

ABSTRACTION AND IDEOLOGY: CONTESTATION IN COLD WAR ART CRITICISM

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In 1957, the British-Australian author Nevil Shute published *On the Beach*, a novel that follows a number of Australians, immigrants, and American naval personnel in Melbourne as they face the death inevitably coming their way as radiation from the nuclear war that has obliterated life in the Northern Hemisphere floats toward them across the Pacific.¹ Two years later in the same city, a group of artists released a statement in which they fought back against a different kind of virus. Known as the *Antipodean Manifesto*, the document opens with this salvo:

Today *tachistes*, action painters, geometric abstractionists, abstract expressionists and their innumerable band of camp followers threaten to benumb the intellect and wit of art with their bland and pretentious mysteries. The art they champion is not an art sufficient for our time, it is not an art for living men. It reveals, it seems to us, a death of the mind

“Socialist Realism in the East.” Instead they sought a middle path, one along which they might, as Australians, serve “a young society still making its myths,” and “the society of man” more generally, by making art about subjects of national and universal concern and by using a visual language accessible to all—that is, through the image, which “communicates because it has the capacity to refer to experiences the artist shares with his audience.”

While specific to the art worlds in Melbourne, Sydney, and London, the battle lines drawn within the *Antipodean Manifesto* are a microcosm of those that shaped postwar art discourse throughout the world: abstraction versus figuration, nationalism versus “international styles,” peripheries versus centers, artistic autonomy versus social obligation, dependence versus nonalignment, democracy versus socialism. Another, less remarked recurrence is the pivotal role of art critics, acting as champions of one artistic group or tendency against another and



Fig. 1. Lithographic poster for the Antipodeans' exhibition at the Victorian Artists Society, Melbourne, 1959

and spirit. And yet wherever we look, New York, Paris, London, San Francisco or Sydney, we see young artists dazzled by the luxurious pageantry and colour of non-figuration.²

The signatories of the Antipodean Manifesto were artists Charles Blackman, Arthur Boyd, David Boyd, John Brack, Robert Dickerson, John Perceval, and Clifton Pugh, along with art historian and critic Bernard Smith. The last was its primary author, shaping drafts by the artists into his own unmistakable language.³ While deploring “the triumph of non-figurative art in the West,” the Antipodeans also opposed

promoting one or the other side of these dichotomies. As we shall see, the debates were never black-and-white divisions between clearly marked positions. Local circumstances, the changing relationships among places, and above all the constant contrariness of artists made them always, everywhere, volatile.

In the immediate prehistory of contemporary art—that is, the transformative moment of the later 1960s and early ’70s and the postwar period just before it—the figure of the art critic seems to catch more light than other actors. If attention today seems captivated by collectors and auctioneers, in the 1990s and early 2000s curators were both celebrated



Fig. 2. Sidney Nolan. *Ned Kelly*. 1946.
Enamel paint on composition board, 90.8 × 121.5 cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Gift of Sunday Reed 1977

and attacked for creating the most visible buzz. Less obviously, but insistently, theorists came to the fore in the 1980s, while in the late 1960s and '70s it was artists who offered the most powerful accounts of what art was and could be. These artists—so the story goes—had displaced the critics who seemed so prominent in the 1950s and early '60s.

Generalizations such as these are mostly rhetorical fictions, but their persistence signals energies that were alive in at least certain times and places. (This decade-by-decade story is mainly a North American one.) We need to ask more specific questions: in the reconstituting and soon expansionist art worlds of the major European centers, and in ascendant New York and some of the rapidly growing art worlds elsewhere, such as Tokyo and Buenos Aires, did certain writers succeed in recording, defining, and even setting artistic agendas to a degree that their predecessors rarely achieved? If so, how did they do it—with which arguments, about what kinds of art, using what kinds of acumen, and with what effects? Did they remain “men of letters” (*litterateurs*, critics of the arts in general) or did they redefine the role of the critic as a medium specialist? What were the issues that impelled them to write? How did they mobilize the evolving elements of art-critical practice—selection, description, interpretation, evaluation—in sizing up the situation for art in their location? Many places were in the early phases of becoming art worlds—what role did critics play in building their infrastructures? Above all, given that the European wars of the twentieth century had resonated throughout the world, not least in accelerating the collapse of colonial empires, what was distinctive and what shared among writers in the many different art centers that were being rebuilt or were under construction at the time?

