

The Ends of Criticism

Chloë Julius and C. Oliver O'Donnell

Tasked by the time-bound phenomena of the recent and the new, criticism—specifically, art criticism—often traffics in endings. Especially from the nineteenth century onward, these endings became something of an inevitability. Chasing an ever-advancing avant-garde, the art criticism of the modernist period repeatedly confronted the limits of its existing forms and conventions. Hence, the ever-present “crisis” that is the hallmark of modernist criticism. Yet if each crisis precipitated an ending, these endings always spelled a new beginning—a new criticism for a new art. Not so in the context of American art of the 1960s. Here, crisis became less of a motor and more of a wrench. Rather than provoke a new phase of modernist criticism, the decade’s new art seemed to suggest that modernism itself had run its course. As Leslie Fiedler had it in 1969: “To describe the situation of American letters at the end of the sixties is difficult indeed, almost impossible, since the language available to critics at this point is totally inappropriate to the best work of the artists who give the period its special flavor, its essential life.”¹ Fiedler notably characterized that period as holding “the death throes of Modernism and the birth pangs of Post-Modernism.”² Aligning criticism with the dying and art with the living, his 1969 essay “Cross the Border—Close the Gap” imagined a postmodernist criticism that would meet that fledgling art where it was.

Fiedler was not the only critic to claim that a link had been broken between art and criticism in the 1960s. Throughout the decade, countless arguments were made in this direction. These assertions are the focus of this special issue, which takes as its subject the ends of criticism as they were variously grasped by those writing about American art of the 1960s, especially in New York. By firmly placing those ends in dialog with the decade’s new art, our ambition is to bring the art that was such a vital part of the picture back into the conversation. For while the crisis of criticism in 1960s American art is a well-worn area of scholarly investigation, often such enquiries expunge the art from the criticism in question. In this issue, the ends of criticism will repeatedly interface with the promise of a new art—after all, this was the beginning against which the ends of criticism were most often wagered.

“The first critical reflex at the appearance of something new is usually an attempt to conserve psychic energy by assuring oneself that nothing really new has occurred”: so wrote Leo Steinberg in 1962 whilst addressing the problem posed by subject matter in Jasper Johns’s art.³ Problem, because a “half-century of formalist indoctrination” meant that critics were

¹ Leslie Fiedler, “Cross the Border—Close the Gap” [1969] in Fiedler (ed.), *Cross the Border—Close the Gap* (New York, NY: Stein & Day, 1972), 61.

² Ibid.

³ Leo Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of his Art,” in Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 23



1. Meyer Schapiro (center) and George Segal (right) in conversation in Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, Reuben Gallery, New York, 1959. Photograph by Fred W. McDarrah.

unable to see subject matter.⁴ Steinberg located the ends of that criticism in Johns's art, claiming that his work had provoked a crisis that would spell the end of the reign of formalist criticism over American art. While that reign was certainly undone, the promise of a new beginning for both art and criticism was not necessarily borne out. By holding onto the ends of modernism and beginnings of postmodernism at once—the death throes *and* the birth

⁴ Ibid., 22. We might think about Johns's sculpture *The Critic Sees* here.

pangs—this issue of Selva confronts both histories as fundamentally unresolved, doing so from the standpoint of the 1960s and from today.

The issue has been divided into two sections, respectively titled “Ends of Criticism” and “Beginnings of Art.” In both, it becomes clear that the incompatibilities between the norms structuring archetypal modernist and postmodernist practices were fundamental to the watershed cultural transformations of the period. These norms or rules were decidedly plural, taking a variety of permutations, but ultimately amounting to game-like forms of activity in which both artists and critics operated, on the one hand seeking to define, enforce, or follow rules and the other hand seeking to transgress or break them. Just as Johns’s embrace of subject matter, as noted above, was recognized as contravening the then-dominant formalist paradigm of artistic production, so too did critics such as Arthur Danto start arguing that art itself was a kind of rule-governed activity, a game played in what he dubbed an artworld.⁵ Going into the 1960s, of course, the very model of cultural play was itself familiar: Herbert Marcuse theorized the potential of liberatory play in *Eros and Civilization* of 1955 and Hans Georg Gadamer tracked some of the notion’s deeper history in his *Truth and Method* of 1960, making much of Schiller’s role in the story.⁶ In more recent art writing and art practice, game theory has certainly continued to attract interest, as scholars such as Pamela Lee have shown.⁷ Rather than focus simply on how artists instituted new games or critics theirs, the essays that follow trace moments of tension between these two spheres of cultural activity, cumulatively demonstrating how they were constantly coming up against each other in uncomfortable relation.

