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**The Destruction Business:
Some Thoughts on the Function of Criticism**

Hellhound on my trail, my muse refused to let this essay rest. You didn't know that critics were supervised by muses? Nor did I, though I assumed some oblique connection to Mnemosyne, fount of memory, and through her to Clio, overseer of history. Yet there's no question but that critics, like artists, draw on wellsprings of energy and (for want of a better word) inspiration, though who or what breathes into us may be nothing identified by the Greeks. Indeed, I often suspect an older origin for mine, something from the Hindu perhaps: Shiva, Destroyer of Worlds.

In any event, for three years now this voice has obstinately refused to allow me to publish this essay in the form in which it was initially drafted for this book — which, of course, meant that the book has been stalled for as long. During that period I have managed to publish three other books; and I have taken care of all other pre-production details on this one, in the hope that she might step out for a beer and let me slip this one past her. No such luck; if her attention flagged, I never caught her napping.

Lest you think me mad, let me assure you that this guiding spirit has a current incarnation: a forty-something woman whose level of intelligence (in my estimation) far exceeds my own, an artist and art historian and arts administrator herself, profoundly frustrated because life keeps getting in the way of her exercise of her many gifts, talents, and hard-earned skills. Part of her problem is that she keeps a keener watch on others (myself included) than she does on herself, to their benefit and her own detriment. In any case, she has loomed ominously over this essay, demanding that I push it to extremes that I had until now, for whatever reasons, avoided.

In response, I employed an assortment of my procrastination techniques, the full

repertoire of which would probably astonish those who think me prolific. And, needless to say, life interfered in various ways with my plans, as it does with hers, providing endless rationales for whatever needs excusing. (For example, in the midst of this very paragraph my computer went on the blink and lost some earlier version of the past several sentences; shortly thereafter, it evaporated an entire working draft of these prefatory comments.) But, in hindsight, I must 'fess up: the real reason this essay's taken so long is that I wasn't in the mood.

What mood, you ask? Simply put, the labor of destruction (which is, as I will argue, the core of my profession) is best undertaken in a certain mood: a readiness, indeed an eagerness, to lay about one with a will and watch things shatter. As Karl Marx wrote, "The essential sentiment of criticism is *indignation*; its essential activity is *denunciation*."¹ (Perhaps this is why the Greek novelist and poet Nikos Kazantzakis once said, "One of man's greatest obligations is anger."²)

And what, might you ask, did it take finally to get me in the mood? A combination of circumstances. To start with, I've spent some time in recent years pondering and savoring the word *citizenship*. This began when my muse, reading the typescript for this very book, on which I'd solicited her commentary, pressed me in conversation to define the public function of criticism more precisely. To my considerable surprise, I heard myself say, "It's the activity of responsible citizenship within a given community." Though I've worked as a professional critic for close to thirty years, I hadn't known I believed that. (As Thoreau once put it, "How can I know what I think till I see what I say?")

But that hardly responded to her primary concern: her conviction that, at least within the confines of this essay as it then stood, I'd let my tender-hearted aspect override my capacity for tough-mindedness. Indeed, she wanted me to go over the top,

¹ "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law (1843-44); reprinted in *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels, Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), p. 177.

² An apology for the absence of full citations for the sources of some of the quotes in this essay. Some come from notebooks I kept at the outset of my work as a critic, which began shortly after I left graduate school, expecting never again to write a footnoted essay; others have been passed along to me by correspondents, colleagues and students who failed to annotate their origin. I would welcome their identification, confirmation and/or correction.

into berserker fury, hang-'em-high bloody-mindedness, suspecting I'd lost my heart for the battle. In retrospect, it seems to me my thoughts were simply elsewhere at the time. Nonetheless, I couldn't deny she had a point; every month or so I'd re-read that version of the essay, note its excessive kindnesses and nice-guyisms, sigh, and put it aside, returning to my brooding on the nature of citizenship.

Eventually, that led me to assessing my fellow citizens in this particular polity, by weighing both the quality and the quantity of the public discourse on photography stimulated by my writings and those of my colleagues. Those of us who publish regularly on this subject do read and, in various ways, respond in print to each other's ideas, of course. But our broader readership persists in an astonishing and disheartening muteness on just about all issues. Rereading such letters to the editor as my own writing had evoked over the past twenty-eight years left me dejected, wondering why I even bothered.

During those three decades, my editors published virtually every letter written to them in response to my essays.³ Available for my review, therefore, I had almost everything readers had cared to offer as responsive dialogue in the public forums in which I've done my work. Judging from that, the average baseball fan — who cheers on his or her favorite team in public, wears its colors at the ballpark or in the sports bar, and actively debates its strengths and weaknesses with all and sundry, including the sports columnists in the newspapers — shows more articulacy and gumption in this regard than all but a tiny handful of my readers.

Indeed, toward the end of my scrutiny of this slim file of missives I found myself so tired of hearing privately from readers who lacked the elementary sense of civic responsibility required to enter the public debate on any issue that I drafted a form letter intended to discourage any further such communication with me — unless and until they

³ The only exception of which I'm aware was the *Village Voice*, whose editors — on the occasion of my forced departure from its pages — censored dozens of letters that were written in relation to my final column in those pages, and in expression of concern and indignation over the censorship that resulted in my resignation. See "Minor White: *Octave of Prayer* (I) and (II)" in *Light Readings: A Photography Critic's Writings 1968-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp.14-49; (second edition, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

first wrote something to some editor about some issue I raised, the equivalent within this community of voting in a local referendum.⁴

But what brought all this to a head, finally, was the response I received to my fall

⁴ Here is the basic version:

Dear X:

I appreciate your taking the time to write to me. However, I have to say "Thanks, but no thanks." After twenty-eight years in the field, I remain astonished at the fact that no one in photography seems to understand the difference between appreciation and support. The former without the latter constitutes nothing more than lip service. One of my mottos is, "Lip service is better than no service at all," but the utility to me of lip service has diminished considerably over time.

I'm well aware that there are numerous folks out there reading me, putting my reviews of their projects on their vitae and including them in their press kits, photocopying my work and using it in classes, and so forth. And I wouldn't at all mind hearing from them, might even reply to their private letters to me from time to time, did they actually constitute a genuine base of support. Unfortunately, they don't.

If everyone who's ever written to me like you, or spoken to me privately in this vein — to tell me how much they enjoy my writing, how useful they and their students find it, how important to them was my support of their work (or their way of working, or of some cause in which they believe, or freedom of expression in general), etc. — had in return taken the trouble just *once* over the years to write a letter to the editor of any publication to which I contribute, in order to add their voices to the dialogue on any subject and indicate that they read me with respect and interest, my life as a professional critic and a working writer would have been and would now be radically different. (I'm sure the same holds true for many of my colleagues.) I wouldn't expect that from the casual or occasional reader of my work, but it seems not unreasonable to look for it from the core of my readership, my fellow toilers in the vineyard.

Since I see such public feedback and debate in just about every periodical I read devoted to other subjects — politics, music, art, literature — I'm forced to conclude that the sophisticated audience for photography is uniquely *irresponsible*: in the fundamental sense of the word, *unable to respond*. I've begun to speculate, darkly, that perhaps something in the very nature of the medium itself actually attracts the irresponsible, and feeds that incapacity in them. Even enlightened self-interest appears insufficient to overcome this basic inertia. I find it noteworthy — perhaps you will as well — that not even any of those to whose defense I've rallied publicly over the years when they were under censorious or other attack have ever bothered to send an open letter to the publication involved expressing thanks for that support.

