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During the exhibition the gallery will be closed: contemporary art and the paradoxes of conceptualism

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4. Artists and Critics in the Culture of Design

“The less we conduct our life in accordance with the precepts of tradition or inner conviction,” writes Hugues Boekraad,

the more it is influenced by professional languages and patterns of action and by categories of evaluation and observation. It is at that moment that designers make their appearance. The function of design – including the design of one’s own life – has become so dominant that it can serve as a metaphor for post-traditional life. In the absence of prescribed forms, life becomes a quest for new forms.³⁴⁴

Once again, we find confirmation of the fact that the primacy of design is identical to the regime of visibility.

The culture of interiority is abolished by the culture of design, which by definition focuses on externality and visibility. As a strategy of visualisation, design is, one could say, the quintessence of postmodern self-determination, both for institutions and individuals.³⁴⁵

The idea of a pure “culture of interiority” which, because of its disregard for matters of appearance, has been eradicated by a postmodern culture of design may well offer the culture critic a convenient starting point, but it is stated in terms that are too absolute. After all, there is little consistency in claiming that a certain phenomenon, in this case the culture of design, is extremely superficial, if at the same time it is said to have profound consequences. If the traditional culture of interiority and the postmodern culture of design really had no common ground at all, the latter would not have been able to affect the former, let alone eradicate it. In reality, they do have common ground: there can be no culture without an awareness of form, no substance without

³⁴⁴ Frederike Huygen and Hugues Boekraad, *Wim Crouwel. Mode en module* (Rotterdam: 010, 1997), 189.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 192. In the same manner, see also Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (London/New York: Verso, 2003).

representation. All the more reason, then, for critics to look for reciprocal adaptations and transformations rather than to fear for the end of the idealist tradition.

In the previous chapters [of *The Regime of Visibility*], I have attempted to show something of the shifts and effects that have occurred in the field of art over recent decades under the regime of visibility and design. Although this undertaking is connected to Boekraad's notion of design as the "quintessence of postmodern self-determination", it should be clear that issues related to the visualisation of the non-visual and the externalisation of internal processes are not by definition alien to the agenda of the artist. On the contrary, since time immemorial such issues have belonged to the core business of visual art.



In contemporary art, the primacy of design coincides with the dictates of professionalism. An important presupposition with regard to artistic practice is that every facet of the creative process can be planned, controlled and substantiated. Artists who fail to comply are generally considered unprofessional. For some artists in the 1960s, wearing a suit and tie was still part of a satirical pose. Since the '80s and '90s, however, the external signs of professional competence have been completely integrated into artistic practice: even if artists now wear a T-shirt and jeans, they have a fax machine and an assistant to operate it; they are able to make detailed estimates, compile project dossiers and participate in competitions. What was referred to earlier as a managerial revolution in art seems to have been brought to completion at this time.

For Wim Crowwel and his colleagues at Total Design, the streamlining and professionalisation of the design trade was still a way of distinguishing themselves from the artist-bohemian. Design firms needed to dissociate themselves from purely instinctive applications of form in order to gain entry to the corporate world of professional services. Today, however, the dictates of professionalism are being imposed equally on all

practitioners in the creative sector, artists and designers alike, which partly erases their differences again.

And the irony of history goes even further. In the previous chapter, I drew a parallel between conceptual artists and graphic designers in the '60s. Both groups erected a watertight partition between information and visualisation, which enabled them to firmly limit their own responsibility to one of the two halves of the creative process. As the example of Jeff Koons demonstrates, such semi-accountability is no longer acceptable for contemporary, neo-conceptual artists. They not only claim responsibility for the concept and the planning of the work, but also direct its execution, even when farming it out. (Koons may appear to be an extreme and rather exceptional case, but another example is Cindy Sherman, whose works are improvised rather than designed. Her habit of dividing the creation of a work between two characters – one active and one passive – and of playing both roles herself testifies to a need to minimise her dependence on the involvement of others.)

