

The Discourse Of Art Criticism by Donald Kuspit

What is called an art object is an object in the world. This statement is simplistic and truistic, but it makes clear that the way we relate to art objects is not any different in kind from the way we relate to objects in general. We invest a good deal of interest in them--in the last analysis, perhaps an even profounder interest than in ordinary objects, for socially we are led to have great unconscious expectations from art objects, which is one of the ways we privilege them. When we do engage them, it is with the same seriousness with which we relate to the significant others in our lives. We relate to art objects perhaps even more seriously, for the instinct we invest in them seems peculiarly concentrated--purified beyond contingency, as though the art objects we commit ourselves to were destined for us. We are drawn to them in a fatal attraction, relate to them in an elective affinity beyond all anxiety. If this is true, as I think it is, then the psychoanalytic understanding of object relations seems useful in understanding the critical character of our relationship to them. Art critical discourse, at its best, is the disclosure of the depth of our relationship to art objects--the reasons for the intensity of our relationship.

The discourse of art criticism privileges the art object with a systematic kind of attention to it, which unfolds an intimate relationship with it. This critical

discourse can seem so inseparable from the art object, that the discourse can come not only to represent it, but to function as its surrogate. When this happens, as it invariably does with the best art criticism, art criticism can be regarded as a kind of conceptual art. (The best art criticism is the narrative of a complex, intense conscious and unconscious involvement with the art object. It is a criticism whose concepts are transmuted passions, or stations on the way to the cross of alchemical involvement with the art object.) The more public or assimilated the art object becomes--the more it seems like an irreplaceable, readily comprehensible part of the social landscape--the more art critical discourse about it seems inseparable from it. Art critical discourse comes to be not simply an avenue of approach to it, but the very place in which it is established, the public square in which it is the central monument. We may be unconscious of the critical space we are standing in when we consciously view the monument, but without that space there is in a sense no monument to see. That "conceptual" space concentrates in itself all our consciousness of the art monument. The conceptual space is the necessary condition which permits it to take a "stand"--permits it to make even the most elementary physical stand. Without that space the art monument has only the most minimum existence; it crawls on the ground like an infant rather than stands upright in the world like an adult. As much as a public monument is established by the mental as well as

physical space it inhabits--it cannot really be said to establish itself--so the art object is established by (and in) the psychodynamic as well as historical/esthetic space created for it by art critical discourse about it. If there was no plaza of art critical consciousness marked out within the larger public realm or city of consciousness, the art object could not even be thought of as a "monument." It could not be known as either central or peripheral. It would simply be an art object barely differentiated from other art objects, and worse yet, from ordinary objects. That is, consciousness of and relationship with it would be "ordinary."

According to Baudelaire in the section on "What is the Good of Criticism?" in "The Salon of 1846," there are two modes of art criticism: the temperamental and the "mathematical." I regard this distinction--which I will explore later--as crucial and far from simple, if superficially obvious. It is a distinction between two basic modes of relating to the art object. Baudelaire regarded them as antithetical, and praised the former as much as he deplored the latter, indicating that he regarded them as discontinuous. I will argue, with the help of psychoanalytic object relations theory, that the relationship between them is more complicated. They are distinct, but not unrelated stages--the mathematical in a sense grows out of and socializes the temperamental, with all the pruning and control that implies--in the development of a serious,

intimate relationship with the art object. This development, just when it seems most mathematically complete--when it arrives at what seems like a full, "formal" clarification and exposition of the art object--unexpectedly points to a further, truly final stage of relationship to it. It is as though the temperamental relationship to it liberated it from enslavement in the Egypt of the everyday world, while the mathematical relationship to it was a kind of forty years of intellectual wandering in the desert with it--forty years of keeping it alive in the desert of its own esthetic purity and hypothetical self-sufficiency. It is only after this ascetic period of mathematical understanding of the art object that one realizes there is the promised land of another kind of relationship with it, another way of inhabiting it. The mathematical understanding at best permits one a glimpse of this promised land, but does not guarantee entry into it. The two modes Baudelaire describes are unwittingly propaedeutic to the final stage of revelatory relationship to the art object. They are experientially a leap of faith in a relationship to it that is difficult to realize, even unpredictable. They are a secondary discourse within this original relationship. Authentic art criticism involves a persistent drive, alternately impatient--temperamental--as well as patient--mathematical--to disclose this original relationship to the art object. The disclosure is itself the step in the development catalyzing the original relationship --seemingly bringing it into being. Yet the epiphanic,

climactic disclosure of the originality of the relationship could not take place without the entire development of the relationship.