Surely it was not your intent — which I have no doubt was just the opposite — but, at this stage of my professional life, I find backstage go-get-'em-kid encouragement like yours actually disheartening, just further proof that I take all my public stands alone; and I would prefer that you spare me any more of it. I'd propose to you the following as an appropriate rule of thumb: Don't presume to take up to a single minute of any public commentator's time with unsolicited private correspondence — no matter how flattering — until you have taken a public stand, at least once, pro or con something that person has published or said in a public forum, or have otherwise actively involved yourself in the public discourse to which he or she devotes such energies.

If you have something to say about my work henceforth, pro or con, the pages of just about every publication for which I write are, as a matter of policy, open to your comments.

Sincerely, /s/ A. D. Coleman

1995 commentary on the posthumous publication of a set of photographs of developmentally disabled people made in the last years of her life by the late Diane Arbus.⁵ My approach to this project was a version of what the Germans call *ausstellungskritik* — "exhibition critique," aimed primarily at addressing the presentational project, in this case a publication rather than a show. I realized as I researched and wrote this critique that it mattered to me, on some very deep levels, contained something that seemed crucial. Not only did it evolve into a defining structure of thought and function as an important position paper for me, but — since it broached two substantive cans of worms — it seemed likely to stir up some controversy. So I forewarned my supportive editors of that, refined my argument, checked my facts, verified my sources and let 'er rip.

What resulted was nothing like I'd expected. This painstakingly crafted provocation was met, publicly, with dead silence for four months. Exactly one brief letter to the editor — not a particularly cogent one, unfortunately — came in to the *Observer*. Some commentary on the issues I'd raised made its way into an on-line discussion group's discourse, not exactly the public arena; and a message board I created for that purpose at my own Website, where I'd posted the original article, began filling up with unilluminating monologues that had everything to do with their authors' feelings and nothing much to do with the matters of principle, both moral and scholarly, on which I'd based my arguments.

Meanwhile, a MacArthur fellow I ran into at a conference indicated full agreement with the principles I'd enunciated but declined my invitation to say so in the *Observer's* pages or anywhere else. So did a prominent specialist in photography at a major auction house, who felt that my points "were very important, and need to be discussed." The editor of a periodical aimed at collectors e-mailed me a note saying that I was "on the side of the angels" with this piece, but did not even mention it in his publication, though one of the issues I raised in the essay pertains directly to the definition of the authentic body of work in photography, and thus to the collecting of photographs. At the

⁵ "Why I'm Saying No To This New Arbus Book," *New York Observer*, Vol. 9, no. 37, October 2, 1995, p. 25.

same time, a literacy-challenged gent from the Bay Area (where the piece had been reprinted, in my column in *Photo Metro*) decided that my encouragement of reader response meant that I was seeking pen pals, and began bombarding me at home with lengthy private letters, castigating me for my positions and instructing me on the responsibilities of the critic, while adamantly refusing my repeated invitations to put himself on the record by sending his letters to the editor and debating me in public.

Shortly thereafter, I found myself hissed at in passing by Janet Malcolm, of all people, in the pages of the house organ of Random House, *The New York Review of Books*.⁶ And someone I once mistakenly considered both a colleague and a friend displayed not only a professional animus of which I'd been unaware but, more disturbingly, some previously unsuspected fascist tendencies — lambasting me in public for my temerity, his counter-arguments incorporating the frightening assertion that "Human rights pale beside the necessity of seeing that great art sees the light of day."⁷

And that was it, the sum total a full year after the piece first appeared. Nothing of either the quality or quantity of response I'd assumed my provocation would evoke. Instead, insults, unreasoned hysteria, behind-the-scenes pep talks, amateur psychoanalysis, aimless chatter. Disheartening, to say the least. I found myself variously bored, discouraged, and offended by the low level of the discourse; moreover, I found no nugget of provocation for myself, no substantial challenge that made me rethink my argument, nothing to chew on. The degree of vituperation surprised me, but

⁶ For an analysis of this publication's umbilical tie to Random House (not coincidentally, Malcolm's publisher on several book projects), see Richard Kostelanetz's investigative 1974 essay, "The Leverages of Collaboration," reprinted in his recent collection, *Crimes of Culture: Three Decades of Citizen's Arrests* (New York: Autonomedia, 1995), pp. 89-106. Malcolm's comments appear in her review of the Arbus book, titled "Aristocrats," *New York Review of Books* XLIII, no. 2 (February 1, 1996): 7-8. It's reprinted in the second edition of her collection of essays, *Diana & Nikon: Essays on the Aesthetic of Photography* (New York: Aperture, 1997), pp. 179-89. The reference to me is on pp. 183-84.

⁷ Mark Power wrote that remarkable statement in a response to my essay that he circulated privately. In the published version of his reaction, he modified it somewhat, to "the right of privacy pales beside the necessity of ensuring that great art sees the light of day." See Mark Power, "Wielding the Scalpel," *The Photo Review*, Vol. 19, no. 2, Spring 1996, pp. 5, 7-11. As I write this, I remain the only person who found either version of that position sufficiently objectionable to warrant refutation in print. A commentary by Anthony Georgieff — taking a position quite similar to Power's — eventually appeared: "Dead Woman Seeing," *European Photography* 17, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 74.

most of it rolled off, mere *ad hominem* stuff. Except for one: a sneering dismissal of me, in passing, by Mark Power, as "photography's professional scold."⁸

Clearly meant as an insult, that stung. For weeks it smarted. At my muse's urging I pulled the barb out to examine it, turned it over and over in my mind, word by word, separately and together, until I accepted them all as the unintended compliment they were, grappled them to me with hooks of steel, slid that precious amulet into my medicine pouch, and (my muse nodding and smiling now, nodding and smiling) wrote, in rebuttal, "Damn straight, pal. I can live with all three of those terms, separately and in tandem. Carve 'em on my tombstone."⁹

And then, finding myself at long last in the mood, nodding and smiling along with her, sat down under my muse's eye to put this essay into its final form.

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Nobody much likes criticism. For that matter, nobody much likes critics — an unfortunate fact demonstrated by countless historical events, the forced suicide of Socrates only one of them.

Artists, in particular, often have an antipathy to critics. Here's Philip Wylie, one of my favorite neglected novelists:

" . . . when and if we reach the state of cannibalism, I shall try to eat a critic. There should be good crackling around fat heads."¹⁰

And Pablo Picasso:

"People who try to explain pictures are usually barking up the wrong tree."¹¹

And the painter Max Beckmann:

"Of all the dim-witted enterprises doomed to failure from the start, talking and writing about art is surely the worst."¹²

⁸ Power, "Wielding the Scalpel," p. 9.

⁹ For my full response to Power's diatribe, see "Diane Arbus: Untitled, Part II — The Responses," *The Photo Review*, Vol. 19, no. 3, Summer 1996, pp. 9-12.

¹⁰ Wylie, Philip, *Opus 21* (New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc., 1949), p. 198.

¹¹ From my notebooks, source unknown.