Unfortunately there is no single survey of the history of modern art criticism on which to draw to find ready answers to these questions. In the rare encyclopedia entries on the subject, postwar writing in New York is taken as the gold standard, to the virtual exclusion of everything and everywhere else.⁴ From this perspective, critics are valued to the degree that they were influential explicators of “The Triumph of American Painting,” a story that goes like this: initially shaped in the crucible of Depression-era social realism, inspired by the arrival during World War II of Europe’s most innovative artists of the interwar years, a loose cohort in New York turns first to a universalizing primitivism, then to an existentially expressive action painting (as Harold Rosenberg characterized it) or a kind of post-Cubist pure abstraction (as defined by Clement Greenberg), thus arriving, instinctively, intuitively, but unmistakably, at a distinctively American kind of art. By the mid-to-late 1950s, however, ironic literalism, allusive figuration, and popular imagery enter the picture, inviting on the one hand a debate about the exact nature of artists’ attitudes (are the Pop artists for or against U.S. consumerism?) and on the other a principled refusal of interpretation in the face of the art’s evident singularity (Susan Sontag). Despite objections and reconsiderations, this story has been repeated so often that it has become the rock upon which even the most critical accounts of postwar art continue to be

erected, even as they complicate it and slowly but surely reject it.⁵

The good news is that a generation of scholars is finally focusing on critics as worthy of the kind of close attention paid to artists. They are doing so from a contemporary global perspective, alert to the complexities of the relationships among the multiple modernities of actual, existing modern art. Andrea Giunta and Inés Katzenstein have done pioneering work in the case of Argentina, as have Charles Green and Heather Barker for Australia.⁶ Pierre Restany is an obvious focus of studies of *Nouveau Réalisme*, as is Michel Tapié for *art informel*.⁷ Reiko Tomii has highlighted the role of critics such as Miyakawa Atsushi, Nakahara Yūsuke, Tōno Yoshiaki, and Haryū Ichirō in defining the acute sense of “international contemporaneity” (*kokusai-teki dōjisei*) in Japan when information about *art informel* in Europe and Happenings in the United States arrived there after the innovations of the Gutai group.⁸ Research into postwar art criticism elsewhere (including the Soviet Union, Eastern and Central Europe, and the Middle East), however, remains in the early stages. Documents from the archives of art critics are being gathered, notably by the Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes, and the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, and some are being published, as in the “Primary Documents” book series produced by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, which now includes Eastern Europe, China, Japan, Argentina, Venezuela, and the influential Brazilian critic Mário Pedrosa.⁹ There is promise in enterprises such as the Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art Digital Archive, hosted by the International Center for the Arts of the Americas at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.¹⁰ Symposia and conference sessions devoted to individual critics are appearing with increasing frequency, so we can anticipate more publications along the lines of the recent collection of studies of Lawrence Alloway.¹¹ Any comprehensive picture of the role of art critics during the postwar period—indeed, of any period—must await the results of such research. What follows are provisional notes about the work of certain representative and in various ways exemplary critics, critics who played crucial roles within the debates about the dichotomies mentioned earlier. Each did so in a different way, according to the context in which he (it is, unfortunately, overwhelmingly “he”) operated.

THE CRITIC AS AMANUENSIS, PUPPET-MASTER, AND MEDIATOR

If, with the great exception of poet/activist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s *Futurist Manifesto* of 1909, statements by artists were the primary written documents of the early-twentieth-century avant-gardes, it is striking that the key texts of postwar art were in many places authored by art critics. They spoke, usually, as the voice of a specific group of artists, whom they joined in defining the option that they believed would best secure art’s future. In such contexts, criticism became engaged in contestation

about the direction of art, which just about everyone presumed would indeed flow in one or another major direction. In the postwar period, such criticism was also, unavoidably and necessarily, engaged in the Cold War culture wars.

On April 4, 1958, in the culture supplement of the Mexico City newspaper *Novedades*, painter and graphic artist José Luis Cuevas published a pivotal document of postwar Mexican art. Headlined “Cuevas: The Infant Terrible versus the Sacred Monsters,” the essay tells the story of Juan, son of a bribe-taking official, as he strives to forge a career as an artist, inspired by predecessors in Mexico and contemporaries abroad, yet slowly succumbs to the compromises and bad faith of an art world dominated by officials in obsequious thrall to an ossified and unpopular muralism. “I protest,” Cuevas writes, “against the crude, limited, provincial, nationalistic Mexico of the Juans,” a condition he names “*la cortina de nopal*” (the cactus curtain) to link Mexican muralism to Soviet Socialist Realism. He praises the few artists, writers, and filmmakers whose art he believes represents “the true, universal Mexico, open to the whole world without losing its essential characteristics. ... What I want in my country’s art are broad highways leading out to the rest of the world, rather than narrow trails connecting one adobe village with another.”¹²