Rather than deal with the messiness of overlapping beginnings and endings, it would be far easier to designate the art criticism that predated the new art of the 1960s simply “old.” Yet, as the essays gathered in the first section highlight, the decisive break with the forms and conventions of pre-1960s art criticism came much later. In the writings of Annette Michelson, Allan Kaprow, and Barbara Rose—the three critics surveyed in this section—we find a concerted and sincere attempt to salvage those elements of modernist art criticism deemed still viable. Although their attempts were variously articulated through a critique of formalism, a truly new criticism was not yet on the table. Dying, perhaps, but not yet dead, the critical efforts of these three writers reveal that modernist art criticism was not immediately outmoded by the new art of the 1960s. This is why we chose to deal with the “Ends of Criticism” *before* the “Beginnings of Art”: by starting at the end, as it were, and—more importantly—by showing that end to be anything but resolved, we hope to challenge the convenience of the new art/old criticism dichotomy in describing the changes in art criticism during this period. A binary formulation is undeniably tempting, especially when the critics themselves appear to fall easily into two generational camps. Yet as Stephen Moonie points

⁵ Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61, no. 19 (October 15, 1964), 571–84.

⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955). Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* [1960], trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (London: Continuum, 1975), especially I.2.i, which is titled “Play as the clue to ontological explanation.”

⁷ Pamela Lee, *New Games: Postmodernism After Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

out in his essay on Michelson, rather than engage the likes of Clement Greenberg or André Bazin as “outmoded,” the new generation to which Michelson herself belonged viewed themselves as much more “entangled” with their art-critical forebearers than prevailing accounts suggest.

“Entangled” is certainly a helpful watchword for the essays in this first section. Just as Moonie locates a reluctance in Michelson to jettison entirely Bazin’s critical method in her dealings with 1960s art, Chloë Julius identifies in Rose a hesitancy to give up on Greenberg even whilst eviscerating formalist criticism in her three-part polemic “The Politics of Art.” Similarly, in the two contributions on Kaprow, we discover a writer maintaining a modernist commitment to the significance of form, in Alex Potts’s essay, as well as an artist preserving what Emily Capper calls a “modernist pedagogy” in his 1959 performance *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*. As Capper underscores, the fact that performance art did not exist as a genre at the time of the Happenings reveals how artists like Kaprow associated with the “new art” were tasked with negotiating the knotted intersection of the ends of criticism and the beginnings of art. There were, of course, those who outright refused that task. Moonie draws our attention to Hilton Kramer, another member of the art-critical old guard, whose collection *The Age of the Avant-Garde: An Art Chronicle 1956–72* was, perhaps surprisingly, sympathetically reviewed by Michelson. While joining Kramer with Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg through their shared “rhetoric of defenses and rejections” regarding contemporary practice, Moonie—following Michelson—stresses the changed political circumstances fueling these critics’ apparent conservatism. Potts, also attuned to these changed circumstances, adds another voice into the mix: Meyer Schapiro, whose uneven relation with contemporary practice is taken up in the next section by Oliver O’Donnell. By affirming the resonance of Schapiro’s earlier conception of the avant-garde’s political imperative within Kaprow’s later art writing, Potts shows how the legacy of the 1930s continued to be worked through in the art writing of the 1960s. Along with Julius, Potts reminds us that the confrontation between the Old and New Left animated many of the critiques of formalist art criticism in the 1960s. And, just as the Old Left debates continued to haunt the New Left (despite their own renunciations), the loose threads of modernist criticism continued to be woven into the art criticism of the 1960s, even as a new art was supposedly just beginning.