¹² From my notebooks, source unknown. Beckmann also said, " . . . words are too insignificant to define the problems of art." The latter is quoted in Lackner, Stephan, *Max Beckmann: Memories of a Friendship*

More sympathetically, there's this insightful comment on the peculiar plight of critics of the non-literary arts, from the sculptor Henry Moore:

"[Art critics] are at a rather serious disadvantage, you know, relative to literary critics, for they are obliged to express their responses to an art work in a medium altogether different from that of the work they are responding to. The literary critic is after all trained to use the same expressive tool — language — as the poet or novelist he writes about. Not so with art critics. It seems to me they struggle with a heavy burden of translation."¹³

If all of that is true (and I must confess I do not disagree with any of those four opinions), then why would anyone in his or her right mind bother to read criticism — or, even worse, to write it?

The basic answer comes, for me, from the hemlock drinker himself, Socrates, who enunciated the fundamental tenet of what was once called the life of the mind: "The unexamined life is not worth living." Anyone who values intellectualism — that is, anyone committed to being truly thoughtful — knows the truth of this, and knows that he or she is therefore already a critic.

Many years ago, during an undergraduate class in literature at the Bronx campus of my alma mater, Hunter College in New York, Professor Leonard Albert was trying to explain to us the meaning of a key concept: *critical distance*, that ability to step back from even the most engrossing work of art or emotionally embroiling situation in order to observe and assess it disinterestedly.

"There was a traveling Shakesperian troupe in the Old West," he recounted by way of example (perhaps, I now think, a purely fanciful one), "that came into Dodge City for a performance of *Othello*. In the middle of the fourth act, a cowboy in the balcony got so upset that he stood up, pulled out his six-shooter, and killed the actor who was playing Iago." He paused for a moment, then added, "Now *that* man lacked critical distance."

(Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1969), p. 50.

¹³ Schulze, Franz, "Henry Moore at 80: 'an artist must remain a mystery to himself,'" *ARTnews*, Vol. 77, no. 6, Summer 1978, pp. 68- 73. Not that Moore thought critics of much value; "Art critics have taught me next to nothing," this statement, to be found on p. 68, begins.

I was reminded of this a quarter of a century later, when, while browsing through an issue of the *Village Voice*, I came to the advertisements for various psychiatrists, therapists and new-age health practitioners. The headline on one ad caught my eye. "DO YOU SUFFER FROM CRITICAL DISTANCE?" it read, then went on (approximately) thus: "Do you experience moments of detachment from your feelings? Are you unwilling or unable to be up-close and personal every single minute of your waking life? Our one-on-one treatments and encounter groups can help you!" How about that, I mused . . . a capacity I've worked hard all my life to attain is now defined as a disease.

Obviously, in a culture that's historically demonstrated itself to be anti-intellectual, where the therapeutic model prevails and our relation to art is almost terminally contaminated with the deadly mix of gossip and intentionalism, the forces dominating that culture will do their level best to discredit critical thinking. Trivializing it by defining it as a neurosis seems a clever strategy, and will probably work with many. Resisting that tendency — maintaining the ability to think critically about anything, even one's most cherished beliefs — remains a genuine triumph, even if it goes unrecognized and unacclaimed.

The music critic Robert Commanday speaks of the "active listener or everyman critic," insisting that "properly, everybody should be one." He adds, "Considering the value of an experience is simply part of experiencing it and fixing it in the mind. . . . When the listener, no matter how imperfectly, acts on the need to establish the meaning, the value or just the nature of the music heard, . . . the circuit of the artistic experience is completed."¹⁴

And, lest you think that it's presumptuous to take as true the folk wisdom "everyone's a critic," consider what the film scholar P. Adams Sitney says: "Criticism is not a profession, it's a disposition of the soul at certain moments."¹⁵ If we agree with him — and I do — then it follows that the people we identify as critics are simply those who have made this disposition into a calling, or at least a

¹⁴ "Everybody Should Be a Critic," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Review (September 12, 1982), p. 14.

¹⁵ In conversation with the author, summer 1985.

profession; the working critic is someone who chooses to live the examined life continually, and in the public eye.

When you leave the jazz club, the concert hall, the quadplex, the theater, the gallery or museum, concerned only with whether or not you enjoyed yourself, you have simply passed your time. But once you not only acknowledge your pleasures and displeasures but exercise that "disposition of the soul," you have stepped into the territory of critical thinking, and must elucidate your responses.¹⁶

Entering this terrain is risky business. The personal hazard is implied by something else that Sitney said: "Criticism, like biography, is the process of falling out of love with your subject."¹⁷ Now, falling out of love (by which I take Sitney to mean relinquishing one's infatuations or unanalyzed emotional responses) can be sobering and painful. It certainly doesn't mean not loving anything; it means not loving blindly, but instead learning to truly see things for what they are — and then loving them, if one still chooses to, warts and all. As the photographer Robert Frank has said, "[C]riticism can come out of love."¹⁸

But to love someone or something is also to take the risk of hating it — or at least hating aspects of it. After all, hate is only the obverse of love, its flip side. The true opposite of love is not hatred but indifference. You can love something and hate it simultaneously, but you cannot do either (or both) and also be indifferent to the subject of your attention.

One does not need to establish critical distance in relation to something one finds affectless or irrelevant; only if one has been gripped by it does one have to

¹⁶ "When we say 'It was great,' we are actually saying 'I liked it.' And 'I liked it' (or its antithesis, 'I disliked it') may, depending on its context, become the first step in the critical act. In any case, it remains a very small one, since unless the question 'Why did I like it?' follows, an act of criticism has not been initiated. 'I like it,' when it stands alone, is only a grunt of approval and while one has every right to grunt, let us not mistake it for other than it is. 'Why did I like it?' demands development and will invariably lead to further questions about one's self as well as to those about the celluloid strip. Since these are the two ingredients of film, film criticism has begun." Boyum, Joy Gould and Adrienne Scott, "The Critical Act or I Just Saw *Barbarella*: It Was Great," *Film as Film: Critical Responses to Film Art* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1971), p. 9.

¹⁷ In conversation with the author, summer 1985.

¹⁸ Frank, Robert, "A Statement," *U.S. Camera Annual 1958* (New York: U. S. Camera, 1957), p. 115.

find a way to disengage. Critics do not write well or usefully about works or issues to which they truly feel indifferent. Only that which evokes passion merits attention. Passion comes, of course, in two basic flavors. And while writing about work one loves is one of the most pleasurable aspects of a critic's work, I've come to the conclusion that such acts of appreciation are not the essence of the critic's task.

Critics in our time and culture wear many hats. Sometimes they're also reviewers, providing quick-take consumer-guide reactions to the available artistic "merchandise." Sometimes they take on the role of interviewer, biographer, historian, appreciator, theorist, eulogist. All of these are valuable functions; they fulfill necessary tasks. But, after twenty-eight years as a working critic, having tried my hand at all of the above, I must report that none of them is at the core of what I do.

The fundamental truth is that I and my colleagues in criticism — at least those of us who do our jobs right — are in the destruction business.

