a motley, grassroots rebellion of artists
internal to Greenbergian modernism, in which the leading artists penned their
own art criticism. That these artists' criticism rivalled the writing of professional
art critics in its precision and power would eventually threaten the specialized role of art critics—although this incipient, art-world social conflict would only come to the fore in the later 1980s. Minimalism would thus constitute an important precedent for criticality, insofar as it made artists at least potentially responsible for art criticism, and also, as it allowed for the possibility of new artistic media, such as Donald Judd’s “specific objects,” with their own aesthetic criteria, including, for Judd, “power” and “interest” (Judd in Harrison and Wood 2003: 824–28). Additionally, although perhaps even more subliminally, within Minimalism latently bubbled the desire for social and political change that would consequently intensify and solidify into what would become one of the principal properties of criticality. Robert Morris, who was Minimalism’s other main leader, described his work thus:

Such work which has the feel and look of openness, extendibility, accessibility, publicness, repeatability, equanimity, directness, immediacy, and has been formed by clear decision rather than groping craft would seem to have a few social implications, none of which are negative. Such work would undoubtedly be boring to those who long for access to an exclusive specialness, the experience of which reassures their superior perception.


If Minimalism reproduced the militaristic rhetoric of power that gripped American society during the escalation of the Vietnam War, as Anna Chave has convincingly argued, Morris’ description nevertheless suggests the desire to create a place, a space for popular, even populist dissent against official dictates (Chave 1990). By the late 1960s, especially after the advent of Pop, Greenbergian modernism, including the critics and artists who subscribed to it, appeared as out of touch as the Johnson and Nixon administrations with the population that it should have been serving and similarly besieged. There was thus a parallel, however barely articulated, between the revolutionary movements internal to the art world and transforming American society in general. While undoubtedly conflicted, Minimalism contained subtle signs that the American avant-garde was finally seeking to regain the social and political role that it had relinquished—in no small part under Greenberg’s influence—during the 1940s and 1950s, but, notably, in a manner that preserved some fundamental qualities of Greenbergian modernism. While criticality’s proponents would conceive of it as inherently and completely oppositional, criticality would develop within the art-critical establishment and serve to preserve its ideology.
It was neither Greenberg, as one might imagine, intuitively, nor, counterintuitively, the Minimalists, but rather Donald Kuspit who seems to have been the first to invoke the term criticality in the context of art. In an essay on Kandinsky, titled "Utopian Protest in Early Abstract Art" and published in 1970, Kuspit writes of Kandinsky’s "concern with criticality—which a recognition of the critical character of objectivity which brings to mind again his shock at the splitting of the atom" (Kuspit 1970: 435). The anecdotal reference to the new, nuclear physics betrays the term's aberratve use and yet also attempts to justify, empirically, if only associatively, the collapse of science, philosophy and their twin notions of objectivity in order to reinterpret Kandinsky's project: "In fact, a case can be made for locating Kandinsky in the Kantian tradition of critical philosophy. Kandinsky in effect introduces the Copernican Revolution into painting, i.e., the insistence that the object conform to the subject, rather than vice versa, as was traditionally the case" (Kuspit 1970: 435). Kuspit's immediate objective was to revise Greenbergian modernism on its own Kantian grounds. More profoundly, Kuspit sought to reenergize, with some significant alterations, Meyer Schapiro's fundamental, innovative idea that abstract art, such as that of Kandinsky, was not only not autonomous but intimately related to its historical context and period, in which it participated actively, whether it sought refuge from the dominant culture, revolution or reform. Schapiro had introduced this influential, counterintuitive idea in the essay, "Nature of Abstract Art," which was published in the first issue of *Marxist Quarterly* in 1937 (Schapiro 1937). Its implications would soon be independently confirmed in the incomparably more broadly diffused and influential manifesto, "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," jointly written and signed by André Breton, Diego Rivera and Leon Trotsky in 1938. Kuspit's critique of Greenbergian modernism would essentially repeat Schapiro's landmark challenge to Alfred Barr's formalism. From "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in which Greenberg had relied upon Schapiro's rescue of abstract art from ivory-tower isolationism, if only to reaffirm the avant-garde's specialness, Greenberg had gradually converted to a position akin to that of Barr in "Modernist Painting." Schapiro's essay thus had renewed relevance.