To this, we should now add that the '90s saw graphic designers – or at least the trendsetters among them – claiming greater responsibility too. The result is that the parallel between designers and visual artists has persisted. Wim Crouwel's view that a designer should never interfere with the content of the information to be conveyed has not gained a following. His unresolved dispute with Jan van Toorn has been won by the disciples of the latter. Today's graphic designers see themselves as editors as well as suppliers of content. One of the *idées reçues* of the contemporary design world is that form cannot be separated from content; that content is, by definition, "mediated". Designers feel they are allowed, or even obliged, to use all available means to intervene in the transfer between client and public. An instrumental, functional type of design no longer stands for transparency; instead, it connotes manipulation and hidden institutional agendas. Designers today pose critical questions to their clients and keep a sharp eye on the environment in which the product to be designed is intended to function. They claim a role as author. The crediting of Bruce Mau as co-author of the Koolhaas opus *S,M,L,XL* is a notorious example of a widely

accepted practice. Essays, conferences and curricula have been devoted to the theme of “the designer as author”.³⁴⁶

The way certain design critics conceive of their own task suggests that visual art and graphic design can now be perceived and assessed analogously – not because the creativity of the designer is thought to approach the autonomous genius of the artist, but because both artist and designer are concerned with a form of institutional critique, and thus produce some version of *applied concept art*.

The “question of application” implies an analysis of the relationship between formal, intrinsic and contextual aspects, and leads to the question of how the design holds its ground in the interaction with its environment – a question that is deemed inappropriate within the doctrine of autonomous art. Entangled in the web of visual culture, art is more than ever part of this environment rather than separate from or above it, and basically every artist has become a designer, even if not every designer makes art.³⁴⁷



If it is part of the legacy of conceptual art that artists can no longer simply “make” things, does this imply that every single difference between visual art and design has disappeared? That the boundaries between the disciplines have become completely blurred? Does it follow from the characterisation of design as the “quintessence of postmodern self-determination” that ultimately all visual disciplines – including painting, television, architecture, urban planning and film – will become completely subsumed into the super-category of design?

An initial answer to these questions must be negative. In each of these disciplines, all that practitioners can do is make sure that, within the specific context, the regime of visibility and the principles of good design are taken into account. As long as every discipline continues to

³⁴⁶ In 2001 the School of Visual Arts in New York devoted a conference to the theme “Designer as Author”. The same year Dutch critic Max Bruinsma gave a lecture entitled “Designers are Authors”.

³⁴⁷ Max Bruinsma, “Elke kunstenaar is een ontwerper. Pleidooi voor een ontwerpkritische praktijk”, *Metropolis M* 21:1 (February-March 2000), 21.

have a discourse of its own and a specific frame of reference – something that is guaranteed by the specialisation of institutions and experts – it is bound to persist as a separate discipline, even if the last external differences have disappeared. Artists as well as graphic designers act as “professionals”, and professionalism is difficult to imagine in the absence of a specific and delineated profession.

A second answer, that in no way detracts from the first, takes the opposite approach. The well-rehearsed discourse of blurring boundaries fails to appreciate the fact that the boundaries of art already disappeared 50 or 100 years ago. Ever since artists first came up with works that were apparently indistinguishable from industrial products or everyday objects, it has been impossible to determine the properties of visual art as a specific domain on purely visual grounds. Nevertheless, time and time again, the promotional machine of contemporary art declares euphorically that “the boundaries are blurring”. This tendency only proves how desperately these boundaries are needed, and will continue to be needed, if only to allow the avant-garde gesture of transgression to retain its relevance. In reality, the fact that some artists step into the shoes of industrial designers, documentary filmmakers or fashion photographers is not exceptional at all, since it is impossible to define the rule to which such practices would form an exception. The prophets of blurring boundaries ignore the fact that, outside the presentation or production context, no one knows what it is that makes a work of art recognisable as such and, therefore, no one can indicate the point beyond which visual art no longer coincides with itself.

There are no longer any criteria to determine what it means to be a visual artist. No specific skills are required of visual artists (unlike artists working in other branches, such as music, dance, film or typography). The profession lacks undisputable norms of competence and expertise. Anything can be a work of art, as long as an artist labels and presents it as such. Although many observers regret this fact or even try to disprove it, it is essentially the great merit of art in the twentieth century. The unrecognisability of visual art, coupled with the loss of a general notion of workmanship, represents the downside of the

boundless freedom that artists possess when it comes to defining their work. What visual art is, is an open question, to which every work of art provides a one-off, concrete answer.³⁴⁸

Artist X possesses quality x, artist Y possesses quality y, but neither of these properties is inherent to art itself nor directly deducible from it. The very fact that quality x changes into a weakness or a handicap when it occurs in artist Y makes this clear. The strength of the individual artist is a contingent fabric of properties, unsuited to generalisation.

