

# Accepting the Lesson of the Worst



To paraphrase Bill Hicks, Satan is getting his cock sucked on the regular these days. The central clue would be the black worm of jism spilling from the lips of all too many of today's critics. The marauding stench dripping from newsprint across the nation, like an overfull belly, enters the nostrils and quickly makes its way to the brain, softening the cerebral cortex, enabling a general readership to confuse noxious drivel with critical acumen, vacuity with sound judgment. Yet, one would hardly know it, since inanity regularly parades itself as thought within a culture that prides itself on the willingness of its average citizens to resign themselves to getting ass fucked with a frequency that would melt a lead pipe.

I wish that the high priestess of the NY centered art world provided a stellar exception to this piteous rule, but alas, like all priests and priestesses, she in the final analysis councils resignation. As we have learned from Nietzsche and Breton, or if one prefers the more contemporary words of Alain Badiou, a priest or a priestess is not merely "a clerk for established religions," but "anyone for whom rebellion is no longer an unconditional value." Priests and priestesses are a dime a dozen these days. And yet art should, despite all its foibles, remain a potent exception to the rule of resignation. Even if it now seems laughable to the urbane to speak of art and rebellion in the same breadth; even if the legacy of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde is indeed threatened by the prevalence of "intellectually decorous" (to borrow one of Smith's truly insightful formulations) art that today unthinkingly dabbles in its codes; it seems to me necessary for art to affirm their principled conjunction.

This, I dare say, puts me at odds with Roberta Smith, the NY times critic who has recently thrown her substantial institutional weight behind a (re)turn to "art that seems made by one person out of intense personal necessity, often by hand" over-against an art she loosely labels, post-minimal, "whose visual austerity and coolness of temperature" is "dispiritingly one-note." The willingness and candor with which Smith takes stalk of the current artistic conjuncture in "Post-Minimal to the Max," February 14, 2010, is no doubt refreshing. It is also rare indeed to find a critic so eager to excoriate New York's museum

culture and curatorial elites for producing a homogenous brand, reinstalling an unquestioned "master-narrative," and engendering what she fears as a post-minimal consensus.

However, if there is indeed a discernible post-minimal consensus, it has little to do with what was originally at stake in the critical break with minimalism. And I dare say, that it has little to do with the works that she is now labeling post-minimal. The fault lies in her own judgment. The production of such a consensus as a theoretical object depends, it seems, upon the ability of her own aesthetic gaze to isolate crude and abstract formal generalities that traverse what would otherwise be divergent artistic orientations. Are the concerns of Orozco, Sehgal, Horn and Fischer really identical as Smith would have it? Her interpretation of the post-minimal implies that nothing more was at stake in the critique of minimalism, and that is to say modernism, than a merely *stylistic* set of concerns.

It should be clear now why I find her position so odious. Why she joins the pantheon of figures such as MC Hammer, Debbie Gibson and Rick Astley who have fallen to their knees before Satan's scaly member, whose compliance, according to the great Bill Hicks, have lowered the standards of the earth. She is perhaps all the worse since she cloaks her stupidity in critical refinement. For it is no easy task to discern why her own manner of judgment is responsible for engendering the very object she proposes to criticize and thus also the kind of master narratives she supposedly is interested in opposing. Her historical blindness to the antagonisms that animated the neo-avant-garde are not only shared by the "intellectually decorous" practices she now rightly criticizes, but her discourse makes them possible. She thus seems to be chasing her own tail. Yet, this chase only gets started by her initial reduction of the historical stakes of the critique of minimalism to a combat between styles. Thus rather than perceiving difference within a divided field, she sees homogeneity.

This belies the fact that her concern with post-minimalism being a new "big-box chain featuring only one brand" has *little* do with the problem of chains or brands, and *everything* to do with *what* is being sold. In other words, she wants a different product. In this case, she wants a different style.

And in the last instance her only justification for that preference cannot even appeal to what ol' man Kant once called taste; it rather concerns her palett, what Kant would have dismissed as the *agreeable*. For Smith the critic is no different than a sommelier responsible for pairing the appropriate art object to the desired mood; art no different than a lifestyle; artistic production a species of self-expression; the art object no different than the commodity. Her ultimate point is not to say that she dislikes what she is calling post-minimalism. Au contraire, she finds perfectly agreeable the Whitney's recent staging of exhibitions of Dan Graham, Robert Smithson, Lawrence Weiner and Robert Matta-Clarke (the fore-fathers of post-minimalism). But as she says, "That's not the point. We cannot live by the dematerialization—or the slick rematerialization—of the art object alone."

And should we not respond, "But what's the difference, since the very terms of your debate seem to divest such aesthetic decisions of any of their principle stakes." Her rejoinder perhaps, "Some styles are better palliatives. They allow one to all the better accommodate the worst in life. I don't mind a little dematerialized art and some slick rematerialized art, but I want this heady aesthetic balanced out with something warm, perhaps soothing like Lois Dodd's "Sunset," something that can enchant." It may be old fashioned. But I too am allergic to any relapse into magic, anything that refuses the lesson of the worst.

At bottom, is this not what art for Roberta Smith becomes? A refusal to accept the worst? A potent mechanism to keep at a safe distance the grim picture of culture under capitalism? Reading Smith makes one long for the reactive vitriol that gushed from the gifted pen of Clement Greenberg. Rather, we are left with his lobotomized avatars that have thoroughly dispensed, unwittingly I should add, with his principled even if flawed legacy.

Our age is indisputably barren. We no longer have Greenberg's certainties. For the artist today there is no Ariadne to weave a thread through this labyrinth of despair and the complexities implied by our aesthetic decisions. Yet, there is little doubt that we artists and critics cannot accept forms of judgment that do nothing other than resign oneself to a world by pretending that meaningless distinctions (differences between styles) in fact mean something. Rather than a resigned happiness whose correlate is the veritable industrialization of positive thinking (cruelly and economically dissected by Étienne Dolet in this issue's Margin of Utility) and the deification of all forms of consensus, we must find the courage to accept the worst.

Should our art enable us to go merrily to our offices with a contented nod of the head?

My answer. Invoking if I dare the now potent and vast legacy of negation too often forgotten even if often invoked. NO

-Ludwig Fischer