These sentiments reflect Cuevas’s relationship to the Cuban critic and curator José Gómez Sicre, from 1946 to 1968 head of the Visual Arts Unit of the Pan American Union, which operated within the Organization of American States. From his base in Washington, D.C., and with the support of U.S. political and cultural figures such as Nelson D. Rockefeller and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Gómez Sicre traveled tirelessly, promoting the idea of “Latin American Art” as a loose collation of regional modernisms and, after the Cuban Revolution (which he did not support), a vital part of a pan-American cultural front against the spread of Communism. Cuevas wrote his barbed essay from Philadelphia, where he was a member of a tour organized by Gómez Sicre. Recent research has shown that the young artist and the worldly critic actually collaborated on most of Cuevas’s writings from this period, including the famous “cactus curtain” text.¹³ Gómez Sicre celebrated Cuevas as the model of the self-creating Latin American artist: inspired by local traditions, alert to international tendencies, but an individualist, finally beholden to neither. It is no surprise that caricatures of the two as puppet-master and puppet circulated in the Mexican press.¹⁴

Similar patterns may be found throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. In Argentina during the 1960s, artists such as Tomás Maldonado, Kenneth Kemble, and Marta Minujín, patrons such as Guido di Tella, but above all critics such as Julio Llinás and Jorge Romero Brest engaged in a constant struggle to influence the direction of culture in their country.¹⁵ Everyone involved believed art to be vital to Argentina’s polity and all were aware of the country’s economic and political vulnerability to American interests. Without hesitation, all understood that taking up art styles and adopting critical postures meant adopting ideological allegiances. At the same time, the most influential critics of the period, while not afraid to take positions (or, if afraid, taking them anyway), also sought to modify the

disabling practice of matching categories of art, and particular styles, to exclusionary ideologies. Their role was to act as public and private mediators between competing, indeed incommensurable visions of what art could become.

ARTICULATING ARTISTIC CHANGE

Published in Rio de Janeiro in the Sunday supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil* on March 21–22, 1959, the *Manifesto neoconcreto* was signed by the poet and critic Ferreira Gullar, the artists Franz Weissmann, Amílcar de Castro, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, and Cláudio Mello e Souza and the poets Theo Spanudis and Reynaldo Jardim (fig. 3). Associated with a show at the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, it sought to put the exhibiting artists at a small but significant distance from the Constructivist tendency then defining modernism in Brazilian art and also, by implication, from the developmentalist ideology inspiring the “New Brazil,” expressed most visibly in the building of the new capital, Brasília.

“Neo-Concrete art, born out of the need to express the complex reality of modern humanity inside the structural language of the new plasticity, denies the validity of scientific and positivist attitudes in art and raises the question of expression.” This is the language of the group. It was, however, Gullar who sought to define what this meant as a description of what was distinctive in the works of these artists: “We do not conceive of the work of art as a ‘machine’ or as an ‘object,’ but as a *quasi corpus*; that is to say, as something which amounts to more than the sum of its constituent elements; something which analysis may break down into various elements but can only be understood by phenomenological means.”¹⁶ A few months later, realizing that Clark’s art of the time could not be characterized as either painting or sculpture but constituted a new kind of artwork, Gullar wrote his essay “Theory of the non-object.”¹⁷ He recognized that these artists had moved to “rupture the frame and eliminate the base,” with the result that the artwork became “a primary formulation of the world,” one that occurred in the phenomenological field between the artist and the spectator.¹⁸ Gullar was one of the first to articulate the spirit of conceptualism, over a decade before it was formalized as Conceptual art.

OUT OF THE COLONIES: CRITICISM AS CULTIVATION

In Africa, the first formulations of contending perspectives on the desired direction of the visual arts are replete with paradox. From the 1930s through to the ’60s, Nigerian artist and teacher Aina Onabolu

vigorously promoted a rigorous Western academicism as the way forward for African artists, while his colleague Kenneth Murray was equally convinced that the elements of folk art were essential to the modernization of Nigerian art.¹⁹ Igbo artist Ben Enwonwu forged a synthesis of these opposing positions in his work and writings.²⁰

that there is “very little genuine abstraction and no naturalistic art of any importance”; rather, “the more powerful African artists are drawn to expressionist or Surrealist forms.”²¹ We are immediately in a discursive space quite other than that of the dichotomies prevailing in Europe, the United States, and their modernized cultural colonies in much of South



