

Charles Harrison, *Since 1950: Art and its Criticism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

In this series of essays compiled over the last 20 years, Charles Harrison—who passed away in August 2009—takes on a variety of subjects focused upon the breakdown of Modernism and its subsequent aftermath. Harrison's position is deeply conflicted, and it is this ambivalence which animates his attempt to work through the problems generated by the cultural upheavals of the 1960s. In the end, it is not a problem which he can resolve, and it is for this reason that the collection deserves attention, quite apart from its evident quality and sophistication. The essays are written with Harrison's signature clarity, although the precision of his language does not always make for easy reading; occasionally his sentences threaten to buckle under their semantic weight.

Harrison's deep involvement in the breakdown of the Modernist narrative is not surprising; he was of course a member of the English collective Art & Language, whose works, and their self-titled journal, formed a not insignificant part in critiquing the untenable claims of High Modernism. However, as Alex Potts writes in the preface, the collection is 'far from being a celebration of the conceptual in late twentieth-century art or, for that matter, a simple deconstruction of modernism and account of its demise'.¹ The reason for this becomes apparent upon perusing the collection. It becomes clear that Harrison is deeply torn between the claims of Modernism and its antagonists. Harrison was well aware that by the late 1960s the claims for Modernist autonomy were increasingly taken for granted both by its critics and practitioners. On the other hand, he has come to be extremely sceptical about the postmodern critique of that project, which as Potts writes, he considers to be 'woefully blind to the aesthetic and ethical commitments implicit in the modernist project'.² Taking aim at the complacent relativism of many commentators and artists, Harrison claims at one stage that 'the collapse of the aspiration to improve the social world was not a license to be comfortable with the world as it was[.]'³

At times, Harrison's sympathy for Modernist criticism is evident. Clement Greenberg's name crops up frequently, and, perhaps more surprisingly, so does that of Clive Bell. One may wonder what Harrison is doing here; is this simply nostalgia, a desire for an earlier, imagined critical authority which now seems lost? Perhaps, but Harrison understands that Modernism has not been fully understood by many of its detractors, who fail to take seriously the commitments which it entails; commitments which cannot be easily dispensed with.

Aesthetically, Modernism held that the work of art consists of certain properties which mark its objects off from other phenomena. Following this, Harrison maintains that the autonomy of the art object is necessary if the objects under scrutiny are not to be simply illustrations of theoretical positions. A particularly waspish sentence from 'Feeling the Earth Move' claims that 'Over the past two decades the centre-stage of the art-world has been largely occupied by a species of academically supported Conceptualism in which Cultural Studies is practised at the level of the illustrative vignette'.⁴ Harrison counters that works of art need to be understood as objects with a certain element of hermeneutic opacity; we need to pay attention to the object's specificity, and not simply claim it for one or another particular methodology, be it theoretical or socio-historical. Harrison claims that

there is one point forcefully made by the writers of modernist criticism that deserves reiteration. That is that works of art are not necessarily interpretable by reference to social or historical events; they are events requiring interpretation in their own right.⁵

But Harrison is no aesthete; he insists that the work of art, embedded in determining socio-historical conditions, must necessarily embody those conditions in its very form; this being the imperative of Modernism as he understands it.

This problem of the artwork's autonomy is inevitably linked to the problem of aesthetic judgement. It is no coincidence that a crisis of criticism accompanied the crisis of Modernism in the 1960s. Criticism was said to be redundant; a function of socio-economic factors, an index of patriarchal prejudice, or simply an untenable claim for a spurious objectivity. However, the problem of judgement, however problematic its foundations may be, cannot be dispensed with so easily. In art historical terms, judgement is required to delineate the objects of study. How do we determine which artefacts or texts deserve attention? This problem is explored during the essay "Englishness" and Modernism Revisited,' where Harrison explains his inability to write a sequel to his study *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939* (1981). He writes

My conclusion was that a social history of English art might well be written, albeit not by me; but that there could be no viable study of the modern, whether in English art or in art at large, without some non-sociological grounds on which to determine what is and is not deserving of attention.⁶

Judgement as it was understood by Modernist critics entailed a certain level of disinterest. In the essay 'Complexity and Disinterest', which is one of the more forceful articulations of his commitment to Modernist principles, Harrison argues that a devaluation of the notion of disinterest is connected to a loss of complexity in the art object. In line with attacks on Kantian notions of disinterested judgment, Harrison makes the observation that 'disinterest has entirely lost its Kantian meaning. As the result of a kind of journalistic transformation, to say that one is disinterested is now understood as meaning that one is *uninterested*'.⁷ This devaluation, due in no small part to postmodernist critiques, has had unfortunate consequences in a wider sense, rendering us more susceptible to manipulative social practices; Harrison cites 'those of the businessman, the cultural manager, the media communicator or the political activist – and to these I would add the self-enchanted curator.'⁸