Afraid of jeopardising their credibility and social position, many art world insiders tend to deny this fact. They wear themselves out trying to provide a general definition of the expertise of the visual artist. The point is well illustrated by the following conversation:

*Can we still speak of a general expertise? – The expertise of the artist lies in the organising of expertise. – So how does an artist differ from a manager? – He tilts the perspective and thus changes the way things are “seen”. – He is a dilettante; he strays into unknown territories and comes up with unexpected solutions. – But how do you distinguish this dilettantism from that of my neighbour or anybody else? – Your neighbour doesn’t make a profession of it.*³⁴⁹

Confident statements like these clearly demonstrate the impossible position of the visual artist in the information age. The artist is seen as a “qualified dilettante” – a “professional amateur”: someone who, like ordinary people, knows nothing about most things, but who effectively employs the expert knowledge of others, just as managers do. Compared to real managers, however, artists have a “different” view of the world, which enables them to come up with unusual, singular, out-of-the-ordinary solutions. Above all, artists are professional; in everything they do, they display the utmost dedication and competence – something of which ordinary people, caught up in the daily grind, are no longer

³⁴⁸ Cf. Camiel van Winkel, *Moderne leegte. Over kunst en openbaarheid* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1999), 100-104. For a further substantiation, see Thierry De Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 1996).

³⁴⁹ Paraphrase of a debate between Alex Adriaansens, Q.S. Serafijn and Let Geerling, as chaired by Henk Oosterling and published in *Interakta* 5 (2002), 142.

deemed capable. The British artist Martin Creed has aptly summed up this paradoxical situation: “It’s true, anyone can do it... It’s just I’m better than anyone else at it.”³⁵⁰



In modernity, the more the responsibility for the work of art came to lie exclusively with the artist, at the expense of the client or the patron, the more the responsibility for *the interpretation* of the work shifted to the beholder, at the expense of the artist. The subjectification of modern art occurred, then, in two independent forms – two forms that correct and counterbalance each other: the subjectification of production and the subjectification of reception.

The control that artists have over their work is at once unrestricted and minimal. During the creative process, they can consider every option and take all the decisions themselves; they can determine how the work is to be made and where it will be presented. But as soon as the work is finished, it no longer seems to be their own. The moment they step into the limelight with their work, it begins to slip away and to alienate itself. Or, worse still, the work is already detaching itself from them even while they are still making it; it happens as soon as they step back to contemplate and evaluate what they have done “as if through someone else’s eyes”. It is impossible for artists not to anticipate the reaction of the public at some point and to some degree, or not to determine their attitude towards the expectations that people have of them. (Even when Cindy Sherman deliberately contravened the prediction made by certain critics about the future development of her work, she was in fact allowing their views to influence her.³⁵¹) For some artists, anticipating the reaction of the public is no less than an artistic strategy. They design a full range of impressions, associations and

³⁵⁰ Quoted in Fiachra Gibbons, “Judges switched on as Turner Prize goes to the Creed of nothingness”, *The Guardian* (10 December 2001).

³⁵¹ “The only time critical writing really affected my work was when it seemed like someone was trying to second-guess where I was going next: I would use that to go somewhere else.” Cindy Sherman, cited in: David Frankel, “Cindy Sherman Talks to David Frankel”, *Artforum* 41:7 (March 2003), 55.

experiences that they imagine will occur in the mind of the viewer. The predicted response of the public thus generates the blueprint of the work even before it is made. This approach may restore the illusion of total artistic control, but it actually increases the alienation; indeed, these artists are only internalising the externalised condition of the work.

The significance of 1960s conceptual art is closely related to the paradox of subjectification. Conceptual artists (or the most radical among them) interrupted the artistic process in order to admit an “alien” element, thus signalling that the work is never completely the artist’s own. By separating the conception of a work from its realisation, and leaving the execution of a script to others, or by not interfering in a predetermined process and accepting any outcome of it, they confirmed that the artist’s control is both all-embracing and non-existent. Conceptual artists abandoned once and for all the pretence that the artist possesses specific expertise. They made art in the awareness not only that it had become impossible to decide whether a work of art was professional and competent, but also that this undecidedness was inherent to art in the modern era.³⁵² They realised that the pure subjectivity of the autonomous gesture and the pure objectivity of chance – “subjective triumph and objective randomness”³⁵³ – are largely indistinguishable when it comes to their material residue. Frank Stella’s early paintings had made this much clear to them.