As Serge Guilbaut has persuasively argued, without necessarily intending it, Schapiro's idea rendered abstract art a distinct possibility for leftist artists, who had previously been compelled to choose between either aesthetic experimentation or political commitment, these two directions being mutually exclusive, according to both formalists and Communists during the 1930s (Guilbaut 1983: 25). Emboldened also by Breton, Rivera and Trotsky's
proclamation that "true art is unable not to be revolutionary" (Breton, Rivera, and Trotsky in Harrison and Wood 2003: 533), leftist artists, such as Jackson Pollock, were thus licensed to pursue abstraction in good faith; they could believe that their solitary, ostensibly purely subjective struggles would nonetheless play a crucial historical role, even socially and politically—and yet, all the while, steer conveniently clear of any compromising political activities during the McCarthy era. The notion that if this abstract art were subversive, this could only have been unintentionally so, was further reinforced by the contemporary belief in the surrealist unconscious.

As if in anticipation then, Schapiro's conception of abstract art would, for all practical purposes, arguably offer Abstract Expressionism, the first American avant-garde, an alibi, as much as a release from the vice of either aesthetics or politics. Or, if not an alibi, then an exemption, as Greenberg would soon afterwards articulate in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in view of the avant-garde's surrogate duty "to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence" (Greenberg 1961: 5). As the American art world, however, along with the society at large, was being repoliticized during the late 1960s and early 1970s, this surrogate duty came to seem detached and insufficient, instead of noble, important and even heroic, and, accordingly, the undercurrent alibi, which had been so liberating for artists in the immediate postwar period, less credible and even problematic. And yet, the alibi would remain desirable and necessary, if art were not to be reduced to politics, and would, for that reason, not be rejected but only reconfigured as criticality.

It was on the basis of Schapiro's "Nature of Abstract Art" that Kuspit proposed the "utopian protest" of his own article's title to be the core of abstract art. Kuspit defined this utopian protest as an "objection not to social and political particulars but to general conditions of existence and the values which sustain them," arguing that this was "one of the major motivating forces behind Kandinsky's early production" (Kuspit 1970: 430, italics mine). Kuspit's argument differed significantly from his proof. While his conception of utopian protest privileged the general over the particular, and, in this respect, corresponded closely to Schapiro's appreciation of abstract art's oftentimes only scarcely perceptible historical embeddedness, Kuspit nevertheless focused on direct and specific connections between Kandinsky and his time, presenting a more extroverted, deliberate and rational Kandinsky than the rather hermetic one that Schapiro had suggested. Whereas Schapiro's Kandinsky had turned within, reflexively, as part of his spiritual protest against materialism, science and socialism, Kuspit's Kandinsky faced the
world head on, including through progressive social activism, even if this was only moral, intellectual and distanced—hence Kuspit's emphasis on Kandinsky's Kantian objectivity. Like Schapiro, Kuspit celebrated Kandinsky's anti-totalitarian and humanistic "spontaneity," but Kuspit located that spontaneity in not only Kandinsky's art but in both the student revolutions in Russian and western universities that Kandinsky had witnessed—but whose "politics," in Kandinsky's words, which Kuspit cited, "did not 'ensnare' him"—and in what Kuspit argued was Kandinsky's substitute, political and "abstract" activity of studying the law, against whose rigidity Kandinsky valorized the spontaneity of Russian peasant law (Kuspit 1970: 431, italics mine). Kuspit's Kandinsky may well have been a fellow traveler of the Free Speech movement in the 1960s; he would not have been a leader of the Art Workers' Coalition, although these artists for the most part likewise separated their political activities categorically from their artistic practices. Curiously, neither Schapiro nor Kuspit invoked Kandinsky's leadership roles in the art worlds of post-Revolutionary Russia or pre-Nazi Germany, although the artist's ideological opposition to totalitarianism was implied by Schapiro and repeatedly mentioned, however obliquely, by Kuspit. Kuspit pursued his interest in politics strikingly hesitantly, seeking to correlate rather than connect the political and the aesthetic and thus maintain what remained an essential distinction.

