Article

Susannah Thompson

The dress of thought

The dress of thought: Form and style in contemporary art writing

Susannah Thompson

The Glasgow School of Art

Dr Susannah Thompson is an art historian, critic and writer based in Glasgow. Her research focuses on writing by visual artists and the development of art writing and criticism since the 1960s. She is head of doctoral studies at The Glasgow School of Art.

Abstract

‘The dress of thought’ is a consideration of recent developments in the style and form of art writing, looking specifically at narrative and experimental modes of writing that operate as ‘criticism in the expanded field’. This article seeks to define, map and navigate paraliterary forms of art writing, countering frequent assertions that such writing is uncritical or apolitical. In arguing for style and form as essential critical vehicles through which judgement, reference and evaluation can be inferred, I contend that these approaches represent a subversive reappraisal of the role and function of critics and criticism.

Keywords

art criticism

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creative criticism

paraliterature

In 1985, the art historian Michael Baxandall claimed that ‘most of the better things we can think or say about pictures stand in a slightly peripheral relation to the picture itself’ (1985: 5). In thinking about the relationship between art *criticism*, as it is still commonly understood, and expanded forms of art *writing*, Baxandall’s observation might serve as a way to define or navigate some of the stylistic shifts to have occurred in writing on visual art in the last few decades.

Since the late 1980s (and arguably long before), debates have raged over an apparent crisis in art criticism, but while criticism has certainly altered, the alleged ‘crisis’ is best described as a drama – reports of criticism’s death have been greatly exaggerated. A recurrent and persistent tendency to focus primarily on the style and form of new art writing as substantiating, empirical evidence of the decline and fall of criticality in writing on visual art has often been at the centre of these debates. Over the last fifteen years, criticism’s so-called crisis has gathered momentum as a subject for discussion through countless articles, letters, round table discussions and letters in magazines and journals such as *October*, *Artforum* and *Art Monthly* and in books such as Raphael Rubenstein’s *Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of their Practice* (2007), James Elkins’ *The State of Art Criticism* (2008) and *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (2003), Matthew Arnatt and Matthew Collings’ *Criticism* (2004) and criticism-specific chapters in Rosie Millard’s *The Tastemakers* (2001), Julian Stallabrass’s *High Art* *Lite: British Art in the 1990s* (1999) and Matthew Collings’ *Art Crazy Nation* (2001). At their peak in the early to mid-2000s, similar discussions continue to appear intermittently, often with little variation in their conclusions (see, e.g. the regular publication of articles and letters in the pages of *Art Monthly* by J. J. Charlesworth, Michael Archer, Dave Beech, Peter Suchin and others).

Many of these accounts focus on the fact that explicit value judgment, direct argumentation and overt theorization in criticism have given way to more associative, allusion and narrative or ‘literary’ modes of writing on art, yet little has been said, then or now, about the critical intentions or political potential of these forms in the rush to decry them as a hollow, latter-day *belle* *lettrist* trend. In response, the champions and proponents of these allegedly more creative, writerly modes of engagement with art have denounced established or dominant forms of criticism and theory as formulaic, paternalistic and dogmatic, as I go on to discuss. In this way, the discourse around criticism and art writing has often become reductive, entrenched and binary, too often dividing itself between the ‘critical’ or ‘creative’, as though the two are mutually exclusive. In the main, the more stylized, experimental or narrative the form, the less likely art writing is to be considered ‘serious’ criticism by those who write according to more established critical conventions. In turn, these writers, whose texts are thoroughly referenced, rhetorical and rigorously argued, have been accused by those with more literary leanings of deliberate obscurantism, impenetrability and an adherence to obsolete, ‘stuffy’ prose forms.

In refuting literary modes of art writing and creative non-fiction as criticism, a number of contemporary critics, historians and theorists (writing in conventional academic, theory-driven forms) continue to doff their critical caps to Greenbergian edicts of medium-specific purity. To adopt forms of writing derived from non-art disciplines or to produce hybrid, ‘impure’ forms of art criticism may appear to dilute the strict methodologies developed in art history and theory and the journalistic codes of professional art criticism. But equally, ‘poetic’ art writers, often in thrall to their own stylistic conventions and sensibilities, could be seen to have dispensed with art theory and critical thinking, and, in some cases, to have dropped the subject of art from the equation altogether.

