

*Clement Greenberg*

## Art criticism



John Griefen, Untitled, 2006.

A recent work by an artist whose paintings Greenberg described as "Phenomenally minimal, aesthetically maximal" in his late years.

The following essay was written when Greenberg was involved in his seminars on aesthetics which were published posthumously as *Homemade Esthetics*. The article appeared in *Partisan Review* 1981 Volume XLVII Number 1, an issue devoted to "The State of Criticism." Earlier examinations of the subject can be found in "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name", *Encounter*, Dec. 1962. and "Complaints of and Art Critic", *Artforum*, Oct. 1967. Both can be found in *Clement Greenberg, the Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 4.*, edited by John O'Brian. Greenberg was exasperated throughout his later years by the absurdity and irrelevance of much of what purported to be art criticism.

**VALUE JUDGMENTS CONSTITUTE** the substance of aesthetic experience. I don't want to argue this assertion. I point to it as a fact, the fact that identifies the presence, the reality in experience of the aesthetic. I don't want to argue, either, about the nature of aesthetic value judgments. They are acts of intuition, and intuition remains unanalyzable.

The fact of aesthetic intuition, as distinguished from other kinds of intuition, has, for lack of a better word, to be called Taste. This word has acquired unfortunate connotations since the nineteenth century, for what are really irrelevant reasons. That great literary critic F.R. Leavis, while insisting on the primacy of value judgment, avoided the word for--as it seems to me--fear of these connotations. Instead, he resorted to "sensibility" or circumlocutions like "feeling for value" or "sense of value." (I may not be quoting with exactness, but I'm not misrepresenting.) I want to try to rehabilitate the word; Taste is the handiest term for what's meant, and somehow the bluntest--in part precisely because of the disrepute into which it has fallen. The word drives home the fact that art is first of all, and most of all, a question of liking and of not liking--just so. Liking and not liking have to do with value, and nothing else.

It's as though the shying away from the use of the word, Taste, had been a portent of the present general tendency to shy away from what it, or its synonyms, means. There is a reluctance nowadays to express value judgments in criticism--at least in criticism of painting and sculpture, and maybe of some of the other arts too.\* I mean outspoken value judgments, judgments that can be discussed. Implied judgments abound, and have to: they decide usually (though by no means always) what items, or occasions, of art critics give their attention to. But implied judgments don't get discussed enough, they don't get put on the table. Art will get explained, analyzed, interpreted, historically situated, sociologically or politically accounted for, but the responses that bring art into experience as art, and not something else--these will go unmentioned.

Need they be mentioned? Only in so far as it's art as art, and not anything else, that's to be talked about. Sure, art can be talked about as something else: as document, as symptom, as sheer phenomenon. And it does get talked about that way more and more, and by critics no less than by art historians and by philosophers and psychologists. There's nothing necessarily wrong in this. Only it's not criticism. Criticism proper means dealing in the first place with art as art, which means dealing with value judgments. Otherwise criticism becomes something else. Not that it is to be so narrowly defined as to have to exclude interpretation, description, analysis, etc.; only that it must, if it's to be criticism, include evaluation, and evaluation in the first place--for the sake of art, for the sake of everything art is that isn't information or exhortation, for the sake of what's in art's gift alone.

To experience art as art is--again--to evaluate, to make, or rather receive, value judgments, consciously and unconsciously. (A value judgment doesn't

mean a formulation or statement, a putting of something into thoughts and words; a value judgment takes place; the thoughts and words come afterwards.) The critic happens to be under the obligation to report his value judgments. These will be the truth, for him, of the art he discusses. It will also, most often, make for the greatest relevance, and greatest interest, of what he says or writes. Though I grant that the issue of what's interesting here may be a moot point for a lot of people.

I realize that I'm simplifying. But I'm not oversimplifying. I'm stating flatly what hasn't been stated flatly enough, or often enough with emphasis. But then the primacy of value judgment in art criticism used to be taken so much as a matter of course that it didn't have to be stated, much less stated emphatically. The last great art critics I'm aware of--Julius Meier-Graefe and Roger Fry--simply assumed it, just as E.D. Hirsch's literary critics did. And it is still assumed, as far as I can see, in music and architectural criticism, and in literary reviewing as distinct from "serious" literary criticism, as it isn't in art criticism or even art reviewing. Which is why I don't feel I'm laboring the obvious when I harp on the primacy of value judgment in the present context. Didn't the late Harold Rosenberg say that Taste was an "obsolete concept"? Didn't another reputable art critic refer recently to the weighing of the quality of specific works of art as "art mysticism"?