Although Kuspit took interest in Kandinsky's politics, his overall argument and definition of utopian protest required only very general evidence of Kandinsky's dissatisfaction with the status quo. Kuspit quite ingeniously derived his concept of utopian protest from Engels' critique of utopian socialists as naïve and ineffective; these were utopians, in Engels' words, who "do not claim to emancipate a particular class to begin with, but all humanity at once" (quoted in Kuspit 1970: 430). What was a fault for Engels was paradoxically a plus for Kuspit, who, under the influence of the Frankfurt School, was seeking to reintroduce Marxist theory into the study of art history. Following Engels' critique, artists partaking in utopian protest could not be reasonably evaluated in terms of their objectives or their results, the expectation in advance being that these were merely foolish fantasies. When criticality came into use to approximately designate what Kuspit had defined as utopian protest, this indeterminacy made for a low burden of proof. This low burden of proof would eventually become a prime advantage of criticality. If protest could be utopian, and thus not issue-, class- or movement-specific, then it could not be assessed in any precise terms either. It would consequently be quite easy to claim criticality and rather more difficult to discount or disprove any positive claims, with all argument, perforce, taking place on a rhetorical plane of generalities.
Utopian protest was arguably an oxymoronic concept, which increased the burden of intellectual and moral responsibility on the artist. Naming the members of Greenberg’s current stable of artists, including Morris Louis, Helen Frankenthaler and Kenneth Noland, Kuspit concluded that “Today’s abstractionists have lost the core of abstract art” (Kuspit 1970: 436). Although the term criticality would only come into use later, Kuspit’s critique of these artists was their lack of utopian protest or criticality. They myopically focused on the aesthetic at the expense of what was “critical,” with all of that word’s denotations serving as connotations; the critical was very serious and significant, related to aesthetic judgment, demanded taking a firm position, was necessarily personal and subjective and yet strove for objectivity through precise and rigorous consideration of the kind associated with science, mathematics and philosophy. Kuspit’s rhetorical emphasis on the utopian at once elevated and evaded the question of politics, which the notion of protest seemed to foreground.

By 1970, Kuspit had already earned a doctorate in philosophy, having studied under the supervision of Theodor Adorno at Frankfurt University, and was then pursuing a second doctorate in art history, from which he would afterwards turn to art criticism, bringing his knowledge of philosophy with him.\(^1\) Kuspit’s internal challenge to Greenbergian modernism can be compared to that of the Minimalists, who likewise emphasized the physical, embodied nature of vision, theorized the relationship between objects and subjects, activated intersubjective space and insisted upon art criticism as well as the relevance of philosophy. Both operated in Greenberg’s terms but problematized autonomy. Kuspit arrived on the scene shortly after the Minimalists and with, moreover, a background in critical theory. He could thus more easily articulate the period’s increasing desire and need to politicize, and yet this remained difficult. Tellingly, Kuspit ultimately retained Schapiro’s alibi in “Utopian Protest in Early Abstract Art.” The notion of the utopian negated the promise of physical or concrete protest through abstraction.

Entrenchment and retrenchment circa 1984

Not only does Kuspit deserve to be credited as criticality’s inventor but also its popularizer, as he would employ the term increasingly frequently, emphatically and influentially in his widely-published art criticism throughout the 1970s and early 1980s—until the term itself, true to its origins in nuclear physics, passed a certain threshold, after which it changed qualitatively and acquired its own
momentum. Criticality's proponents were soon left battling over this precious object, which, among art critics anxious about their own role within the booming art market, signified an alternative value and good, one that was antithetical to contemporary art's increasing market value as a luxury good.

Such a lucrative economic situation would have been unthinkable from the perspective of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," which Greenberg concluded with an assertion that may have seemed axiomatic in the late 1930s: "Capitalism in decline finds that whatever of quality it is still capable of producing becomes almost invariably a threat to its own existence" (Greenberg 1961: 21). The avant-garde's pursuit of quality doubled, in Greenberg's view, as anti-capitalist subterfuge. During the Great Depression, contemporary art could take moral if not material comfort in its lack of saleability. This lack only further evidenced its social and political independence and incorruptibility and thus its quintessentially avant-garde character—even as many artists found employment within the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project. As the New Deal expired, however, and the postwar economic boom finally expanded to include the contemporary American art market in the mid to late 1950s, it became increasingly difficult to ensure the avant-garde character of contemporary art in this manner. That would be true again, as this pattern of recession and boom was repeated, albeit on a smaller scale, from the 1970s to the 1980s. Anti-capitalism had cushioned, as in Greenberg's essay, the depoliticization of the American avant-garde during the 1940s and 1950s and would be reactivated as this process was reversed during the 1960s and 1970s. If the origins of criticality, as in this essay, can be located in Greenberg's emphasis upon the "self-critical," the origins of these origins were in a political commitment displaced onto an anti-capitalism, which had diametrically opposed the quality of the avant-garde with the quantity of kitsch and conflated capitalism with fascism through the prism of kitsch. This initial political and economic ideological source of criticality would resurface as politics took a distinctly conservative turn at the same time that the contemporary art market exploded in the 1980s. With ever more urgency arose the question, which was rhetorical for some, while loaded for others: could avant-garde art participate in the art market?