An indication of these positions can be seen in Donald Kuspit’s claim that ‘art criticism comes in two varieties: searching but impenetrable or readable but stupid’ (Kuspit cited in Grimes 1996). In the United Kingdom, the art historian Julian Stallabrass has bemoaned the ‘decline of serious art criticism’, pointing to its ‘idiocies’ and ‘philistinism’ and accusing writers such as the late English critic Stuart Morgan of ‘specious and overheated prose’ (1999: 263). For Stallabrass, contemporary art criticism is almost exclusively affirmative and market-driven, in part signified by the way in which it ‘rejects the specialist language it picked up in the academy’ (1999: 267). The critic J. J. Charlesworth, writing in 2003, argued that an ‘exhaustion’ with the ‘moribund institutionalization of critical postmodernism’s strident critical activity, grounding criticism throughout the 70s and 80s’ was responsible for ushering in the ‘conditions for the recent rise of art writing’ adding that ‘the slip in terminology from art criticism to *mere* art writing in recent years is symptomatic of a growing indifference to writing’s polemic and contestative potential’ (2003: 1–4, emphasis added). As such, art writing (i.e. writing that deviates from the models of academic writing which became the orthodoxy in the 1970s and 1980s, or writing that does not resemble established forms of standard art criticism) has been positioned as a kind of neo-formalist retreat from politicized debate: all form, no content, style over substance. Even the US critic and curator Dave Hickey, himself often held as the exemplar of the kind of cool, gonzo style of writing on art so disparaged by high theoreticians, has reinforced a sense of opposing critical camps, divided largely according to style. He has stated that ‘criticism has sort of divided itself into this opaque, academic narrative, which is totally over, and this new sort of Art Brit-tabloid sleaze, which is about who was at the club’ (Hickey cited in MacMillan 2003).

The continued assertion of this binary opposition, with ‘searching’ criticism and theory on one hand, and more ‘readable’, creative or hybrid forms of art writing on the other, has engendered an unhelpful rivalry between these different approaches and methodologies. One of the most intractable and oft-repeated suggestions is the idea that oppositionality and criticality are synonymous. An oppositional stance in writing is frequently taken to imply a political left-leaningness, while creative, fictional and experimental texts are often dismissed as subjective-thus-apolitical. Unlike contemporary art itself, writing on art continues to be regarded as being more orientated to either form or content, with one or the other seen as the privileged position.

Are there other ways of thinking about these developments? Should we be so quick to assign writers to particular camps or categories or so eager to impose taxonomies and definitions of what critical writing on art ‘should’ be? Are more literary or hybrid forms of art writing (stories, fragments, memoir, plays, fictocriticism, creative plagiarism, object-oriented writing, site-writing, situated writing and so on) simply ‘art criticism lite’? Or can/do they perform a critical function? And is the kind of dense argumentation and theoretically grounded writing so dominant in the 1980s ‘totally over’, as Hickey has claimed?

In his 1987 book *Artwriting*, the critic and philosopher David Carrier noted that ‘each new style of argumentation in artwriting is linked to a discovery of new ways to narrate’ (1987: 136). Through the close analysis of the literary structures of art writing and criticism, Carrier has frequently argued that ‘style is important in artwriting, for we cannot entirely extract an artwriter’s argument from the text in which it is presented’ (1991: 5). His case is compelling in understanding style, mode and form as inextricable from the meaning and function of a given text. Similarly, in direct response to J. J. Charlesworth (2003), the artist Rasheed Araeen argued for ‘an integrated practice, demolishing the boundary between art making and art writing. The crisis of art criticism is in fact the crisis of art, and vice versa. To separate them or set them up against each other is to defeat the whole purpose of the debate’ (2003: 18–19). And the critic Martha Schwendener, writing in the *Village Voice* in 2009, noted that ‘while James Elkins, author of the doomsaying “What Happened to Art Criticism?” claims that art criticism is “dying, but everywhere […] massively produced and massively ignored”, writers are pushing out in new directions, trying hybrid forms, and blurring the distinction between art writing and art making’ (2009), highlighting the closer proximity between art and criticism that such developments have fostered.