Fig. 3. Amílcar de Castro, Lygia Clark, Ferreira Gullar, Reynaldo Jardim, Cláudio Mello e Souza, Lygia Pape, Theo Spanudis, and Franz Weissmann. *Manifesto neoconcreto*. 1959

Along with his short study *Art in Nigeria*, from 1960, Ulli Beier’s 1968 volume *Contemporary African Art* is arguably the first art-critical text that attempted to survey the emergence in Africa of a kind of art that neither perpetuated traditional, local practices nor sought, through imitation or expatriation, to join other, usually European artistic currents. A German writer, educator, translator, and institution-builder, Beier had moved to Nigeria in 1950 to teach at the University of Ibadan. He notes

America and in Australia. It is a tentative, exploratory one, searching for a language appropriate to its fresh yet fragile experience of possibility.

Contemporary African Art opens with an acknowledgment of the decline of traditional African art, steering blame not only to European colonialism but also to the “inherent weaknesses” and “decadence” of many local cultures.²² Against this, Beier notes the recent exuberance of many kinds of popular and tourist-oriented art, which heralds “the

coming of the intellectual African artist,” one who “refuses to be fossilized,” who accepts the challenge of Europe, and “does not hesitate to adopt new materials, be inspired by foreign art, look for a different role in society,” such that “New Forms, new styles and new personalities are emerging everywhere” and “this contemporary African art is rapidly becoming as rich and as varied as were the more rigid conventions of several generations ago.”²³ He demonstrates this claim through evaluations of the work of artists from across the continent, many of whom have subsequently become widely acknowledged. While noting that “superficially a common vocabulary can be detected among many of these artists: the mask, the sacrifice, spirits, and folklore,” Beier underscores that “the way in which this mythological vocabulary is used differs considerably from artist to artist.” For example, while Uche Okeke collects and illustrates Igbo folklore, Skunder Boghossian rejects the imagery of his country (Ethiopia) in favor of a painstaking constructed personal mythology.²⁴ Prefiguring the future for art in Africa, this is an art driven by its own differences.

Beier remarks that many artists “regret and rightly so that art criticism is a field hardly explored by Africans themselves at the moment,” but that “they certainly want to communicate” about art.²⁵ Oddly, he does not cite Okeke’s “Natural Synthesis” manifesto, written in 1960, the year of Nigeria’s independence. It is a call to the “young artists in a new nation” to reject the confusion of Western art (“What form of feelings, human feelings, can void space inspire in a machine artist?”) and, equally, the copying of “our old art heritages, for they stand for our old order.” Instead, Okeke urges artists to create a synthesis based on openness to all possibilities, “a *natural synthesis*, for it should be unconscious not forced.”²⁶

In the postwar period, critics took sides within the various artistic tendencies and attitudes, favoring one over another and often becoming its public spokesperson. Art-world position-taking nearly always aligned with one or another competing ideological or political perspective within each center, and was readily understood to be so aligned by others in the same discursive world. A competition of styles dominated discourse and, to a large degree, practice. Nevertheless, within the period, counter-tendencies arose and countercurrents swirled. By the mid- and late 1960s, things were changing: while these markers persisted for the growing audiences for art, artists deliberately set out to complicate them, and increasing numbers of younger critics took on the responsibility to do the same.

CRITICISM AS A POSTWAR PRACTICE

These few examples of different critical practices, undertaken in wildly differing situations, have introduced us to some of the challenges critics faced in their immediate localities during a period when international connections between art worlds were gathering pace, inequities between them were becoming more evident, and these differences were being both codified and contested. There are marked inequities between the dense concentrations of critics in the modern metropolitan centers and their relative isolation in towns within internal provinces, in the cities of colonies and ex-colonies, and in peripheral countries. In such settings, certain individuals, many of them artists, took on multiple roles as critics, curators, art dealers, educators, and administrators. Everywhere critics took for granted that their basic task was to describe and evaluate the kinds of art being made and exhibited in their location. With exceptions (including Sontag, Dore Ashton, and Marta Traba), and usually late in the period, it was rare for women to take prominent roles as critics, but some (such as Dorothy C. Miller at MoMA) curated significant exhibitions.