For Baudelaire, then, there is "cold, mathematical criticism which, on the pretext of explaining everything, has neither love nor hate, and voluntarily strips itself of every shred of temperament." And then there is the "amusing and poetic" art criticism Baudelaire prefers, the temperamental art criticism which, in the famous sentence, "should be partial, passionate and political, that is to say, written from an exclusive point of view, but a point of view that opens up the widest horizons." (1) The cold, mathematical relationship to the art object is essentially objective. It exists in terms of the ideal impersonality inseparable from austere formal, rigorously rational analysis. The warm, temperamental relationship to the art object is essentially subjective. It is "precise" only in the sense that it offers one very particular existential perspective on the art object. It denies the possibility of explaining everything about the art object. Neither the personal nor the world-historical meanings of the art object can be exhaustively analyzed. Temperamental criticism thus implies the incompleteness--and ongoingness--of one's relationship to the art object, even its own incompleteness and lack of "integrity." It is just this strange "selflessness" which makes it temperamentally interesting. That is, to relate to an art object temperamentally is to recognize its "need" to

be invested with one's own sense of selfhood, as well as the inadequacy of conscious, mathematical understanding of it. Its existence as an open horizon makes it available as a talisman of one's "self"-development.

A useful way of understanding the temperamental and mathematical modes of relating to the art object is in terms of the psychoanalyst Harry Stack Sullivan's distinction between the parataxic and syntactic modes of experience. Temperamental criticism is parataxic, while mathematical criticism is syntactic. The former is essentially imagistic criticism, the latter is interpretative criticism. But the understanding of criticism does not stop with the distinction between these two modes of critical relationship to the art object. Neither of them truly arrives at the goal of art criticism: prototaxic experience of the art object, to use a Sullivanian term again. This involves an epiphany of it as "momentary" or immediate--a rare disclosure of it as unequivocally and integrally present--as eternally pure presence. The development of art critical discourse from the parataxic to the syntactic modes positions consciousness for a transient prototaxic prehension of the art object. It is extremely difficult to articulate, even acknowledge, the prototaxic prehension, in part because it reveals the original "reason" one related to the art object, found it critically significant--invested one's feelings (temperament) and ideas ("mathematical" understanding) in it. Moreover, this climactic stage of critical relationship to and

revelation of the art object is paradoxical, not only because it discloses the art object to be in complete dialectical, narcissistic reciprocity with oneself--giving one a momentary sense of completely being oneself, of wanting for nothing but the art object to be oneself, which correlates with experience of it as adequate and complete in itself (proudly "immediate")--but, more crucially, because the prototaxic experience of the art object is possible only after an intense mathematical/syntactic relationship to it.

That is, prototaxic experience of the special presentness of the art object becomes possible not, as one might expect, as a consequence of a temperamental/parataxic grasp of it, but by exhausting the possibilities of mathematical/syntactic interpretation of it. The systematic/scientific character of the mathematical/syntactic transcends the unsystematic/poetic character of the temperamental/prataxic. Prototaxic experience of epiphanic immediacy transcends--if in a less stable and predictable way than the mathematical transcends the temperamental--the mediational character of both. In each case, the transcendence is dialectical, forfeiting none of the "concepts" of the previous stage while reordering and resocializing them. But prototaxic experience unifies in a kind of transcendental intuition the irrationality of the art object that parataxic experience discloses and the rationality of the art object that syntactic experience discloses. The key point is that the parataxic and syntactic modes of relating to the art

object regard it as never more than indirectly manifest--as necessarily mediated subjectively (temperamentally) or objectively (mathematically)--while the prototaxic mode assumes that it can be made immediately manifest, or directly experientiable.