To be sure, value judgments of a certain kind--more than enough of them--are to be met with in the current art press. But they are not aesthetic value judgments. The values invoked are those of sheerly phenomenal newness, or of "objectness," or "information," or "process," or of purported demonstrations of the hows of perceiving and knowing, or of acts and things by which our notion of what's possible as art is expanded. The critics who take these values or claims to value seriously *ipso facto* exclude any appeal to aesthetic value, whether they realize it or not. To judge from their rhetoric, more often they don't. I said earlier that implied value judgments abound, and I meant value judgments that were properly aesthetic, for better or for worse. I want to correct myself somewhat. Being for the new simply because it's new, or being for a certain kind of art simply because it's in vogue, doesn't entail an aesthetic value judgment. Nor does rejecting what seems old-fashioned simply because it seems that. (Categorical judgments are in any case never truly aesthetic ones.) What's involved here is something I'd call aesthetic incapacity: the incapacity lies in letting irrelevant factors like newness and oldness shut off aesthetic experience, inhibit the operations of Taste. This amounts to, has amounted to, a kind of judgment on aesthetic experience itself. And it's this judgment, this disparaging judgment, that seems to control too much of what's offered as criticism of contemporary fine art.

Of course, there's more, and should be more, to art criticism than the expressing of value judgments. Description, analysis, and interpretation, even interpretation, have their place. But without value judgment these can become

arid, or rather they stop being criticism. (A bad work of art can offer as much for description, analysis, and interpretation--yes, interpretation--as a good work of art. It's possible to go on as long about a failed Goya as about a successful one.) As Meier-Graefe and Fry show us, description and analysis can carry value judgments with them, implicitly and otherwise. The literary criticism of F.R. Leavis shows that too, eminently. Donald Francis Tovey, in writing about music, shows it comparably. (It takes nothing away from Tovey to suggest that music, of all arts, seems most to compel the critic to evaluate as he describes or analyzes.)

But what about the extra aesthetic contexts of art: social, political, economic, philosophical, biographical, etc., etc.? The historical moment? Don't they have to be brought in? And how can aesthetic value be kept enough in sight in such contexts? It doesn't have to be. For when such contexts are brought to the fore it's no longer criticism that's being practiced. It's something else, something that can be valuable, something that can be necessary. But it's not criticism. And let those who occupy themselves with such contexts not think they're doing criticism; or that they're rendering criticism proper unnecessary.

I want now to enter a plea for the discipline of aesthetics. It's become routine lately to refer disparagingly to aesthetics, and there may be some justification. When you see the aesthetical lucubrations of a philosopher like Nelson Goodman treated with respect by others in the field you want to throw up your hands and conclude that anything can be gotten away with here, just as in art criticism. But that's not the whole story. Certainly artists don't need to be acquainted with aesthetics. However, it might be of help to those who teach art-acquaintance, that is, with the right kind of aesthetics, the kind that shows you what it's possible to say relevantly about art or aesthetic experience and what it's not possible to say relevantly. Acquaintance with this kind of aesthetics would most certainly be of help to a critic. It might lead him to keep more firmly in mind that aesthetic value judgments can't be demonstrated in a way that would compel agreement; consequently, that in the last resort it's his reader's or listener's taste that he has to appeal to, not his reason or understanding. The critic might also be brought, with the help of aesthetics, to see more clearly what his own experience only too often doesn't bring him to see at all: namely, that content and form can never be adequately differentiated, since the term form is always somewhat indefinite in application, while the term content is of no definiteness at all. An awareness of this might head off a lot of vain controversy. (It might also keep someone like Joshua Taylor, in his recent *The Fine Arts in America*, from referring to the "intense concern for content, not method, that characterized" the "procedures" of the Abstract Expressionists. This is also what comes of taking artists at their word.)

Some critics would also do well to consult a dictionary oftener. They might look up the word gestural, for example, and discover what a solecism they commit when they talk of gestural painting. Is it conceivable for a painting to be made

by means of gestures? Can a material object--or for that matter, a poem or a song--be created, fashioned, or altered by gestures?

It "signifies" that the appellation art critic has been narrowed down now to one who criticizes contemporary and recent art alone. When you deal with art further back in time you get to be called an art historian rather than an art critic. It was not always that way; it wasn't that way for Julius Meier-Graefe, or Roger Fry, or André Lhote, all three of whom wrote about past and present indiscriminately, and it was only ignorance that called any one of them art historian. Now it's also become assumed that an art historian proper is not to engage in criticism, not to express value judgments, but keep to scholarship and interpretation. As a consequence, painting and sculpture of the more than recent past get less and less evaluated or reevaluated, less and less criticized as art. There are exceptions, but that's just what they are: exceptions.