Throughout the history of criticism and writing on art there have been approaches that veered towards the objective, universal and elucidatory (working towards a series of specific, closed conclusions) and those that demonstrated a more allusive, reflective, subjective and open-ended kind of engagement with their subject matter. It has only been in the twentieth century that art criticism has become so synonymous with ‘criticality’. Many recent discussions on the state of art criticism claim that the stylistic expansion and diversification of writing on art (mentioned above) has occurred in the last few decades. In fact, the idea that style and form might be representative of a*critical* stance is much more entrenched. In the *Salon of 1846*, Baudelaire wrote:

I sincerely believe that the best criticism is the criticism that is entertaining and poetic; not a cold analytical type of criticism, which claiming to explain everything is devoid of hatred and love, and deliberately rids itself of any trace of feeling […] Thus the best accounts of a picture may well be a sonnet or an elegy.

(Gayford and Wright 1998: xii)

Likewise, in the late nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde reiterated Baudelaire’s position through his dialogic essay-play *The* *Critic as Artist*, representing his critical stance through a fusion of form and content. For Wilde, art criticism could be ‘both creative and independent’ and ‘an art by itself’ (1891: 79).

In anglophone art criticism, the omniscient influence of the US critic Clement Greenberg and his brilliant, bombastic Modernist criticism gave way to an equally powerful school of critical postmodernists such as Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michaelson, Benjamin Buchloh, Craig Owens, Yves-Alain Bois and others associated with the US critical theory journal *October*, founded in 1976. The journal’s influence, and the theoretical turn it reflected, was such that (from the late 1970s onwards) ideas derived from continental philosophers such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida became a shorthand demonstration of gravitas for any aspirational, ‘serious’ art writer: *October* spawned a monster. In the United Kingdom, the overtly politicized agenda of critics and historians associated with the New Art History and the growth of academic disciplines such as cultural studies, visual culture and media studies combined to establish a kind of critical orthodoxy in how art should be discussed and analysed.

In keeping with broader societal change post-1968, a rigorous examination of the hidden ideologies that underpinned the art historical canon ensued, as did a self-reflexive and revisionist questioning of the foundations and methodologies of the discipline of art history itself. The effect of these shifts on writing about art was that while many art writers and critics continued to work across form and genre, the incorporation of ‘theory’ (i.e. critical perspectives associated with feminism, post-colonialism, psychoanalysis, queer theory and so on) within criticism became almost generic and *de* *rigeur*. Writing in this mould frequently took the form of lengthy, verbose, sometimes exhaustive argumentation and analysis. In some respects, this level of rigour and self-referentiality in writing was regarded as a progressive development for art history and criticism, an attempt to develop specific criteria for critical and historical practice in contrast to popular biographical or connoisseurly approaches that had dominated the field of criticism and the discipline of art history as it was disseminated outside the academy. Along with many others, the art critic and philosopher David Carrier has acknowledged the significance of theory in the development of twentieth-century art criticism:

No one else offered anything like his [Greenberg’s] account. In the 1960s, Fried, Rosalind Krauss, and some of their rivals tried to take up Greenberg’s role. Greenberg’s footnote-free style of argument was frankly informal. Fried and Krauss were professors, and so offered serious arguments. When Fried explained the virtues of Anthony Caro and Krauss championed Richard Serra, they used heavy-duty theorizing. The style of criticism was influential, and so by the 1980s, critics felt that they had to invoke the authority of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and other intellectual sources. I can hardly criticize them, for so did I. You needed to cite these French writers if you were to be judged *au courant*. But by the 1990s, this way of proceeding no longer carried conviction.

(2007)

If, as Carrier claims, ‘this way of proceeding no longer carried conviction’, what forms did art writing and criticism take after the theoretical turn? In 1995, Joyce Carol Oates claimed that ‘criticism is itself an art form, and like all art forms it must evolve or atrophy and die’ (1995: 21). The literary, narrative and experimental registers of criticism I go on to discuss represent this evolution. Texts that deviated from what had become an entrenched and expected way of writing about art were sometimes seen as a strategic disavowal of theory-laden art writing and criticism. But, as the artist and critic Peter Suchin has noted, these developments may not have been a rejection of established modes of writing but an attempt to find a function for criticism that would reflect an ever-expanding pluralism in contemporary art itself. To do so would ‘necessitate the invention or adaption of a vocabulary that is suited to the task in hand’ (Suchin 1998: 13). Likewise, Yves-Alain Bois has acknowledged that it was not theory per se that had become a problem for criticism, but its blunt handling, ‘the indiscriminate appeal to theory as a set of ready-made tools to handle a question’ (1990: xiii). Writers on art had not wholly dispensed with theory, but began to look for alternative, less ‘indiscriminate’ ways to incorporate and employ it within their work. Indeed, it was critics and theorists associated with *October* who were amongst the first to take an interest in such developments and subject them to scrutiny. In 1989, Gerard Mermoz identified the difficulty facing critics and art writers attempting to maintain critical distance or objectivity, those hallowed precepts of criticism, in his essay ‘Rhetoric and Episteme: Writing about “Art” in the Wake of Poststructuralism’ (1989). In 1980, Rosalind Krauss wrote of writerly strategies in theory and philosophy in her essay ‘Poststructuralism and the “Paraliterary”’ (1980) while Gregory L. Ulmer was prescient in identifying and analysing emergent post-critical modes of writing in ‘The Object of Post-Criticism’ (1983).