(accessed June 2016); and Kerr Houston, "A History of Art Criticism," *An Introduction to Art Criticism: Histories, Strategies, Voices* (New York: Pearson Education, 2013), pp. 23–81, available online at <https://www-pearsonhighered-com-prd.pearson.com/assets/samplechapter/0/2/0/5/0205835945.pdf> (accessed June 2016). See also Lionello Venturi, *History of Art Criticism* 1936 (rev. ed. New York: Dutton, 1964), and James Ackerman, "Art History and the Problems of Criticism," *Daedalus* 89, no. 1 (Winter 1960): 252–63.

5 Landmarks include Irving Sandler, *Abstract Expressionism: The Triumph of American Painting* (London: Pall Mall, 1970); Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Anne Wagner, *A House Divided: American Art since 1955* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); and Katy Siegel, *Since '45: America and the Making of Contemporary Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011). Few individual critics have won monographic studies, with Clement Greenberg being the most evident exception.

6 Inés Katzenstein, ed., *Listen, Here, Now!: Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2004). Charles Green and Heather Barker's *No Place like Home: The Idea of Contemporary Australian Art, 1960–1988*, forthcoming, is a sustained analysis of three generations of critics.

7 See Jill Carrick, *Nouveau Réalisme, 1960s France, and the Neo-avant-garde: Topographies of Chance and Return* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), and Julia Robinson, ed., *New Realisms: 1957–1962. Object Strategies between Readymade and Spectacle*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2010).

8 See Reiko Tomii, "Historicizing 'Contemporary Art': Some Discursive Practices in Gendai Bijutsu in Japan," *Positions* 12, no. 3 (Winter 2012): 611–41.

9 Mário Pedrosa: *Primary Documents*, ed. Glória Ferreira and Paulo Herkenhoff (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2016).

10 Online at <https://www.mfah.org/research/international-center-arts-americas/icaa-documents-project/> (accessed June 2016).

11 Lucy Bradnock, Courtney J. Martin, and Rebecca Peabody, eds., *Lawrence Alloway: Critic and Curator* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015).

12 José Luis Cuevas, "Cuevas: El niño terrible vs. los monstrous sagrados," *México en la cultura* no. 473 (April 4, 1958): 7. Eng. trans. as "The Cactus Curtain: An Open Letter on Conformity in Mexican Art," *Evergreen Review* 2, no. 7 (Winter 1959): 111–20, this quotation 119–20.

13 See Claire F. Fox, *Making Art Panamerican: Cultural Policy and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), chapter 3, esp. pp. 151–59.

14 See *ibid.*, p. 150.

15 See Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the 1960s* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).

16 "Manifesto neoconcreto," *Jornal do Brasil*, March 22, 1959, Sunday supplement, pp. 4–5. Extracted in Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea, *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, exh. cat. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, in association with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2004), pp. 496–97.

17 Ferreira Gullar, "Teoria do Não-Objeto," *Jornal do Brasil*, December 19–20, 1959, Sunday supplement. Eng. trans. in Kobena Mercer, ed., *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, and London: Institute of International Visual Arts), pp. 170–74.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 174. See also Michael Asbury, "Neoconcretism and Minimalism: Cosmopolitanism at a Local Level and a Canonical Provincialism," in *ibid.*, pp. 174–89. The contemporary resonance of Gullar's essays has eclipsed the fact that the dominant Brazilian critic at the time was Mário Pedrosa; see *Mário Pedrosa: Primary Documents*, ed. Glória Ferreira and Paulo Herkenhoff (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2015), and the introductory essay's discussion of the relationship between the two critics.

19 See Ola Oloidi, "Art Criticism in Nigeria, 1920–1996: The Development of Professionalism in the Media and the Academy," in Katy Deepwell, ed., *Art Criticism and Africa* (London: Saffron Books, 1997), pp. 41–49. See also comments by Olu Oguibe in the same volume, pp. 99–101.

20 See Sylvester Ogbechie, *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2008).

21 Ulli Beier, *Contemporary Art in Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1968), p. 168.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 14.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 169, 168.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 167.

26 Quoted in Clémentine Deliss, ed., *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1995), pp. 208–9. See also Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015).

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1 Nevil Shute, *On the Beach* (London: Heinemann, 1957).

2 The Antipodean Manifesto is most readily accessible in Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara, and Philip Goad, eds., *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917–1967* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2006), pp. 694–97.

3 See Bernard Smith, *The Antipodean Manifesto: Essays in Art and History* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. vii.

4 For example, James Elkins, "Art Criticism," *Dictionary of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 2:517–19; Donald Burton Kuspit, "Art Criticism in the 20th Century," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, available online at www.britannica.com/topic/art-criticism/Art-criticism-in-the-20th-century