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Although the managerial revolution in art took place via conceptual art, the consequent imposition of the dictates of professionalism on contemporary art is not in the spirit of conceptual artists. They had a more ambivalent attitude towards the professional competence of the artist than is customary now. Their tendency to refrain from evaluating

³⁵² Cf. Dirk Pültau, “De kunst van het diletantisme”, in: *De Witte Raaf* 90 (March-April 2001), 12. See also Stanley Cavell, “Music Discomposed”, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* [1969], new ed., (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 180-212.

³⁵³ Pültau, “De kunst van het diletantisme”, 17.

the outcome of their scripts is actually unthinkable in the situation of today: critical self-assessment is the sine qua non of contemporary art practice. The norm, upheld by critics, teachers and curators, is that the artist critically observes and evaluates every stage in the creative process. Jeff Koons is therefore not alone in his rejection of the premise that any result is a good result.

The historical impact of conceptual art has produced two contradictory tendencies. Its characteristic formats – text panels, photographic documents, temporary “situations”, performances, etc. – have become part of the toolbox available to any contemporary artist. At the same time, the criteria for judging works of art have never been updated in the spirit of conceptual art.³⁵⁴ Artists like Lawrence Weiner wanted art to transcend value judgments in terms of creativity, originality and innovation. They strove to dismantle the normative effect of such criteria. In their view, the reception of works of art should be determined more than in the past by the contribution and initiative of those at the receiving end. In 1972 Weiner stated that the “receiver” of his work could decide at any moment to destroy a material realisation if he or she needed space (for example for a new TV set) or could make an alternative version, should this be occasioned by new insights or a change in material preferences.³⁵⁵

As one movement among many, conceptual art has been granted its place in the annals of twentieth century art, yet it has not had a lasting effect on the way the history of art in the twentieth century is being written. Creativity, originality and innovation remain the dominant concepts. Basically, all those institutionally engaged in the professional judgment of art objects – critics, museum curators and art historians – have managed to shield themselves against the implications of conceptual art. The intended separation of conception and execution

³⁵⁴ This inconsistency explains why art since the mid-'70s has become so much more vulnerable to accusations of plagiarism. Cf. Camiel van Winkel, “The Obsession with a Pure Idea”, in: cat. *Conceptual Art in the Netherlands and Belgium 1965-1975*, ed. Suzanna Héman et al. (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2002), 42 ff.

³⁵⁵ Lawrence Weiner, “October 12, 1969”, in: Ursula Meyer, ed., *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972), 217-218.

– the replacement of a finished work by an open description or instruction – threatened to destabilise the very idea of a considered quality judgment. If any realisation is a good realisation and any result a good result, what more is there to say about it? Conceptual artists ignored the accepted modernist criteria of quality, thus ridiculing and undermining the position of professional assessors.

The visual appearance of a work is subordinate to the underlying ideas. Typical contemporary art clichés like this would appear to affirm the conceptual legacy but in fact serve a contrary aim, namely to safeguard the notion of original and critical artistic practice, which had been threatened by the nonchalant attitude of conceptual artists. The aim is also to protect artistic production in general from the regime of visibility that so strongly defines contemporary culture as a whole. In this context, what critics have written about the work of Cindy Sherman is highly significant. When the visual appearance of an oeuvre is barely (if at all) distinguishable from the products of commercial mass culture, critics refer to the underlying ideas – and the quality, originality and critical content of those ideas – as the basis for a positive judgment. In 1984 Rosalind Krauss's interpretation of Sherman's work amounted to a belated attempt to hold on to the spirit of conceptual art – an attempt that was inevitably stymied by its own radicality. When an artist makes work that is not original, the only way to judge that work positively is to assume a critical content. As Krauss denied both the originality and the critical content of Sherman's work, she inevitably ended up empty-handed.