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So far, I have referred loosely to literary, alternative and experimental forms of art writing. The next section of this article attempts to map some of the subsequent trends in the field of art criticism and writing in more specific terms. The most visible models of critical practice that deviated from established or traditional forms of art criticism could be summarized as falling into four broad, often overlapping categories: ‘new journalist’ or ‘gonzo criticism’, post-critical ‘collage/montage’, ‘creative criticism’and ‘fictocriticism’ (and numerous cross-genre, hybrid forms within and across these loose taxonomies).

Much of the debate over the decline of art criticism, including the critical spats I have cited so far, refers an informal, pop cultural, slangy form of latter-day New Journalism-as-art criticism, represented by artists and writers such as Dave Hickey, Jerry Saltz and Peter Schjeldahl in the United States and Duncan McLaren, Stuart Morgan, Michael Bracewell and Francis McKee in the United Kingdom. This kind of ‘gonzo’ art criticism (seen also in other branches of cultural criticism, particularly music journalism, and almost exclusively written by men in relation to art) frequently employed a vernacular, idiomatic lexicon and was particularly notable for the reintroduction of playful and irreverent humour and ironic wit into art criticism. Like 1960s New Journalism itself, art criticism that appropriated these characteristics some decades later featured a strong focus on primary, first-hand experience. Tom Wolfe’s 1975 *The Painted Word* is a clear and significant precedent in terms of a shift in critical voice and register. The titles of the essays, books and articles published by these writers are indicative of a significant tonal change in writing on contemporary art from the 1990s onwards. These include Stuart Morgan’s 1993 ‘Confessions of a Body Snatcher’, Ross Sinclair’s 1994 ‘Nietzsche, the Beastie Boys and Masturbating as an Art Form’, ‘The Little Church of Perry Mason’ by Dave Hickey, 1997, and Duncan McLaren’s *The Strangled Cry of the Writer in Residence*, 2002.

As it became more visible, this informal, conversational approach seemed to stand in direct contrast to the detached, tonal seriousness of the traditional art criticism that had been so prevalent in the late twentieth century. By adopting the methods of New Journalism (the use of subjective, primary, experiential reportage), art criticism could parallel the forms and styles of the art it critiqued. In the 1990s and early 2000s, for example, the timbre of writing by figures such as Tom Morton, Matthew Collings, John Calcutt and Ross Sinclair embodied and enacted the dominant slacker aesthetic in music, fashion, film and visual art of the period, presenting itself as a reworked, self-consciously wry, ironic ‘neo-gonzo’. In a tongue-in-cheek attempt to historicize (or perhaps validate) this kind of writing, Dave Hickey was described as ‘the Walter Pater of the Midwest’ by fellow critic Peter Schjeldahl, a reference to his reputation as a ‘deep stylist’ (Hickey 1995: 80). The clear evaluative rubrics and critical prescriptions of mid-late twentieth-century art criticism and its codified, stylistic particularities seemed to dissolve in the modish, pop idiom of contemporary criticism, as Jerry Saltz, whose own criticism is representative of this style of writing, has observed:

Too much art criticism is written in a dreary hip metaphysical jargon that no one understands except other dreary hip metaphysicians who speak this dead language. Lately these critics have taken pot shots at me on panels and in print, always wanting to know what ‘my criterion for judging art is’, as if there were a formula.

(Saltz 2005)

In the crossfire between various approaches, it is worth noting that terms such as ‘academic’, ‘journalistic’ and even ‘art writing’ have often been used pejoratively to defend or champion respective positions. In this case, writings by Jerry Saltz, Matthew Collings, Dave Hickey, Stuart Morgan, Tom Morton and othershave often been referred to disdainfully as ‘journalism’ inferring a separation between crafted copywriting and ‘actual’ criticism. And yet the core function of criticism ‘to defend old standards, values and hierarchies against new ones or to defend the new against the old’ (Kuspit 2005) is clearly in evidence in this writing; in style, choice of subject matter and approach.