Because prototaxic experience of the art object offers it with such absolute immediacy, prototaxic experience appears to be post-linguistic--from another point of view regressively pre-linguistic or essentially somatic. This, together with the fact that it is beyond both the temperamental and mathematical grasp of the art object, makes the prototaxic experience of its immediate givenness seem mythical or fictional, however undeniable. The art object seems to exist in a paradoxical state of doubt-free givenness, a state which, apart from what it offers, comes to be doubted as truly the case. Prototaxic experience comes to be regarded as a wonderful illusion--divinely spurious. The aura of unreality that surrounds prototaxic experience signals its reality as a way of revealing the art object itself as a primordial fantasy of primitive givenness. In any case, it is perverse to have to experience the art object prototaxically only by way of as complete a syntactic articulation of it as possible. One can finally accept the fact that the terms of cold, mathematical, syntactic criticism are rooted, as it were, in warm, temperamental, parataxic criticism, but it is harder to accept the fact that prototaxic experience of the art object is possible only by

exhausting all the syntactic means of articulating it. For this means going from the most sophisticated to the most primitive modes of articulation--from logical rigor to the seeming slackness of the inarticulate. As Sullivan writes, "the prototaxic or primitive mode" of experience is "ordinarily incapable of any formulation." (2) The unformulatable is experienced only after overformulation, as it were. Moreover, one can only formulate what cannot be formulated as the annihilation of expected formulations, not as something in itself. This also seems to be the only way it can be experienced--as the negation of every other experience. Beyond discourse, it seems beyond experience. The nihilism of prototaxic experience of immediate presence seems clear--as clear as the experience seems an illusion. And yet the critical process aims at prototaxic experience of the art object. If it did not, it would not be "critical."

It is as though, in developing brilliant syntactic interpretations of the art object, one had created a magnificent critical divining rod--also adorned with beautiful temperamental images of the art object--to search for a treasure that did not necessarily exist, and was not necessarily a treasure. Criticism with such an ambition seems stupidly risky and absurd, yet if it did not have as its ambition an impossibly primitive, "fantastic" experience of the art object it would sell both itself and the art object short. It would neither realize its own temperamental and mathematical potential, nor disclose the vitality of the

art object. Moreover, the possibility of prototaxic experience of the art object in a sense does no more than acknowledge the failure of all systems of thinking about art. For to achieve their consensual accuracy they depend upon excluding the peculiar quality of the sheer givenness of the art object in contrast to other objects.

The prototaxic mode of experience is infantile. It is paradoxical that to establish an infantile mode of experience of the art object--immediate experience of it--requires such a heroic effort. But this is because only an infantile experience of the art object can disclose its extra-ordinary significance for us. Only the experience of it as "mothering" us with its "sensational" immediate givenness discloses the infantile character of our attachment to it. In a sense, the entire critical experience--all of critical discourse--exists to disclose the particular mothering experience that drew one into relationship with the art object--an experience of unconscious merger or profound intimacy with it that seemed to deny one's autonomy, yet was its root. The irony of art critical discourse is that all its analyses, whether poetic or mathematical, exist to discover the extra-analytic reason for the absurd intensity of one's relationship with and response to the art object.

Let us distinguish Sullivan's three modes of experience more precisely. The prototaxic mode is the primary, most infantile one. It involves the experience of "momentary states" with no "before and after," that is, with no