Many people, including many of those same colleagues, are fond of disguising this difficult truth from others and even hiding it from themselves by evoking the notion of something they call "constructive criticism." To me, that's an oxymoron; there ain't no such animal. Man Ray was right: "All criticism is destructive, most of all self-criticism."¹⁹

The root of the word *criticism* is the word *crisis*. As Roland Barthes reminds us, "To criticize means to call into crisis."²⁰ The job of the critic is *calling into crisis* the subject of the critique. My own metaphor for this is the metallurgical process known as *stress analysis*. Calling something into crisis, subjecting it to stress analysis, not only exposes its structure but accentuates its flaws. Stress analysis exacts a toll: The thing under scrutiny may shatter and collapses — or else, seeing it for what it truly is, with all its inadequacies and weaknesses laid bare, we may "fall out of love with it."

¹⁹ Ray, Man, "To Be Continued Unnoticed," exhibition portfolio, Copley Galleries, Beverly Hills, CA, 1948. Reprinted in *Man Ray* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art/Lytton Gallery, 1966), pp. 23-24.

²⁰ Barthes, Roland, *Le Plaisir du Texte* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973), pp. 25-26.

Why on earth would anyone want to chance that? I can think of two reasons. The first, simply, is curiosity: to understand how the thing was made, what ideas and decisions went into it, how the work that embodies them holds up under pressure. The second is growth: to learn from those flaws so that a better one can be built next time. (Keep in mind here the Chinese ideogram for *crisis*, whose components are *danger* and *opportunity*.)

But building a better one next time is not the task of the critic. Nor is it incumbent upon him or her to instruct the artist on how to go about doing so. The critic's chore ends when the stress analysis test is complete and the destruction, if any (for some work survives even the most rigorous challenges), is over. The rest — including the cleaning up — is left to others.²¹

Another way of thinking about this is to recognize that the critic functions as a *radical*, in the original meaning of the word — which comes from the Latin word for root, *radix*. The radical is one who insists on examining things from the roots up. Such a diagnostician is not likely to be popular among true-believer types, whose blind faiths insulate them from self-doubt and justify all deeds. Critics who take their obligations seriously plant themselves as roadblocks on the highways of groupthink, obstacles in the path of mindless majority rule. They are not unlike the "free radicals" about which I've read in contemporary biophysics, molecules containing unpaired atoms. In a stable, healthy biosystem — a well body, for example — it seems the free radical can attract atoms from other molecules, upsetting the organism's ecological balance and causing illness. Notably, though, in a sick body the immune system actually produces free radicals to combat infection from bacteria and viruses.

If we take this as a metaphor, we might propose that the critic-as-free-radical destabilizes his or her sphere of influence by pulling individuals away from stasis and consensus, from the easy conformism embedded in that epitome of

²¹ Several years ago, when I was using this metaphor of stress analysis during a lecture on criticism, I was greeted after my talk by a man who told me that his profession actually *was* stress analysis. Well, I asked him, did he think my analogy was apropos? "You may not believe this," he replied with a grin, "but when we joke around at the lab, do you know what we call our work? *Art criticism*."

argumentum ad populum, the locution "As we all know." Does this do a service to one's culture, or an injury? Obviously, the answer depends on whether one believes one's own culture to be healthy or sick.

My view is that, however nostalgic we may be for a past in which things remained stable and static for long periods of time (or so we like to imagine), we live in an age of flux in which stasis proves fatal, for, as Bob Dylan wrote years ago, "He not busy being born is busy dying." In such an environment, the very presence of the magnetic tug of the free radical, the persistent nay-saying of the critic, keeps us healthy by forcing us to remain always aware of the full range of perspectival options, the availability — and utility — of different points of view, the unlikelihood that we are absolutely right about anything.

Yet there, in a nutshell, is why critics are unpopular. It's their job to be fault-finders, spoilers and contrarians: to break spells, ruin moods, poop parties, rain on parades, disrupt consensus, point out the emperor's nakedness, resist seduction and speak truth to power. Power rarely likes to hear the truth. In fact, since truth makes a habit of unpleasantness, most of us, powerful or not, are loath to hear it with any frequency. Critics, when they set about their fundamental task, are generally the bearers of bad tidings; and the inclination to kill the messenger runs deep in the human psyche.

Obviously, one does not engage in these actions and emotions lightheartedly. They spring from intellectual passion, and, when effective, they evoke the passions of others. As a critic, you must be willing to stand by your words or be prepared to eat them. Because criticism in its most highly realized manifestation — as commentary in the agora — demands recognition as a public act.

There may be artists who genuinely make art "for themselves," whom I would define as amateurs by virtue of that choice. (More on that anon.) There are certainly professional artists who for various reasons — painful shyness, for example, or a distaste for the dominant trends of their time — have kept their work largely to themselves: Emily Dickinson and Franz Kafka are instances. But I

guarantee you that there are no naïf, "outsider" or undiscovered critics, no folks posting critical commentaries on billboards in their front gardens, no trunksful of great unpublished critical essays moldering in someone's attic. To function as a working critic is by definition to publish, in order to participate in a public dialogue centering around various but necessary reference points (among them, centrally, the works of artists).

And that means to risk stress analysis yourself, to be constantly calling yourself into crisis and putting yourself in the way of finding yourself in that state. For if you publish, you will be read — by your fellow critics, by artists, by others in the field and by the general public. And if you're read, you will be disputed, sometimes even reviled. Peculiarly, critics not only expect that, they usually delight in it. I have yet to meet any critics worth their salt who aren't surprised and disappointed when people widely or entirely agree with them (or merely remain silent), and who don't turn gleeful when sparks start to fly. Malcontents and troublemakers, the lot of us.

However, you can't upset those not yet conceived — or at least they're not prone to writing argumentative, denunciatory letters to the editor. So critics work for the audience of their own time, not for readers to come. The bonus value of doing so is that one may thereby sometimes contribute to the establishment and continuity of a critical tradition. The function this serves for the future, for history, for the ongoing life of a medium, the literary critic Hugh Kenner described in these words:

"There is no substitute for critical tradition: a continuum of understanding, early commenced. . . . Precisely because William Blake's contemporaries did not know what to make of him, we do not know either, though critic after critic appeases our sense of obligation to his genius by reinventing him. . . . In the 1920s, on the other hand, *something* was immediately made of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, and our comfort with both works after 50 years, including our ease at allowing for their age, seems derivable from the

fact that they have never been ignored."²²

Becoming part of such a "continuum of understanding" is all the reward from the future a critic could ask.

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That's what's in it for the critic. This brings me to several additional questions: Why should the public read criticism? And why should artists pay any attention to it?

In answer to the first, John Perrault has said, "There is a need to read about art as well as to look at it. The timid read art criticism to have their opinions and their investments confirmed; the brave to have them challenged."²³ In fact, a regrettably large number of people are so timid that they cannot even formulate independent opinions in the first place, and instead treat criticism as a source of ready-made substitutes for ideas and opinions of their own, doing what was once called "copping an attitude." This is perhaps the worst use to which criticism can be put by its readers; unfortunately, it's one that no critic can protect against.

Conversely, as Perrault suggests, the best reason to read critics is to call your own responses and opinions into crisis. Criticism can be said to begin at the point where we set aside or move beyond our simplest reactive patterns, unsatisfied with mere declarations of taste. Nothing closes off a discussion of a work of art so completely as the assertion, "I like it." For, as we so commonly aver, you can't argue with taste; criticism, on the other hand, is for arguing with. And one of the main stimuli for some of our most heated and productive arguments about art is the curious fact that many images important to us do not appeal to our "taste."