Most critics claiming to be faithful to the spirit of conceptual art take care not to manoeuvre themselves into such an impossible position; they posit that conceptuality in art implies a critical attitude towards visuality and visual priorities. As the art historian Thomas Crow writes:

The “withdrawal of visuality” or “suppression of the beholder”, which were the operative strategies of Conceptualism, decisively set aside the assumed primacy of visual illusion as central to the

making and understanding of a work of art.³⁵⁶

Fellow art historians working to transform their profession into an interdisciplinary study of “visual culture” are accused by Crow of ignoring this shift in priorities in the art of the last forty years. He even finds that they reinstate, in camouflaged form, modernist dogmas of the 1950s that conceptual art had attempted to eliminate:

... high modernism in the 1950s and 1960s ... constructed its canon around the notion of opticality: as art progressively refined itself, the value of a work lay more and more in the coherence of the fiction offered to the eye alone. The term visual culture, of course, represents a vast vertical integration of study, extending from the esoteric products of fine-art traditions to handbills and horror videos, but it perpetuates the horizontal narrowness entailed in modernism’s fetish of visuality.³⁵⁷

In the previous chapter I have tried to show that the attitude of conceptual artists towards the visual aspect of art was less dismissive than Crow suggests. These artists were the first to take into account the primacy of information, the cultural “achievement” that essentially undermines any categorical distinction between visual and non-visual parameters. Conceptual art did not, therefore, favour the non-visual over the visual, as Crow would have it, or language over image, but insisted on their equivalence, thus changing the work of art into a medium for the transfer of information.³⁵⁸



³⁵⁶ “Unwritten Histories of Conceptual Art: Against Visual Culture”, in: Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1996), 213.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Jorge Pardo, a contemporary prototype of an “applied concept artist”, concurs with this: “I don’t believe in the difference between the decorative and the textual, because I think they both carry meaning on fundamentally the same level. To look at an ornament can be just as generative as to read a text. Whether the information that is produced comes from the relationship of the ornamental or the textual is all the same to me.” Jörn Schafaff and Barbara Steiner, “Interview with Jorge Pardo”, in: Schafaff and Steiner, eds., *Jorge Pardo* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2000), 10.

The lack of solid, a priori criteria for the critical judgment of works of contemporary art means that recourse is often taken to an outdated avant-garde discourse, causing the work to be read as a refusal by the artist to submit to the mediocrity of human existence and the perfidiousness of modern, capitalist society. Even well-established and professional critics who, if asked, would confirm the demise of the avant-garde, unconsciously cling to this discourse by employing some form of critical negation or negativity as the ultimate touchstone for art. (In the passage cited above, this is discernible in Crow's use of terms like "withdrawal" and "suppression".) While the popular media have, as a rule, already chosen to appraise the work of artists on the basis of the principles of good design – actually a tautological procedure, as these media only recognise works of art that already comply with these principles – the specialist critics wish to retain the specificity of their judgment and their ability to draw distinctions. The avant-garde discourse, no matter how watered down, enables them to do this.

The fact, acknowledged by conceptual artists, that "information is primary",³⁵⁹ minimises the already reduced relevance of criticality or negativity as a criterion for the quality of contemporary works of art. Reinforced by the universal regime of bits in the digital era, the primacy of information has resulted in the abolition of the material difference between negation and affirmation. The time when the creation of an abstract painting was invariably interpreted as the refusal of a recognisable image, or even as an attack on the medium of painting itself, belongs to an irretrievable past. In 1951, Robert Rauschenberg's white monochromes were still experienced as an act of iconoclasm and, as such, food for scandal; with his *Erased De Kooning Drawing* two years later, Rauschenberg disclosed the hidden violence of his gesture. Nowadays such qualifications are obsolete. The refusal to create something visual, or to produce a recognisable image, just as well results in a package of information to be communicated; in terms of the exchange between artist and public, it makes little difference.

³⁵⁹ A phrase by Seth Siegelaub from 1969. See Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* [1973], (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1997), 125.

The question then remains as to whether this regime of information is compatible with the regime of visibility described in the first chapter of this book [*The Regime of Visibility*]. After all, these two regimes would appear to conflict. The first means that it makes no difference whether one visualises something or not; the second accepts only things that have been clearly visualised and can be seen. But even though the regime of information implies the equivalence of the visual and the non-visual whereas the regime of visibility implies their non-equivalence, what they have in common is, firstly, an acceptance of the fundamental *possibility* of visualising the non-visual, and, secondly, an indifference towards anything that might be lost in this translation. By causing a complete separation between information and visualisation in the realm of art, conceptual artists ushered in not only the reduction of art to a form of communication, but also (as we can ascertain with hindsight) its subjection to the laws of the media and the regime of visibility.³⁶⁰ Yet these artists can hardly be blamed for the specific consequences of this subjection in today's cultural situation; their responsibility was always, as mentioned previously, strictly delineated.