Another distinctive development in the style and form of writing on art came about through the production of fragmentary, *Arcades*-influenced writing characterized by appropriation, rewriting and the use of quotation in place of or interspersed with ‘new’ writing. Gregory L. Ulmer observed the emergence of this form in *The Object of* *Post-Criticism*:

Criticism is now being transformed in the same way that literature and the arts were transformed by the avant-garde movements in the early decades of this century […] I will argue that ‘post-criticism’ is constituted precisely by the application of the devices of Modernist art to critical representation […] the principal device taken over by critics and theorists is the compositional pair collage/montage.

(1983: 83)

Ulmer noted that such writing was characterized by citation, but citation ‘taken to an extreme’. Postmodern tropes abounded in Burroughsian ‘remixes’ of existing sources to form recomposed, restructured, cut-up criticism. Creative, politicized plagiarism (or postmodern citation) became a critical tool in the post-punk or collage/montage art writing of Scottish, English and Irish artists and writers such as Stewart Home, Will Bradley, Ross Birrell, John Calcutt and Francis McKee. Their texts often worked as a series of apparently tangential threads and fragments, intended to form an allusive, associative parallel to references in the artwork itself. Along with the extensive use of textual appropriation, essays by writers working in this manner frequently incorporated word play, punning and an exaggerated juxtaposition of pop and high cultural references. Other characteristics included an excessive use of marginalia, footnoting or preface/endnote features as though to lampoon stuffy academic conventions. Amongst other examples, lyrics from *The Beatles* ‘I Am The Walrus’ can be found interspersed within Calcutt’s 1996 essay ‘Full Fathom Five’, footnotes subsume and swallow the ‘main’ body of the essay in McKee’s overtly Hickey-inspired ‘Signing On’. A 2001 catalogue text by Birrell, apparently on painting, is entirely composed of anecdotes about Belgrade’s Youth Radio B92, interspersed with lists of pop albums according to year heading. The 2001 catalogue for Mike Nelson’s *A Forgotten Kingdom* is a re-stitched, recomposed ‘novel’ made of up of sections from existing works of literature, mined and pillaged by Will Bradley.

If the gap between literature and criticism had begun to close in gonzo and collage/montage critical forms, the re-emergence of creative criticism or criticism ‘aspiring to the condition of literature’ took this tendency further, becoming another prominent feature of alternative approaches to art writing from the 1980s onwards, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Literature that took art as its subject matter was clearly long established: Henry James’ *The Golden Bowl*, Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Zola’s *The Master* and Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *La Belle Captive* are just some examples. However, literature-as-*art criticism* began to appear in the particular spaces (exhibition catalogues, gallery texts and monographs) formerly occupied by interpretative, elucidatory and didactic essays on art and thus represented a further shift in approaches to critical writing and its forms.

Creative-critical art writing tends to be modeled on existing literary forms (plays, novellas, poems and short stories) or takes the form of *ekphrastic* parallel texts and narrative-driven experimental writing. In some cases, examples of ‘real’ art works, objects or projects appear as props or characters in fictional narratives, denoting a kind of writerly object theatre. Laurence Figgis’s 2010 catalogue essay ‘Perlescence and Patience’, for example, appropriates the fairytale genre in a story populated by animals and objects drawn from Zoe Williams’s exhibition *The Flight of O.* In Lynne Tillman’s *Madame Realism* stories (or fiction essays), originally written to accompany Kiki Smith’s work in 1984, the eponymous *Madame Realism* acts as Tillman’s art critic alter-ego, offering incisive commentaries on the art she surveys. Posing as an art world outsider or gallery flâneuse, *Madame Realism*’s interior monologues, observations and opinions on art and its audiences demonstrate Tillman’s critical acuity and verve. Many of Italo Calvino’s short stories occupy a similar position as works that function as alternative theoretical texts, a way into theory and critical thinking on art without employing the language of theory (see, e.g. ‘The Story of a Photographer’, from the collection 1970 *Difficult Loves*). Likewise, the art historian Carol Mavor’s 2012 *Black and Blue* is a montage of images, art criticism, theory and poetic and fragmentary memoir, punctuated with first-person recollections.