I do not consider the taste patterns of critics to be of paramount importance. Certainly I don't assume that my own interest anyone but me. More significant by far are our lines of reasoning, the methods by which we approach and interact with

²² Kenner, Hugh, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), p. 415.

²³ Perrault, John, "Power Critics," *Village Voice*, Vol. 28, no. 42 (October 18, 1983), p. 81.

the works that draw our attention, the variety of ways in which we ask the four questions that define intellectual activity: *Why? Why not? What if? Suppose I'm wrong?* It's for those experiments in inquiry that we still read long-dead critics, writing about works long exhausted and forgotten.

For the audience, then, the critic functions as a stimulus to involvement and a sounding board off which the audience can bounce its own reactions to the works. After all, the excitement of becoming a member of what the late Minor White referred to as "the educated audience" goes beyond the pleasure of one's initial direct experience of the work, and also past one's later reflective reconsideration of it. Art, if it matters, is also a manifestation of our culture, our time. Criticism, John Berger suggests, "is always a form of intervention: intervention between the work of art and its public."²⁴ Actively engaging with the critical dialogue that emerges around a medium is a way of using art as a positioning device, a means for exploring yourself in relation to the field of ideas in your own day, of finding out what your culture has gotten up to and where you stand within it.

Moreover, the critic serves the audience as living proof that one can say no: no to specific works or entire bodies of work, no to one or another tendency in art, no to the spin put on the work by this or that functionary, no to the biases of institutional emphasis and exclusion. In a globalized art economy increasingly modeled after and intertwined with multinational capital, whose art-related products and presentations thereof spring less and less organically from within the cultural environments in which they appear, such exemplification of and permission for individual nay-saying has an empowering effect, to which I'll return shortly.

As for artists — well, I'd hardly presume to tell artists that they *should* read critics, especially critics of their own work. But I'm more than willing to suggest why they *might*.

²⁴ Berger, John, *Art and Revolution: Ernest Neizvestny and the role of the artist in the U.S.S.R.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), p. 9.

Artists of course share membership in the audience for art. Though they approach the field as performers in it, criticism of work other than their own, or in entirely different media, presumably has a usefulness to them not unrelated to its function for other members of that audience.

Whether appreciative or caustic, commentary on their own work can carry a potent emotional charge. After all, a profound connection exists between what we do and who we are. Jesus reportedly said, "the tree is known by his fruit." To the extent that our deeds, our actions in the world, have an integral relationship to our central sense of identity, we feel ourselves inseparable from the work that we do, the things that we make — and criticism of that work, those things, seems necessarily and inarguably criticism of us.

The critic has an obligation to walk a fine line in this regard, recognizing the artist's sense of oneness with and inseparability from his or her art without ever slipping into a critique of the private person, whose precise, authentic relation to the work the critic cannot (and should not) pretend to know. The correlation between an artist's personality and life and his or her creative output remains always slippery and inexact; delightful people sometimes make dreadful work, while genius may well appear in appalling characters.

It strikes me as less that useful to transform the critical arena into a killing ground on which to parade one's hostilities toward individuals (though it remains appropriate to view critical discourse as not only a marketplace of ideas but a battlefield on which they contend, sometimes to the death). The critic — at least as I envision the role — is properly restricted to addressing only the deeds, the works themselves and the lives those live in the world, regardless of his or her response to the works' makers. Responsibly undertaken, that challenge validates Nietzsche's comparison of the critic to the mosquito who bites not because he wants to but because he must, who "desire[s] our blood, not our pain."²⁵

²⁵ "#164 — IN FAVOUR OF CRITICS — Insects sting, not from malice, but because they too want to live. It is the same with our critics — they desire our blood, not our pain." From "Human, All-Too-Human: part I, Miscellaneous Maxims and opinions," in Dr. Oscar Levy, ed., *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*

In that light, artists certainly should feel free to pick and choose among those who respond to their work, and are entitled to dismiss or bypass entirely anyone whose reaction is clearly the product of personal animus. Beyond that, not all critics prove themselves equally substantive and useful. As Man Ray noted, "Taste and opinion cannot replace intelligence and knowledge."²⁶ Far too many critics function only as tastemongers and starmakers.²⁷ This does no service to anyone. John Berger points in the right direction, I think, when he writes, "I have come to see that the arranging of artists in a hierarchy of merit is an idle and essentially dilettante process. What matters are the needs which art answers."²⁸

It is in the short- and long-term response of the audience that the artist will discover what the needs are — beyond private satisfaction — that his or her own work answers. As a rule, the artist can only guess at this.²⁹ Perhaps it would be ideal if the artist could interrogate the receivers, the audience, ourselves. This could be done; someone may well have already attempted such an experiment. The utterances of all those who've commented publicly on a particular work could be scanned and correlated for recurrent mentions of particular aspects, similarities of interpretation, and such. Polls could be taken of gallery visitors and museum-goers, interviews recorded with owners of prints. Perhaps we would learn

(New York: Gordon Press, 1974), vol. 2, p. 82.

²⁶ Man Ray, from an artist's statement in a limited-edition portfolio of prints, *les voies lactées* (Turin: Il Fauno, 1974).

²⁷ For more on this issue, see the essay "Interesting Conflicts" in my book *Tarnished Silver: After the Photo Boom* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1996), pp. 33-36.

²⁸ Berger, *op. cit.*, *loc. cit.*

²⁹ My muse argues with this, proposing that artists, inherently informed by their connection to what C. G. Jung called "the collective unconscious," intuitively and always correctly perceive these needs and automatically produce in response to it — that, virtually by definition, the needs they feel and those of the culture are identical. Though of the Jungian persuasion myself, and willing to accept my muse's formulation as it might apply to previous eras, I am not convinced by what strikes me as both grandiosity and oversimplification in its relation to our own quite different times. Specifically, I find problematic its equating of, say, the work of a medieval sculptor of cathedral gargoyles — or that of a Van Gogh, obsessed but critically disregarded in his own lifetime — with the output of a typical graduate of our current academic-art context who produces work in which no audience or market or circle of practitioners shows the slightest interest, intending primarily to persuade doubtful parents that the money spent on expensive art-school education was not wasted.

something of value by this.³⁰

But the effort would be enormous (not to mention the expenditure). As things stand, the most efficient, accessible and dependable source of that response (at least for artists who don't perform their works in front of live audiences) will be critics — those atypical members of the audience willing to work at the difficult and thankless task of articulating their reactions and perceptions and putting them out on the table.

Those "needs which art answers" that John Berger speaks of are, of course, the needs not only of artists but of the culture in which they live. He appears to assume, as do I, that we are speaking of artists concerned not merely with self-expression but with communication — because criticism is irrelevant to self-expression. And most art-making up until the Renaissance in European culture, at least, and through the present day in many cultures, does not prioritize self-expression. Quite the opposite, in fact. From cave painting through Egyptian statuary and African sculpture to the rock concert and Mai Lin's Vietnam memorial, the concerns of the individual psyche of the maker have played second fiddle to the communal functions of art.

I consider self-expression an act or function whose effectiveness has only one judge — the person doing the expressing; as I have no training in psychoanalysis, it lies outside the parameters of my expertise. It's my opinion that the statement "You're not expressing yourself well" is semantic nonsense. If a relative dies and I opt to manifest my response by (a) wearing black for a year, (b) throwing a party and tying one on, or (c) going about as if nothing had happened, no one but I can tell whether I've expressed my reaction effectively.