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The foregoing can now be summarised as follows. 1. Criteria for judging works of art have never been adapted in line with the spirit of conceptual art. 2. Anyone who does this will sooner or later become entangled in contradictions. 3. Still, it would be ill-advised to ignore the implications of conceptual art, since it was a symptom of social and cultural conditions that retain their relevance even today.

³⁶⁰ Looking back in 1996, Siegelau had this to say about it: "Art is always related to its time, but it is a dialectical relation; in one aspect, art reflected the radical politics of its time, but it also mirrored the other more conservative aspects, as the Sixties saw the rise of the tertiary sector, the service sector. One could argue that 'conceptual art' was just another facet of the rise of the communication society, global village, etc." Ute Meta Bauer and Maria Eichhorn, "Interview with Seth Siegelau", in: Paul Andriess and Mariska van den Berg, eds., *Art Gallery Exhibiting* (Amsterdam: Paul Andriess and Uitgeverij De Balie, 1996), 214.

Against this background, it is clear why art critics do not shrink from rhetoric in their efforts to uphold the validity of their critical and aesthetic judgments. Pleas for more “workmanship”, for a reskilling of artistic practice,³⁶¹ are merely a smokescreen put up to hide the indeterminacy of their aesthetic judgment, and the embarrassment it causes them. Now that the metier of art no longer offers any clear touchstones, the problem for critics is not that artists simply muddle along but that there are no universal criteria for deciding the quality of the muddle. Nobody is able to formulate in general terms the technical or aesthetic demands to be met for something to qualify as a successful work of art. Although this is an artistic achievement of the historical avant-garde, it evokes in many minds an image of crisis and impoverishment.

In such a situation, critics should not attempt to formulate new, contemporary quality criteria, which they can then use to re-establish their reputations for expertise; this would only result in unfounded self-confidence and new orthodoxies. (Even when simply trying to articulate one’s own personal taste in general terms, it is difficult not to underestimate the unpredictability of aesthetic judgment and thus bring oneself up short.) Moreover, such attempts would increase the confusion touched upon earlier between descriptive and prescriptive discourse.³⁶² Instead, critics should operate on the basis of a “post-conceptual consciousness”, which, to begin with, involves an awareness of the three points listed above. In principle, this form of self-reflection does not provide new touchstones; what it does is make critics realise why they have none, and why this situation is irreversible.

All things considered, there remains only one convincing guideline for art criticism, and that is that one should turn around all the

³⁶¹ See for example Cornel Bierens, “De gemakzuchtige slaapkamers. De beeldende kunst moet onderduiken”, *NRC Handelsblad*, Cultureel Supplement (19 May 2000), 1.

³⁶² Nicolas Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics” is a clear example of this unwanted hybridisation. Cf. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 1998).

arguments for and against the work of art in question – and *keep* turning them around. Each quality of the work should also be seen as a potential flaw, and each flaw as a potential quality. Artists parading as professionals should be criticised just as harshly as those posing as dilettantes; after all, neither of these positions is now tenable in a pure form. The same goes for the negativity or critical content of the work. As an artistic attitude, negation always includes an affirmative element: it is precisely in what is most abject and alien that artists – or in their place critics – recognise something akin to what is closest and most familiar or intimate. This dialectic is of particular importance when it comes to the opposition between art and mass culture. As has been argued at various points in this book, the rhetorical separation of the superficial from the profound – as two separate sectors within culture – hinders the development of more sophisticated forms of criticism and cultural analysis.

(In)competence and (un)professionalism represent a problem for critics just as much as for the artists they write about; the notion of a “professional quality judgment” is just as dubious as a critique presented as dilettante. What is more, the work may lead critics into territories like film, fashion and advertising photography, where their specialist knowledge offers little or no guidance. Instead of calling on artists to deliver more workmanship, or imposing a particular agenda on them, it would be better to admit that the critic is bogged down in the same morass as that in which the artist necessarily operates. The impossible demarcation of their own expertise, which nevertheless is always by definition a limited one, is a structural fact that both artists and critics urgently need to face.