This resistance to the manipulations of our culture brings out more explicitly the ethical commitments to Modernism. There are two recurrent themes which

accompany this commitment: realism and sentimentality. The former term is never fully elucidated, and indeed shifts depending upon the issue being discussed, but in the essay on Roger Hilton, Harrison refers to a condition of realism being 'a social and ethical difficulty . . . we confront in holding on to our desires and intuitions in face of the pervasive simplifications of our political and economic culture'.⁹ This sounds very Greenbergian indeed; that is to say, the earlier Greenberg of 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch,' if not the later Greenberg who stressed the aesthetic as an end in itself. More peculiar, however, is the use of the term 'sentimentality', which crops up in several places; most striking is his discussion of Institutional Critique. He claims that

at the heart of the modernist enterprise, from its origins in the mid-nineteenth century until the early 1960s, lies a critique of sentimentality in all forms of representation. The power of the modernist aesthetic lies in its unresponsiveness to those questions of moral or political virtue that sentimental criticism has always tended to read out of art's figurative motifs.¹⁰

Institutional Critique, on the other hand, 'runs the risk of buying its effectiveness at the price of transparency – and thus of sentimentality in its interpretation if not its conception . . . Transparency is an illusion and a mystification.' I fully agree here with Harrison's scepticism *vis-à-vis* 'transparency' – a spurious managerial weasel word if ever there was one. Further, I share his doubts about the ability of Institutional Critique to live up to its name. A recent comment by Andrea Fraser crystallises this problem. Her claim that 'It's not a question of being against the institution: We are the institution,' leaves me puzzled as to whether or not the irony is intentional.¹¹

However, Harrison's use of the term 'sentimentality' is less convincing, striking the reader as odd, if not anachronistic. The term made sense in terms of older modernist critiques, which had as their target academic painting and its clichéd 'figurative motifs.' The work of the likes of Hans Haacke, for instance, simply cannot be tackled at this level, for his work cannot be read in terms of the form-content divide which was at the heart of earlier modernist criticism.

Despite Harrison's debt to Modernist criticism, he seems to have had little faith in criticism itself to sustain Modernism's critical impulse. The essay 'Feeling the Earth Move' is perhaps the centre-piece to the collection. It refers to an encounter; not of a romantic nature, but an aesthetic one, when Harrison found himself face to face with Morris Louis's stripe painting *Red Go* (1962) in London during the late 1960s. Initially convinced of its aesthetic quality, a later visit to an exhibition at Andre Emmerich's in New York provided a rather different experience. In those plush gallery surroundings, Harrison felt that he 'could not see [the works] as art at all. Far from serving as vehicles and expressions of feeling, they had the aspect of wallpapered money[.]'¹² This moment crystallises the ambivalence Harrison feels between the aesthetic integrity of Modernism and its institutional complicities; elsewhere in the same essay, Harrison describes Louis's works as maintaining a certain indifference to those institutional complicities. This is not a problem he can adequately resolve, but the turn to practice is offered as a way of coping with this dilemma; a turn he considers more fruitful than the retreat of critics to the academy.¹³

Given this emphasis upon practice, Harrison's references to the work of Art & Language are frequent. One gets the feeling that there is something a little questionable here, as though Harrison is writing himself into the history with which he is engaged. And this suspicion is confirmed by works such as the *Portrait of V.I. Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock* (1979-80), which strike me as somewhat arch and overly self-conscious (not to mention aesthetically negligible). But other works, such as the concocted naivety of *Index: the Studio at 3 Wesley Place Painted by Mouth* (1982), are more successful, combining art historical references, self-deprecating humour, and no small degree of aesthetic success.

As has been noted above, the ambivalence which animates much of this collection is not one which can be satisfactorily resolved. How can one hold on to a certain degree of disinterest or aesthetic autonomy, without lapsing into redundant critical models? To be fair, it would be unfair to criticise

Harrison too harshly for failing to provide an adequate answer. Perhaps, given his emphasis upon the centrality of practice, he does not feel that the solution can be found by academics.¹⁴

But I think that the problem is deeper; that the period in the 1960s is still too close to us historically to be able to get to grips with what took place during that decade; whether, as Harrison writes, 'we witnessed a change in the historical character of our culture or merely a redirection of intellectual and artistic fashion'.¹⁵ Currently, the prospect of a substantial shift in our political and cultural landscape seems the likely consequence of the current economic situation. Perhaps, as these changes take place, the transformations of the 1960s, which have been so formative for the artistic practice of the last few decades, may come more sharply into view as an object of historical study.

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¹ Alex Potts, 'Preface,' in Charles Harrison, *Art Since 1950: Art and its Criticism*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009): vii.

² Potts, in Harrison, *Art Since 1950*: viii.

³ Harrison: 87.

⁴ Ibid: 146.

⁵ Ibid: 139.

⁶ Ibid: 104.

⁷ Ibid: 226-27.

⁸ Ibid: 229.

⁹ Ibid: 87.

¹⁰ Ibid: 153.

¹¹ Andrea Fraser, 'From the critique of institutions to an institution of critique,' *Artforum*. 44:1, (Sep. 2005): 105.

¹² Harrison: 130.

¹³ With regard to the relations between criticism and academia, Harrison claims that 'little encouragement was to be drawn from the products of this convergence.' Harrison:145.

¹⁴ Harrison notes that 'none of the major theorists of Modernism was an academic or art historian. All were either artists or practicing critics or both': 227.

¹⁵ Harrison: 29.