Self-expression, then, is fundamentally both narcissistic and solipsistic as a final goal; intentionally, it serves no one but the person doing the expressing. For

³⁰ The recent experiments by the Russian expatriate team Komar and Melamid suggest that such experiments are not impossible. See "Painting by Numbers: The Search for a People's Art," *The Nation*, Vol. 258, no. 10, March 14, 1994. This special issue is devoted to a poll conducted by Komar & Melamid for the purpose of identifying popular preferences in visual art and producing paintings according to those taste patterns.

that reason, as I pointed out previously, it is the primary concern of only those artists who work "for themselves" — that is, those who, in my opinion, are thereby self-defined as amateurs.³¹

Here, by the way, my muse and I part company; she insists that serious artists, even those we would classify as professional, have no obligation to take their audiences into account, no conscious relation to the process of communication, only the imperative to answer the felt urge toward self-expression. By no means does she find herself alone in this belief; many artists in all media

³¹ I do not seek here to ennoble professionals by denigrating amateurs; instead, I hope only to reverse a peculiar tendency in the visual arts generally and photography circles in particular to treat amateur standing as something for which one should strive, and professional status as an embarrassment. Tracing its origins among visual artists goes beyond the scope of this essay; in photography, we can track it back at least to the posturing of Alfred Stieglitz, and some of his disputes with Edward Steichen, though even today the medium has its ardent advocates of perpetual amateurism, such as David Vestal. Interestingly, outside the visual arts no serious practitioner feels honored by description as an amateur: imagine Merce Cunningham taking pride in maintaining amateur status as a dancer and choreographer, Wynton Marsalis doing so as a musician, Meryl Streep as an actress, Richard Meier as an architect. The very notion is comical.

Nonetheless, these definitions should not be mistaken for value judgments. The substantive issue is the distinction between vocation and avocation, between one's job and one's hobby. One's hobby is always enjoyable; anytime it stops being fun, one can disengage from it. One's job is not necessarily fun — often, in fact, it is frustrating, boring, and genuinely unpleasant — but one performs it anyway. The amateur is free to perform whenever he or she feels like it; the professional puts in a full work week, regardless of mood or whim.

Financial success is not the gauge; Jackson Pollock was no less a professional painter when he was starving in a Greenwich Village loft than he was a decade later when his paintings were selling in the five figures. The point is that painting is what he did for a living, even if the living he made from it was lousy for quite a while; it was his occupation, the epicenter of his life, and whatever else he did to generate income was done strictly to enable him to paint. When Pollock got out of bed to go to work, his workplace was in front of his canvas.

Artists take on all kinds of work to support themselves, of course, and — as recent polls have reiterated — few make enough to live on from their creative activity. Sometimes the borderlines between the professional artist, the part-time artist, and the amateur or hobbyist are blurred, to be sure. Surely there's no need to muddy the waters any further.

These comments on this subject found an earlier manifestation in "Expression and Communication," my introduction to the exhibition catalog for "Photographers Dialogue," curated by Steven Carothers and Gail Roberts (Boca Museum of Art, Boca Raton FL, October 19-November 26, 1989). That essay turned into a series of three pieces for *Darkroom Photography*: "Amateur Standing vs. Professional Stature," Vol. 12, no. 3 (March 1990); "Check Your Focus: Is Your Artistic Expression Directed Inwardly or Outwardly?" Vol. 12, no. 4 (April 1990); and "Vox Populi," Vol. 12, no. 5 (May 1990).

issue such disclaimers.³² Curiously, however, quite a few of them (my muse among those) speak nonetheless about critical misinterpretation of their own work and the work of others, the audience's failure to "get it," and so on. If one can misinterpret work, then, presumably, one can interpret it correctly (or, at least, more correctly in some cases than in others). Which means it has identifiable content that allows for a range of more or less accurate reading by others, whose responses are solicited by the work's public presentation. Like so many artists, my muse here wants both to have and to eat her cake, claiming indifference to any audience while at the same time aspiring to find one.

Professional standing *per se* does not guarantee work that is better or more devotedly made. There are good professional artists and bad ones, just as some amateur artists are better than others. Many amateur artists have made a piece or two of work that's of professional caliber, and some amateur artists are consistently superior to some professional ones. Yet the obdurate fact remains: In art, as in every other field of human activity, amateurs and professionals play before different audiences, in different leagues, by different rules, for different motives, and for different stakes.

From my standpoint, to place one's work into the public sphere, before the polity, is by definition a political act, and an active solicitation of response. Even if the origins of that work lie in the self-expressive impulses of the maker, one cannot take its presentation to others as anything but an effort to communicate. I consider that among the defining acts of the professional artist (and, for that reason, I restrict my critical attention to work that appears in public).

In addressing work that's publicly presented, a critic has every right to assume that (unless informed otherwise by the maker or the presenter) he or she engages with the work of a professional artist. The professional artist may begin with the urge toward self-expression, but is eventually concerned with something

³² Andres Serrano, for one; see my report on a panel discussion in which he and I participated, in my book *Critical Focus: Photography in the International Image Community* (Munich: Nazraeli Press, 1995), pp. 38-40.

beyond that: communication. That commitment to communication involves acknowledging the existence of the Other — embodied in some audience, whether actual or hypothetical, identifiable or imagined. This acknowledgment is signalled by accepting the imperative of a shared symbol system, the first requisite of communicative activity. (If I wish to convey to some Other that my relative's passing has caused me grief, I'd best employ the cultural rituals of mourning; drunken revels, however much they might salve my wounds, are not widely equated with tears.)

This does not mean that all communications must be reduced to the literal or simplistic; states of mind and feeling are among the transmissions we receive from artists. Nor does it mandate any artist's uncritical adoption of some extant symbol system lock, stock and barrel; one of the functions of professional artistic activity is the generation of new symbols and the redefinition of older ones. But it does imply that the professional artist is producing not mnemonics for him/herself but articulated ideas, communications, *messages* — intended to be received, open to interpretation, and subject to evaluation.

Unlike self-expression, the effectiveness of communication can be evaluated, and its substantiality and usefulness can be judged. Failure to communicate is a frequent phenomenon, due to either some flaw in the message and/or transmission process or the absence of a shared symbol system. Sometimes, too, of course, the problem lies with the receiver. However, if the audience laughs at the object with which you sought to make them gasp in fright, you the maker have probably failed to manipulate the symbolic structure effectively so as to evoke the psychoids of fear. The audience thus serves the artist not only as a target for the communication but as a tool for refining its delivery.

This suggests that the meanings of a particular work of art, however complex and ambiguous they might be, are to some extent specific and determinable — at least within their own culture in the era of their making. Certainly some artists believe this to be true. Let's go back to Picasso for a moment. Here's something else he said:

[Paul] Valery used to say, "I write half the poem. The reader writes the other half." That's all right for him, maybe, but I don't want there to be three or four thousand possibilities of interpreting my canvas. *I want there to be only one.* . . . Otherwise a painting is just an old grab bag for everyone to reach into and *pull out what he himself has put in.* I want my paintings to be able to defend themselves, to resist the invader, just as though there were razor blades on all the surfaces so no one could touch them without cutting his hands. A painting isn't a market basket or a woman's handbag, full of combs, hairpins, lipstick, old love letters and keys to the garage" [emphasis in the original].³³

Now it's true that no meaningful work of art is merely an empty vessel into which one is free to pour whatever emotions and ideas one happens to have on hand at the moment. The artist isn't obligated to lead us by the nose to his or her meanings. But — unless he or she is satisfied with any old response any of us might make, regardless of its appropriateness — it is the artist's job to point the audience towards some territory of interpretation, an arena in which possible likely meanings battle it out for dominance.