One extreme and exceptional but indicative point can be identified in the late 1980s when the term criticality could be self-consciously used to valorize almost any kind of art: from the abstract painting of Brice Marden and Gerhard Richter to the political satire of Robert Arneson and street art of Liz-N-Val, including also the neoconceptualism of David Robbins and Wallace and Donahue, and
even Robert Smithson, whose work and influence was so vast and various that it
could not be categorized. In 1987, in his essay, “Seven Types of Criticality,” Dan
Cameron alluded to William Empson’s “Seven Types of Ambiguity” in order to
problematize the ambiguity of the term criticality and yet demonstrate its
complexity and applicability to all of these artists. Most strikingly, Cameron
defined critical art by contrasting it with protest art:

If a work of art is critical, then it supplements its aesthetic function with a social
presence or awareness that connotes a dissatisfaction with ‘the way things are.’
This formula differentiates critical art from, say, protest art, which draws
historical significance from the play of contemporary events. Protest art
manifests its belief that events may change, but the factors underlying these
events are allowed to perpetuate themselves, hence the role of protest art as a
model for heightened sociohistorical consciousness. Critical art, on the other
hand, recognizes so-called permanent cultural factors only insofar as they make
themselves evident in the perennial issues that mark the periodic formal
upheavals within the art community. To remark on an artwork’s criticality is thus
a recognition of its status as a cultural emblem, treating real-world matters
allegorically (if at all).

Cameron 1987: 14

Despite the fact that criticality had become current in art-critical discourse, and
furthermore even de rigueur and comprehensive by this point in the late 1980s,
it still retained the same function as in Kuspit’s obscure first use in “Utopian
Protest in Early Abstract Art.” The difference was that Cameron acknowledged
the alibi of criticality as a conceit. But Cameron’s admission of the relativity and
utility of criticality at once was unique and borne of a short-lived moment in
which criticality was, on the one hand, being critiqued by artists and, on the other,
caught between rival critical camps. At that moment, between 1986 and 1987,
when some artists were rebelling against the notion of criticality, Cameron could
observe that even Neo-Expressionism possessed criticality: “For an American
audience used to debating the fine points of Robert Kushner vs. Jennifer Barlett,
having the doors knocked open by Anselm Kiefer or Enzo Cucchi was a cleansing
moment of self-deprecation, hence the very essence of criticality in action”
(Cameron 1987: 15).

The key critical debate of the decade had been whether or not
Neo-Expressionism possessed criticality. Even the subsequently dominant
artistic movement of Pictures would be theorized in relation to it. The case for
the criticality of Neo-Expressionism, whose most prominent advocate was
Kuspit, became less credible, as the Pictures movement, which came to be known after an exhibition of the same name organized in 1977 by Helene Winer and Douglas Crimp at Artists Space in New York, gained traction. Between these competing movements, the mutually reinforcing differences were demographic, epistemological, formal and ideological. Whereas the Neo-Expressionists were mostly men, who believed in the primacy of the creative individual and subjective experience, worked in the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture, and seemed to pander to the art market, the Pictures artists had internalized the feminist critique and structuralism, preferred the less saleable mediums of photography, film and video, and appropriated already existing imagery from mass culture as if it were a coherent meta-language, whose system of signs could be deciphered and even destabilized. So neatly were these differences aligned that they appeared to be systematic and ultimately served as proof of these movements’ diametrically opposed cultural politics.