The case doesn't appear to be the same with music. There the productions of the past continue day in and day out to be evaluated and reevaluated along with those of the present, and to a great extent by the same people, whether musicologists or just plain music critics. Nor is the situation that much the same in literature either, despite all the truth there is in what E.D. Hirsch says. Literature of the past still does get discussed often enough in terms of aesthetic value. And while most literary scholars proper may not come near contemporary or very recent literature, literary critics still range between past and present with their value judgments, and do so as a matter of course, taking it for granted that without keeping an eye on the past it would be impossible to keep Taste sharp enough for the present. Of course there are exceptions here, but these are mainly reviewers, not literary critics proper, and not taken seriously--as, alas, their counterparts in the field of art are.

The difference for current art writing stems, I feel, from what's become the entrenched assumption that modern, modernist painting and sculpture have broken with the past more radically and abruptly than any other modernism has. The assumption is wrong, just as the notion of a radical break as defining modernism itself is wrong. This doesn't make the assumption any the less prevalent, as it has been for a long time. I remember Paolo Milano--an Italian man of letters and as cultivated a person as I've ever known--telling me back in the 1940s how surprised he was to gather from a review of mine in *The Nation* that I saw modernist art as not fundamentally or even phenomenally different in kind from art of the past; that was new to him. (His remark made me realize that originally I myself had made the same assumption to the contrary and had come to abandon it only unconsciously. In that *Nation* review I'd not at all made a point of indicating this change of view, I hadn't even known I was indicating it.) Anyhow a large consequence of this assumption of a radical, epochal break between the visual art of modernism and that of the past is, finally, the further assumption that the former has made value judgment, made Taste, irrelevant in dealing with painting and sculpture.

As I said in the beginning, even when it comes to current and recent art, criticism is ceasing to be criticism proper, ceasing to judge and assess. Look at the magazines devoted to contemporary visual art and see how more and more of the articles that fill them are scholarly or would-be scholarly, would-be high-brow in the academic way: explicative and descriptive, or historical, or interpretative, but hardly at all judicial, evaluative. Notice the proliferation of foot and tail notes, and how they attest to recondite reading, most of which has nothing to do with art as art. Meanwhile the value judging is pocketed off in the spot reviews (where even so, there's always a certain coyness enforced by the art magazines' large dependence on art dealers' advertising--for which, things being as they are, the magazines can't be censured). On the other hand there's now and then the laudatory or apologetic article about a given artist or artists which has to contain value judgments. Yet these are couched less and less in aesthetic terms. Aesthetic quality as such is no longer enough to warrant praise; other, extra aesthetic values have to be invoked: historical, political, social, ideological, moral of course, and what not. But what's new about that?

What's new is something else. That the value in itself, the autonomous value, of the aesthetic wasn't asserted so often in the past, at least in the Western past, doesn't mean that we're permitted to keep on doing the same. We've eaten of the Tree of Knowledge. The more ruthless examination and cross-examination of inner experience, the more searching introspection, that have gone with the advance (if it can be called that) of rationality have shown well enough that the aesthetic is an intrinsic, ultimate, and autonomous value.\* Art for Art's Sake has helped, and so have 200-odd years of aesthetics, both of them giving much and taking away enough. There's no excuse now for not realizing that when the absolute value of the aesthetic is doubted, the reality itself of the aesthetic is doubted, the absoluteness being inseparable from the reality. Just as this reality is there and can't be thought away, so the status of that value is there and can't be thought away.

Bearing this in mind can make the doing of art criticism--of any kind of aesthetic criticism--difficult. It means writing about art as art before anything else. And it does seem easier to write and talk about art as something else. I know it's easier for me. But it doesn't catch my interest much when I read or hear that kind of writing or talk. Almost, if not quite, I can do without it.

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\*E.D. Hirsch, Jr. in *The New York Review of Books* (14 June 1979): "Ever since Plato, literary theory has concerned itself almost exclusively with the problem of value, e.g., 'Are the ancients better than the moderns?' 'Are standards of judgment universal?' You can read through virtually all the major works of the important literary critics before the twentieth century without finding an extended discussion of the problem of interpretation. In Britain, writers like Sidney, Pope, Hume, Johnson, Coleridge, and Arnold ... asked of a piece of writing, 'Is it good?' or 'Why is it good?' rather than 'What does it mean?'"

"By contrast, ever since the revolution begun by the New Critics during the 1940s, and the enormous increase in the numbers of academic interpreters over the past forty years, the question of value has fallen into the background. . . ."