At the same time, there are always aspects of a work of which its maker is unaware. And, while an artist can certainly have conscious intentions in regard to the work, we must beware the intentionalist fallacy. "Between the intention and the act falls the shadow," wrote T. S. Eliot. Any work's actual effect is at least partly determined by the audience, as I. A. Richards has argued.³⁴ And, as communications theory assumes, there is always a difference between the message sent and the message received.

When an artist pays attention to it, the audience's response to his or her

³³ Quoted without citation of source in Worth, Sol, "Man is not a Bird," *Camera Lucida* 5, 1982, p. 32.

³⁴ See, for example, Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961, a reprint of the original 1929 edition). Elder Olson's comments on related matters in the concluding "Metacriticism" section of his *On Value Judgments in the Arts and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) are also pertinent.

work functions as what the founder of cybernetics, Norbert Wiener, first defined as the "feedback loop."³⁵ In communication theory, the feedback loop is any device used to measure performance so as to narrow that gap between intention and effect. Certainly one of the useful functions audience response in general and criticism in particular can provide to the artist is its service as feedback, as *information*. Used as a gauge of the differences between the message sent and the message received, such information enables the artist to use past performance to improve future performance.

If we agree that art is a manifestation of the cultural *zeitgeist*, the "spirit of the times," then one role of the critic in society is to serve as one of the culture's feedback mechanisms. Performance evaluations, if honest and thorough, are often less than favorable, and no one is ever expected to like the bearer of bad tidings. But no culture (and no individual psyche) has ever remained healthy that acquired the habit of disregarding its feedback and killing its messengers. Culturally and individually, giving and receiving criticism can easily bring out the worst in us; yet it is the only sure path to the discovery of what our best might be.

With all of that said and done, I come at last to that bullet my muse demands I not only bite but savor, the function of nay-saying as such, the moral necessity of it. Let me then get to it.

Whether or not it was ever so, what we call culture in our time — including art, of course — has to a considerable extent turned into something constructed by and/or under the direct supervision of power, and foisted pre-fab onto the populace. The international marketing system for art can serve as sufficient example for this top-down imposition of culture on the general public. A great many critics play far too complicitous a role in that structure, when they should instead be redressing the imbalance of power therein, providing a countervailing resistance, operating in the public interest, articulating the legitimate concerns of

³⁵ See Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (New York: Avon Books, 1967), pp. 36-39.

the public at large in this manufacturing of culture.

The opinions of the citizenry in this regard are rarely solicited by curators, museum directors, grants panelists, arts administrators and the assorted other gatekeepers who serve as functionaries of this complex, extensive merchandising and indoctrination system. On the contrary, let the average citizen raise his or her voice in anything but blind, wholehearted worship of the entire contemporary enterprise of art and the howl of indignation and scorn becomes instantly deafening. (Witness the disdain for the working class manifested in the supportive art-world testimony about and editorial commentary on the Richard Serra "Tilted Arc" controversy.) If thoughts could kill, as in Shirley Jackson's grim parable "The Lottery," then much of the midwest would be scorched earth right now, torched by the disdain for its inhabitants concentrated in New York's SoHo and related art ghettos in Los Angeles, Chicago, and a few other cities.

A century ago, Robert Louis Stevenson noted that "Enthusiasm about art is become a function of the average female being, which she performs with precision and a sort of haunting sprightliness, like an ingenious and well-regulated machine."³⁶ This condition — its symptoms most prominently visible among docent lecturers and hyperventilating press-release writers at museums — has spread widely during the intervening years, across genders and gender persuasions, so pervasively that even those who have not succumbed to it feel obligated to defer to the earnestness of its sufferers. As Harold Rosenberg pointed out in the early 1970s,

[I]t is inconceivable that any exhibition can be mounted that would cause people to guffaw or howl. What has vanished is not advanced art, as the Nazis planned, but the independent and unruly spectator — the inexpert citizen who laughs when a picture (as of two dressed-up men conducting a debate with a naked lady on the grass beside them) strikes him as funny and who is irritated when works are boring. The outstanding fact about art in the past fifteen years is the restoration of public piety toward works under

³⁶ *Virginibus Puerisque* (1881).

official auspices; it extends to anything, from pre-Columbian potsherds to big-edition prints, that has entered the precincts of art history. While avant-garde art was pulling down the pillars of the Salon, art theory was already toiling to restore them.³⁷

Someone — the critic, I propose — must step into the role of unruly spectator, since the situation has only gotten worse since Rosenberg penned that observation, with the signal exceptions of such recent debates as the Serra case and the Mapplethorpe/Serrano/NEA flap, which suggest that unruly spectatorship may be making a comeback. Though the orchestration by the fundamentalist right of the latter uproar cannot go unconsidered, the fact remains that informed and knowledgeable opposition to government and corporate subsidy of these works and their imposition on the audience prompts the same hysterical art-world defensiveness as does ignorant knee-jerk reaction. The necessity for uncritical support of the arts, which of course serves all those who toil in the urban vineyards of art marketing and presentation, has spread as an article of faith throughout the brainwashed audience for contemporary art.

So cowed has that audience become by high-financed art-world propaganda that many of them have taken to parading around wearing on their heads, their handbags, their chests and backs — in the form of buttons and T-shirts and stickers — one of the most idiotic slogans I've ever come across. It emerged in the early '90s, during the NEA flap just previously mentioned, and it reads, in its entirety, "Fear No Art."

The fatuousness of this notion steals the breath away. It implies, nonsensically, that all art is good (and, presumably, good for you!) — and, at the same time, that art as a phenomenon is powerless, incapable of doing you harm. All of these insinuations are lies.

Let me speak briefly, then about what so few of my colleagues seem willing to mention, much less identify: *bad art*.

³⁷ "The Art World: The Big Show — Art and the Crowd," *The New Yorker* 49, no. 11 (May 5, 1973), p. 103.

To begin with, let me distinguish between what I'll call *bad art* and what we might consider mere *failed art*. Please note that I'm not speaking here, under either rubric, of the derivative picture-postcard floral studies of your local camera club, the amiable beachscapes produced by the amateur watercolorists in your community, the well-made macramé and pottery in your neighborhood art fair, or any of the thousand varieties of similar ersatz generated by people sincerely if ineptly trying to locate and externalize their own modest creative impulses in professionally unambitious, basically harmless ways. Such work, grounded in a notion of art-making as primarily therapeutic and hobbyist, rarely solicits and even more rarely attracts serious critical attention, and hardly ever requires it, save when the occasional eccentric curator mounts a show of "thrift-store paintings."

So, excluding all that, the terrain I'm outlining encloses work produced by serious, craft-competent, working professional artists seeking to have (or succeeding in having) their works entered as reference points into the field of ideas for art activity in their own time, and the critical discourse around those works and ideas.