Despite the contemporaneity of these movements, to its supporters, the Pictures movement seemed an historical epoch apart and ahead of Neo-Expressionism. Throughout the debate over its criticality, Neo-Expressionism remained an international stylistic movement, but the Pictures movement, including artists such as those featured in the landmark exhibition of 1977, namely, Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo and Philip Smith, soon inspired an intellectual movement, whose leaders constructed a sophisticated theory of postmodernism. It relied upon what is called critical theory today: a combination of postwar French theory, including structuralism and poststructuralism, as well as Frankfurt School philosophy. The cause of postmodernism advanced the critique of Greenbergian modernism even as its theoretical bent ensured that the relationship between art and politics would remain abstract.

It was during the later 1980s, when the debate on the criticality of Neo-Expressionism was finally decided, that Kuspit would arguably be forced to forfeit the term of his invention to the camp that had prevailed. That within this debate Kuspit had been insisting upon the importance of traditional artistic creativity, subjectivity and intentionality in principle opposed Kuspit to the emerging poststructuralists. Simultaneously, however, Kuspit had more generally displaced his notion of criticality from the sphere of art to art criticism and thus was analogously, one could argue, transferring the meaning of the artwork from the author or artist, now dead, to the reader, or the critic, who was becoming not only the judge of criticality in art but also, to a certain extent, its guarantor and bearer.
In the name of criticality, art criticism, it would seem, was becoming more important than art itself. In the preface to Kuspit's collection of art-critical writings, published in 1984 and titled *The Critic is Artist: The Intentionality of Art*, the implausibly overblown proportions that criticality had acquired were without compunctions laid bare; criticality was no longer a property of certain praiseworthy art, but criticism in itself a superior form of art. After epigraphs quoting Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde on the greatness of the critic, Kuspit began:

It used to be that one could think of 'the critic as artist,' if not as an actual artist. Now it is inevitable that one acknowledge, however reluctantly—for both critic and artist—that 'the critic is artist,' in the fullest sense that the eroding idea of 'artist' retains. All the weight of meaning in the formula of their relationship is now on the critic rather than the artist. The balance has tilted to the critic, although there may be no critic to take the opportunity it affords. It is harder to know what it is to be a critic, and to be one, than to know what it is to be an artist and to be one. The majority of artists tend towards one-dimensionality—towards a set of operations which close down the concept of art they articulate in a style. The critic separates the stylistic operations from the concept to recover the question the concept represents, the painfully uncertain meaning and use of art that the concept embodies. The critic does not accept the anodyne of style as the destiny of art, and he refuses to endorse the established modes of discourse that aim to institutionalize a dominant system of style. Unlike the artist, he does not look for a place in the sun of the existing order of art. Unlike the artist, he does not totally identify with art. He identifies also with the dialectic of ideas from which art emerges and to which it returns. Today, the meaning of criticality has become more uncertain than the meaning of artistry; but this is perhaps the discovery of what has always been the case, which is why criticism and self-criticism have been thought of as the core of art in modern times, its risky means of advance.

Kuspit 1984: xi–xii

What such a boast obscured and arguably opposed was the extreme insecurity of art criticism at that moment for both external and internal reasons. It was a field under siege and divided. In 1984, the National Endowment for the Arts suspended its fellowship program for art critics, citing a report that it had commissioned from the art critic John Beardsley, which pointed to "specific ideological biases" within the field and expressed doubt that the grants positively affected the quality of individual art critics' work or of art criticism in general (quoted in Glueck 1984). Created in 1972, the program had already been once
discontinued and reinstated, in 1981 and 1984, respectively, then President Reagan having sought to curtail if not cut funding for the arts entirely. The decision to suspend the program in 1984 was immediately and widely viewed on the left as a coordinated political act designed to suppress criticism of the government. All three writers, including Kusmit, who expressed their outrage in the "Forum" published in Artforum, mentioned the conservative art critic Hilton Kramer, who in various publications, including notably in The New Criterion, had been arguing against the politicization of art and the lowering of standards of aesthetic quality. These critiques were arguably criticality’s concerns, and doubly so; criticality took account of politics, regarding it as important and even essential, and yet not without considerable unease, as it was equally interested in aesthetic issues. The stakes could not have been higher, or the tone of this collective self-defense more distressed; Kusmit went so far as to cite Joseph Goebbels in his response, published in Artforum, Goebbels having issued a “Decree Concerning Art Criticism” (Kozloff, Larson and Kusmit 1984: 78). For critics on the left, it was not only a question of funding or even moral support but a deeply cherished culture of criticism that was under attack.