awareness of "serial connection between them." In the prototaxic mode, the infant has "no awareness of himself as an entity separate from the rest of the world...his felt experience is all of a piece, undifferentiated, without definite limits...'cosmic'." With maturation, "the original undifferentiated wholeness of experience"--the difficult aim of critical experience of the art object--"is broken. However, the 'parts,' the diverse aspects...are not related or connected in a logical fashion. They 'just happen' together, or they do not, depending on circumstances. They ...are felt as concomitant, not recognized as connected in an orderly way." That is, they exist in "poetic correspondence." This is the parataxic or temperamental mode of art criticism; it takes the form of poetic discourse declaring the correspondence between different subjective partial apprehensions of the art object. Indeed, speaking from the temperamental point of view, Baudelaire remarks, in the same section of "The Salon of 1846" that I have already quoted from, that "a sonnet or an elegy" may indeed be the best critical account of an art object. Finally, the syntactic mode of experience is established. It involves the "'consensually validated' meaning of language--in the widest sense of language. These meanings have been acquired from group activities, interpersonal activities, social experience. Consensually validated symbol activity involves an appeal to principles which are accepted as true by the hearer." (3)

In a sense, parataxic, temperamental, poetic criticism is critic's criticism, in that it is a kind of shorthand "account" of critical experience of the art object. It is written critical poet/person to critical poet/person. It is a subjective appeal from one heart to another, an affair between lovers of art. It is an appeal to unknown others to love art as one would love oneself--even more than oneself, for in so doing one becomes more than one's ordinary, everyday self. But the poet-critic does not really care if he has company in his love for art; he is happy to be alone with it, to have the beloved for his own embrace alone. Indeed, the poet-critic is infatuated with the art object, and wants to possess it in an exclusive relationship. In contrast, for the mathematical critic, the other is an indispensable presence, the legitimator of his experience--the legitimator of a relationship to the art object that is beyond the poetry of love or hate for it. This cool mathematical critic practices a public, prosaic criticism, a criticism which performs a public service--which integrates the art object into civil society by civilizing it. However, civilized, analytic interest in the art object is rarely durable, except--paradoxically--among a few temperamental aficionados. Few art objects enter the so-called "canon," in comparison to the many produced. The syntactic understanding of art is always slipping--regressing to the poetic level which sustains it, and which it organizes. Or else, as we have noted, the syntactic understanding of art is

transcended for a different kind of "subjective" reason: it seems to mirror the self of the mathematical critic of art, who thought he left love of it behind for a cold understanding. How unexpected for him to see himself in the art object when he thought he was looking at it scientifically! And how difficult it is to accept the fact that the poet-critic is never in a position to have the same narcissistic experience of the art object, for he loved the art object for itself--not, however unexpectedly, because it reflected himself. In a sense, the mathematical critic intellectually polishes the dark mirror of the art object to a shine. No longer dark, it speaks to him of his fundamental self. The poet-critic accepted that darkness as the art object's gift to his own dark--irrational--soul. He had no comprehension that his, and its, irrationality, were not fundamental. The mathematical critic alone is in a position to experience--through the unexpectedly completely present art object--what Heinz Kohut calls archaic narcissistic grandeur. The irreducible presence of the art object confirms the irreducible presence of the self.

Art critical discourse has an ultimately narcissistic purpose, in the deepest sense. In object relational terms, it is the new mother who gives one the feeling of omnipotence and integration the old one never really gave one. It is only after it is known as a set of obsolete rules that it can be experienced "cosmically" as an undifferentiated whole with which one can merge. Prototaxic experience reveals what is

most unrepresentable or sublime about the art object: its capacity to love one for oneself. This is reversed, translated as lovable-ness of the art object in itself. But there is nothing lovable about the art object as such. It is lovable only because its immediacy, experienced with great difficulty, seems the mother of our own immediacy. It is in prototaxic experience of the art object that one has a truly "creative" relationship with it--experiences it esemplastically, to use Coleridge's term. That is, one creates the illusion of its immediacy to create the illusion that one was created for one's own sweet self. The entire aim of art critical discourse is narcissistic justification of the art object.

Notes

(1) Charles Baudelaire, "The Salon of 1846," The Mirror of Art, ed. Jonathan Mayne (Garden City, N. Y., Doubleday & Co., 1956; Doubleday Anchor Books), p. 41.

(2) Harry Stack Sullivan, The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry (New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 1953), p. 29.

(3) Sullivan, pp. 28-29.