Much of that art, inevitably, doesn't make the grade — that is, doesn't prove provocative, resonant, or durable for any audience, even the most knowledgeable, even one composed of astute fellow practitioners. This is *failed art*, a large quantity of which gets generated in the production system for the art of western culture nowadays. (It seems unlikely that the same statistics applied during the Gothic period, for example, or in African art at any time.)

Except to the extent that our encounter with it can exhaust our capacity to attend to art that in some way succeeds, or can even preclude our coming across the latter, failed art is not to be feared (only dreaded, perhaps by the overburdened working critic).³⁸ Indeed, contemplating it critically often proves instructive, for the lessons it offers that only failure teaches. Nonetheless, to quote my colleague at

³⁸ For more on this issue, see my essay "The Vanishing Borderline" in my book *Depth of Field" essays on Photography, Mass Media, and Lens Culture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), pp. 81-90.

the *New York Observer*, Hilton Kramer, "Failed art is no less a failure even when all the conditions of failure have been accounted for."³⁹ Such work must be dealt with ruthlessly, if only to clear the decks. Someone has to put the art that pulls up lame out of its misery, and the critic is the only one likely to do so in public and on the record. This may discourage its producers, which is well and good; in a culture that, unprecedentedly, now produces far more art than it can consume, those who can be discouraged should be.

Beyond such art — art that proves itself tendentious, overwrought, less than fully realized, imaginatively limited, excessively derivative, vapid, too facile, merely clever, etcetera — we must come to terms with art that's problematic on deeper levels and in more pernicious ways. I refer to art (and art-related activities, such as its institutional presentation, for example) that, regardless of the presence therein of manifest genius, critical analysis reveals as deceitful, hypocritical, bullying, venal, in service to totalitarian forces, pandering to our worst prejudices, vicious, even sometimes murderous in its impulses.

Does such art exist? In my opinion, yes; surely each of us can name some loathesome, reprehensible, vile masterpiece. I'd cite Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, and anti-Semitic aspects of the writings of Pound, Eliot, and Céline as evidence. They bring to fruition or contain the seeds at least of something that, beyond the explanations of even the most expert and cogent psychoanalysis, I believe one must judge to be *bad* — morally, ethically, philosophically flawed, with some degree of severity. (I would go so far as to describe some such work as evil; but that term discomfits many nowadays, so for the purposes of this argument I substitute its milder version.)

If we agree that some art, past and present, fits that description, then pretending otherwise serves no useful purpose. Nor should we mistake the censoring of such work for censorship thereof, and flinch from the former in order not to appear to propose the latter, out of some misguided protective impulse.

³⁹ "Schnabel Go Home! MoMA's Latin Mess," *New York Observer* 7, no. 23 (June 14, 1993), pp. 1, 23. Even a stopped clock, I remind you, is right twice a day.

"[W]e do art no honor and no justice," wrote Jacques Barzun, "when we represent it as invariably humane, heroic and disinterested in its intentions, exclusively good in its effects, and thus not subject to reproach and accountability."⁴⁰

Precisely because its creators used their considerable craft expertise, artistic abilities, and access to inspiration to render those ideas palatable by making their works persuasive, credible and seductive, such art proves *fearsome*. It must meet opposition, as must such related sins as the willful misreading and/or misrepresentation of works of art for the purpose of serving various agendas. Opposing such malevolence falls to the critic as an unavoidable responsibility.

Identifying it as such, and attaching that identification to it in the marketplace of ideas, becomes the obligation of all who recognize its insidiousness and its potency, for art in all media has demonstrated extraordinary powers of persuasion. (Why else, as my muse insistently points out, would every dictator in our century have made absolute control of art a key element of totalitarian strategy?) And, as the analysts and explicators of the applications of those ideas and those powers, critics either stand against them or assist in their dissemination. The regimes of our century have all had their house critics along with their pet artists, and dissident critics of art have joined dissident artists in concentration camps and gulags, faced firing squads and had their heads too thrust to the chopping block.

I do not mean to imply that the uncovering of evil — or, if you prefer, of the morally wrong — in works of art can be achieved unerringly, and that these determinations by any single critic or group thereof can (or should) stand undisputed. Nor do I suggest that only one standard for gauging good and evil (mine) exists or deserves priority. Of course those evaluations remain open to debate; but, for that to be true, the debate must be opened in the first place. I mean rather that, in the words of Heinz Lubasz, "moral problems are real,

⁴⁰ From my notebooks, source unknown.

irreducible and vital even when they are insoluble,"⁴¹ and critics of art must find the courage to grapple with them in the arena of public discourse about art.

Finally, I do not want to appear to promulgate the belief that the only fearsome art is that which I adjudicate (my own choice of adjective here) as evil. I have encountered other art that I've found terrifying, though for different reasons — for its shattering insight into our individual and collective psyches, for example. The visual art of Francis Bacon and Francisco Goya, the writings of Marilyn French and Carolyn Forché, the photographs of Robert Frank and Joel-Peter Witkin, the lyrics and melodies of Bob Dylan, have generated profound tectonic shifts in my life, permanently altered my ways of thinking, feeling, seeing. While ultimately their effect proved nourishing to me (or I found nourishment in them, not always the same thing), their initial effect on me was enormously disruptive.

These works, and works by many other artists in all media, have persuaded total strangers to rethink their fundamental assumptions, challenge the received norms of their acculturation, overcome their inhibitions, and otherwise change their lives. Though those changes were not always expected, or welcome, we — myself among them — learned to accommodate ourselves to them, for they left us little choice. That too is power, great power, fearsome in its own way.

Whether or not we share similar tastes and susceptibilities, there is work like that in my life, and I expect there's work like that in yours; if there weren't, I doubt that we'd bother looking for more of the same, and reading and writing about the process. Proposing that art at its most potent poses no genuine threat to anyone or anything resembles nothing so much as telling your houseguests that your growling dog is toothless and can do them no worse harm than pissing on their shoes. I have a higher respect for the impact of art on culture than that. Were I given to button-wearing, in fact, mine on this subject would read thus:

Fearsome Art!
(and more of it)

⁴¹ From my notebooks, source unknown.

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Some of this I know my muse wanted to hear: that I accepted fully my involvement in the destruction business, my role as professional scold, the critic's position as "the disciplinarian of the arts" whose "function is to FRY the artists in kettles of boiling oil." (Her words, those. But you'd like her, really you would. Trust me.) She no doubt will not find all her reservations overcome by this last draft, however. I have revised it primarily to get it, and not her, off my back (where I expect her to stay, periodically thumping my shoulder, urging me to string 'em up by the short hairs). Still, I hope it will both mollify and chasten her, at least for a while.

Perhaps it is my nature to act more bloody-mindedly in practice than in theory. On the bench, I've demonstrated (I think) my willingness to impose life sentences, even without parole. Yet I believe in the possibility of redemption, so I hesitate, where my muse clearly does not, to mandate the death penalty. Do I see myself as more merciful than I appear to those whose work comes to stand before me, and those who read my decisions? Could be. Perhaps, even if I fill the role of "hanging judge," I just admire and model myself after those who maintain a certain dignity, and see to it that the ropes are properly adjusted, the defendant treated courteously, the rules of evidence scrupulously observed. Some like their executioners blunt, callous and brutal. That's not my style. A matter of taste, in the last analysis; unlike criticism, nothing you can argue with.⁴²

⁴² This essay is based on the text of a lecture that was first delivered at Loyola College, Baltimore, Maryland, on December 7, 1989.

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