Against Kramer, there was solidarity on the left, which might have outlasted this attack, had its factions not been so similar and thus competitive. Two rival camps developed: one associated with the journal October, which was founded by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Annette Michelson and Rosalind Krauss in 1976, and centered around the CUNY Graduate Center; and the other with the journal Art Criticism, which Lawrence Alloway and Kusmit established in 1979 and edited from their base at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Art Criticism, it must be mentioned, would appear far less frequently than October and furthermore oftentimes only irregularly. Both groups were motivated, according to their first editorial statements, by their opposition to the art market, to which, they argued, art criticism had been made subservient by the glossy, flashy art magazines of the period and enslaved as nothing more than intellectually dressed-up advertisement (Gilbert-Rolfe, Michelson and Krauss 1976: 5; Alloway and Kusmit 1979: 1). This was an anti-capitalism rooted in neo-Marxism, to which October gestured in its name and which Kusmit discussed in his first essay, “The Necessary Dialectical Critic,” whose epigraph quoted Horkheimer and Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment (Kusmit 1979).

In resistance then to the reigning model of the art magazine as catalogue or brochure, the graphic design of both journals was deliberately bare, consisting almost exclusively of text; “October will be plain of aspect,” wrote its editors, “its
illustrations determined by considerations of textual clarity," while *Art Criticism* would arguably be even plainer, with scarcely an image, light, sans-serif typeface and the most basic, default layout (Gilbert-Rolfe, Michelson and Krauss 1976: 5). The visual impact of both was nevertheless buoyed by an indisputable trendiness, by their resemblance, in a word, whether by common parentage or as progeny, to the ascetic aesthetic of Conceptualism and its spare, iconoclastic look of linguistic chic. The dematerialization of the art object of the late 1960s and early 1970s had likewise been at least partially motivated by opposition to the art market, although, by the time that these journals were founded in the late 1970s, the market had already proven its adaptability to the most intractable new "conceptual art," much to the disappointment of its leaders (Lippard 1973: 263).  
Beyond these common ethics and aesthetics, there were ostensibly slight differences that would soon reveal themselves to be significant. *October* was more interdisciplinary and interested in promoting what it considered to be the most important new art, including the work of the Pictures artists, and in developing coherent theoretical models, notably that of postmodernism. *Art Criticism* was at once more narrowly interested in the field of art criticism itself and, as part of this disciplinary specialization, deliberately comprehensive in the kind of art that it examined, while nevertheless restricting its purview to traditional, fine art alone.

If it was Kuspit, who introduced criticality into art criticism, how can it be explained that the term is now associated with *October* and Kuspit's role has been forgotten? Kuspit was as inspired by critical theory, having been a student of Adorno and among the first, if not the very first, to apply critical theory to art criticism and history. Kuspit and Krauss were directly and personally compared, since both were considered to be purveyors of "theory," answering a new need for "philosophical art criticism," although, in general, contemporaries, such as David Carrier, concluded that Krauss' approach was more promising (Carrier 1986: 173). The proponents of what came to be known as pluralism and critical postmodernism developed valid critiques of each other's assumptions and biases. Both couched their art criticism, whether favorable or negative, in terms of the presence or absence of criticality. It could be, however, that the pluralism of *Art Criticism* belonged more properly to the 1970s, while the cultural politics and rebounding art market of the 1980s demanded the increased political commitment and partisanship of critical postmodernism. Ironically, it is the Pictures movement that has had much greater longevity on the art market, not the supposedly cynical, solely market-driven Neo-Expressionism that Kuspit
supported. How to explain, furthermore, why it was only after the market for Neo-Expressionism wavered and then collapsed that the debate over its criticality was definitively decided against it? An irony noted at the time by the curators Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo was the role that the postmodernist critics played in the sanctification of the Pictures movement, which in turn established them: “We have watched,” they wrote, “the ‘picture’ theory of art pass from the critique of reification into the reification of critique” (Collins and Milazzo 1988: 9). A final irony is that with hindsight Neo-Expressionism and the Pictures movement diametrically opposed to it have come to appear more similar and even related (Foster 2011: 643).