The second block of essays, “Beginnings of Art,” considers how four critics confronted the new art of the 1960s in different ways. First, Schapiro and Greenberg, both from the same generation of Jewish New York intellectuals, are respectively analyzed by Oliver O’Donnell and Daniel Neofetou. Though Schapiro and Greenberg are more strongly associated with the modernist art of their generation—especially the Abstract Expressionism of the New York School—O’Donnell and Neofetou both show that there was considerable compatibility between their critical sensibilities and the 1960s art that they confronted in their later lives. O’Donnell demonstrates this by analyzing Schapiro’s rarely discussed writings on artists such as Johns, Kaprow, and Warhol, revealing that these artists formed their practice in productive, rather than antagonistic, dialog with Schapiro himself. Neofetou, in turn, shows how Greenberg’s notorious interest in medium specificity is in fact compatible with practices like

Duchamp's readymades by unpacking how central to both is an embodied intuition irreducible to dominant concepts.

Next, the writings of Craig Owens and Gregory Battcock, two critics who embraced the new art of the 1960s and of a younger generation than Schapiro and Greenberg, are respectfully analyzed by Karen Lang and Jennifer Sichel. Though a conventionally postmodern interest in identity surely did play a larger role in the writing of Owens and Battcock than it did for archetypal modernists, Lang and Sichel show that a concern for modernist qualities like form still pervaded Owens's and Battcock's work. In Owens's case, this is revealed by way of his interest, following a misreading of Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes that Lang helps tease out, in the fragment and allegory, two forms which Owens frames as pushing against modernist assumptions about autonomy and historical intention, but which are forms nonetheless. This suggests that the "allegorical" art that Owens championed—for instance, the meta-pictorial photography of the Pictures Generation, which often deploys irony in biting critique of modernist principles—necessarily cohered into unified, autonomous wholes no matter how dependent on fragments of previous art they undoubtedly were. For Battcock, the issue of "anti-art," a term appropriated from Herbert Marcuse, similarly amounts to a radical attempt to create a completely new form of expression, especially in relation to his queer identity. In this instance, classic debates over minimalist sculpture clearly lie just beneath the surface of Battcock's prose; the supposedly additive nature of our experience of minimalism, wherein we are unable to retrieve the artist's original intentions and performatively project our own identity onto the work, self-evidently resonates with Michael Fried's famous modernist critique of minimalism.⁸ That this modernist critique has been widely suspected to be premised on homophobic assumptions in turn relates to the new forms of criticism and to the "anti-art" that Battcock championed while at the same underlining how those practices instantiated forms nonetheless.⁹

Cumulatively, such cases demonstrate with considerable detail how the ends of criticism were worked through—rather than outright rejected—by interfacing with the beginnings of a new art. Instead of two warring camps, we find a plurality of art-critical approaches that resemble one another far more than the critics then, and art historians since, let on. When brought together, they lead to an important conclusion: the history of art criticism in the 1960s, and all the more so in New York, is not simply a matter of siding with the aging modernists or the rising postmodernists, let alone disaggregating the supposed "old" criticism from the new art. The following essays show that those divides are more ambivalent than political battle cries about form or flatness, identity or irony would lead one to believe. Framing figures such as Schapiro and Greenberg or Michelson and Rose through the lens of intellectual history shows that the groups and generations to which they belonged and with which they sparred had more in common than perhaps even they were prone to recognize. The mistake, it seems, comes from us identifying too strongly with these critics and not letting them be the historical figures that they became. Since the postmodernist episode, however,

⁸ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 10 (summer 1967), 12–23.

⁹ For instance, see: Christa Robbins, "The Sensibility of Michael Fried," *Criticism*, vol. 60, no. 4 (fall 2018), 429–54.

has now also become part of history and is surely no longer new—no longer ours—perhaps we can now finally see these critics as the full historical figures that they were, and recognize that the ends of their criticism are not the same as our own.