At the time, what seemed most unexpected and unexplainable was Kuspit’s exceedingly charitable view of German Neo-Expressionism, including the particular politics of its engagement with German national identity and historical memory. The debate over the criticality of Neo-Expressionism had hinged, internally, upon the meaning of the German movement, one’s interpretation of its character determining also the perceived import of the Italian and even American movements, however distinct the latter now appears in retrospect. This debate ultimately became a struggle for criticality itself, as German Neo-Expressionism’s scandalous arrival on the international scene pressured precisely the historical origins and necessity of criticality; representing Germany in the German Pavilion, the Nazi imagery of Baselitz and Kiefer at the Venice Biennial of 1980 recalled the moment, the reason, too ambiguously, in and for which criticality had been created in the United States. To argue for the criticality of German Neo-Expressionism thus seemed to be its perversion. Certainly, it involved a fundamental revision of the avant-garde’s widely understood but narrowly defined relationships to fascism, capitalism, history and art history.

Critiques of criticality circa 1987

Criticality survived two independent critiques during the later 1980s, the first of which was led by a growing group of artists, while the second came from critics, for whom the dominant model of criticality was insufficiently effective politically. The always delicate and changing balance between aesthetics and politics that criticality maintained was thus tested from both ends. It may be because these challenges came from opposing perspectives in rapid succession that criticality could regain its footing as quickly and durably as it did. At a minimum, if the
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artists' rebellion against the criterion of criticality to which their works were being submitted had been successful, there would have been no need for the critics themselves to engage with it. At most, this dynamic testifies to criticality's necessity for our era, in which we remain equally hostile to art for art's sake and political propaganda and can only quibble, depending upon the circumstances, about their optimal relative proportions. Only for some the AIDS crisis made such quibbling irrelevant, obsolete and impossible. Because these critiques were developed by star exemplars of criticality, they had the treasonous and embarrassing quality of defections or desertions.

Sherrie Levine publicly repudiated criticality in a cover story published in the May 1986 issue of Artnews. It was news to the art world that Levine, whose work had been essential to the theorization of critical postmodernism, strongly objected, as her interviewer reported, to this interpretation, in which she had nonetheless initially willingly participated:

She [Levine] spoke that first evening of her boredom with the current deluge of 'mindless' appropriation. There was also the support she was getting critically—that was really bothering her. There may have been a time (she herself is not sure about this) when she was happy to play the role of the theoretical critics' model artist, serving the poststructuralists as Jules Olitski once served the formalists. But by last spring, she was talking as if she wanted out. Almost all the critical support for my work was coming from a leftist, academic reading of it,' she said. 'I was very appreciative, even collaborative. But at some point I began to feel boxed in. It had gotten to the point where people couldn't see the work for the rhetoric. People weren't really reading what I was doing as photographs or drawings or watercolors but as position papers. [...] I felt I was being judged for purity or correctness,' she continued. 'I had never cared about that. And I really felt envious of those artists who hadn't put themselves in a position to have their work read so narrowly ...'

Marzorati 1986: 93

The most celebrated artist of the Pictures exhibition of 1977 narrated her intellectual development and named her interlocutors-cum-instructors, notably Krauss, Crimp and Craig Owens, who had introduced her to postmodernism (Marzorati 1986: 96). Perhaps most significant was Levine's repositioning of her work in relation to Neo-Expressionism: "When I think of it now," Levine said, "I don't think what Julian Schnabel was doing was all that different from what I was trying to do" (Marzorati 1986: 92). Not only did this upset the then current dichotomy between the criticality of Pictures and the complicity of Neo-Expressionism but it
also recast the meaning of Levine's own recent artistic development. Levine had begun by re-photographing photographs in reproduction, but then turned to photographing German Expressionist paintings in reproduction in 1982 and afterwards to drawing and painting after reproductions in her own hand in 1983; by 1985, Levine was producing her own "original" and "artistic" paintings, which, given Levine's public repudiation, could be reinterpreted as acts of defiance against critical postmodernism's denunciations of these values and the medium of painting itself as modernist and passé.

Levine's defection from the critical postmodernist camp soon unleashed a younger generation of artists' rebellion, which was more specifically directed against criticality. Its highpoint can be pinpointed by the panel, "From Criticism to Complicity," which was published in the summer 1986 issue of Flash Art, shortly after Levine's tell-all interview. Levine's presence signaled her interest in, if not approval of the polemical, contrarian position and value of complicity, which the panel's moderator Peter Nagy and its participants Peter Halley, Haim Steinbach, Ashley Bickerton, Philip Taaffe, and Jeff Koons were variously sketching, and Steinbach most explicitly:

There has been a shift in the activities of the new group of artists in that there is a renewed interest in locating one's desire, by which I mean one's own taking pleasure in objects and commodities, which includes what we call works of art. There is a stronger sense of being complicit with the production of desire, what we traditionally call beautiful seductive objects, than being positioned somewhere outside of it. In this sense the idea of criticality in art is also changing.

Steinbach quoted in Nagy et al. 1989: 46

While the social and political remained essential to these artists, Bickerton admitted without guilt or hesitation: "This work has a somewhat less utopian bent than its predecessor" (Bickerton quoted in Nagy et al. 1989: 46). Halley ventured furthest, when he stated, "We are now in a post-political situation" (Halley quoted in Nagy et al. 1989: 47). This group, under various names, including especially Simulationism and Neo-Geo, was, perhaps predictably, quickly embraced by the market and, maybe more surprisingly, nearly as rapidly validated by important museum exhibitions, including the New Museum's Damaged Goods in the summer and the Boston ICA's Endgame in the fall of 1986 (Wallis 1986; Bois 1986); both exhibitions were accompanied by catalogues with serious scholarly essays. The following fall, Koons would debut a systematic critique of criticality, after having reinvented his artistic project from one of
analysis to activism; “Criticality Gone” would serve his manifesto’s clarion call, sounded in the November 1987 issue of *Artforum* (Koons 1987: 116). It is possible that the artists’ uprising against the strictures of criticality would have succeeded, as leftist art criticism anyway felt miserably outgunned during the 1980s by both the art market and reigning conservative politics. In a searching self-examination of 1989, Abigail Solomon-Godeau bemoaned, “It should have become abundantly clear in recent years that the function of criticism, for the most part, is to serve as a more or less sophisticated public relations or promotional apparatus,” and yet concluded: “... it becomes increasingly difficult to say with any assurance what critical practices should actually or ideally seek to do” (Solomon-Godeau 1989: 191, 210). The reason for this state of uncertainty remained, through elaborate reasoning, self-imposed, or imposed by an adherence to the doctrine of criticality:

Although Heartfield is clearly a political artist, few contemporary artists concerned with critical practice are comfortable with the appellation *political*: first, because to be thus defined is almost inevitably to be ghettoized within a (tiny) art world preserve; second, because the use of the term as a label implies that all other art is *not* political; and third, because the term tends to suggest a politics of content and to minimize, if not efface, the politics of form. It is for all these reasons that throughout this essay I have chosen to employ the term *critical practice* in lieu of *political practice*.

Solomon-Godeau 1989: 206, italics original

Just as the invention of criticality was motivated by the politicization of the American art world at the height of the anti-war movement around 1970, the need for social and political activism was renewed during the late 1980s, as the AIDS crisis came to a head, hitting the art world, with its large gay community, particularly hard. Given the massive, life-and-death nature of that crisis, which confronted many in the art world firsthand, criticality alone seemed to some an increasingly inadequate answer. Crimp edited a special issue of *October* on the crisis (Crimp 1987), titled “Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism,” although he would for his efforts soon afterwards be “pushed out of *October*” (Crimp quoted in Danbolt 2008). This kind of analysis-cum-activism would be too political and too particular in its concentration on one issue and one social group to qualify as criticality, which insisted upon the equal importance of aesthetics and mandated a certain level of abstraction. Aesthetics did play a role in both the figuration of the AIDS crisis and the success of ACT UP, but this role was hardly
abstract and much too actual. Criticality was theorized from the abstract art of modernist painters like Kandinsky and retained the character of modernist abstraction through Conceptual Art and even the Pictures movement and Simulationism. Rather than succumbing to the internal critiques of artists or activist critics, criticality arguably survived the 1980s, without having to make any real accommodations.

Notes

1 For more information on Kuspit and his legacy, see Craven and Winkenweder 2011.
3 For a contemporary report, see Honan 1988.
4 See Alberro on how Conceptual Art catered to the art market (Alberro 2003), and Crow on how it accelerated the art market’s expansion (Crow 2008).
5 Carrier later wrote an admiring book on Krauss’ writings (Carrier 2002).
6 For an excellent summary of the debate surrounding pluralism, see Whiteley 2012: 433–40.
8 These issues are developed in my unpublished essay on Koons (AnnMarie Perl unpublished manuscript).

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