In contrast to Mavor’s detailed encounters with key works, in some instances of creative-critical writing specific artworks and artists are not mentioned at all, but are invoked instead through allusion, metaphor and allegory, less interpretative than complementary or expansive. Collage/montage forms of criticism (associative, indirect) also adopt this peripheral relation to artwork but in creative criticism they are expressed through more closely interwoven, linear narrative prose forms (often short stories). Other approaches focus directly on art objects, but work with literary concepts such as personification, imbuing inanimate artworks with voice and agency in which the art writer’s role is akin to that of a method actor – objects are ‘inhabited’ by the writer who attempts to speak from their perspective. This kind of fictionalized object biography (or ‘object-oriented writing’) can be seen most recently in works such as Travis Jeppensen’s *16 Sculptures*. At their most successful, these forms offer a dynamic dialectic between art and writing on art in which both discourses animate one another. Neither contingent nor attendant, such texts propose a reciprocal, equivalent relationship with art but maintain their autonomy as forms in their own right. A ‘parallel text’ in this sense might reflect or sit alongside an artwork but never attempts to translate or achieve straight*ekphrasis*. (It is also important to note the increasing presence of women’s voices in this series of examples and in the fictocritical examples I go on to outline – while gonzo and post-critical writing is notably male in profile, creative criticism and fictocriticism is frequently represented, sometimes dominated, by women. I go on, albeit briefly, to consider questions around gender and critical models further in this article.)

These approaches are not a formal or aesthetic ‘return’ to late nineteenth-century models of poetry, fiction, prose-poems and other literary forms; they do not function as literary responses to art for their own sake, as has been suggested. Rather, the latter-day stories, plays and novellas-as-criticism I refer to here are informed by a critical reconsideration of the place of narrative in discourses around art and the political value of storytelling and memoir as art criticism. In Brian Wallis’s essay ‘Telling Stories’, storytelling is advocated as a form capable of criticality, resistance and political intent. Wallis refers to Walter Benjamin’s understanding of storytelling as a ‘form melding personal experience and political desire’, adding that ‘many writers today (in particular women of color, Latin American writers, artists) have turned to storytelling and other fictional modes as forms of cultural criticism’ (1989: xiii).

In spite of the tendency to polarize art writing into the creative/literary or critical/theoretical genres, it is important to note that some of very texts regarded as the antithesis of theory have their foundations in the work of established ‘theorists’, figures such as Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guttari, Catherine Clément, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. The work of the above critics, writers and philosophers is frequently and reductively categorized as ‘theory’, when in fact all these writers oscillated between criticism, philosophy, memoir, autobiography, poetry and fiction. Even at the height of critical postmodernism’s domination in the field of art, Gregory L. Ulmer proposed a new critical writing genre which he dubbed ‘mystory’, an intertwining of ‘the personal (autobigraphical), popular (community stories, oral history, popular culture) and expert (disciplines of knowledge) in an attempt to find an adequate form for the cognitive structures of the electronic age’ (Whybrow 2011: 40).

Most recently (along with site-writing, travelogue and other situated forms of art writing) hybrid forms melding fiction, theory and criticism have been much in evidence; they constitute the fourth grouping of shifting directions for art writing and criticism in the last few decades, some of which could be seen as an anglophone extension of the European post-structuralist theory, criticism and philosophy which adopted literary, poetic and fictional forms, as discussed above (*écriture* *féminine* is one such example). Defiantly subjective, diaristic, anecdotal and trans-disciplinary, these long-form essays, memoirs and other examples of creative non-fiction, most visible in the United Kingdom, United States and Canada, have established themselves as a new, if contested, orthodoxy as the twenty-first century progresses. Perhaps more than their predecessors, texts adopting these formal strategies challenge the notion of objectivity and criticality as intertwined and contingent through a privileging of the personal-as-political in autotheory, theory-fiction, lyric essays, personal essays and meta-fiction. I refer to here to all of these related approaches (and this final group) as fictocriticism, simply because it is perhaps the most prominent and visible of these hybrid forms today (though most emerged in the late 1990s). As it suggests, ‘fictocriticism’ refers to writing which grafts fiction and criticism. It bears a close relationship with writing practices such as autotheory, an approach combining autobiography and social criticism, often attributed to Stacey Young’s 1997 book *Changing the* *Wor(l)d* and to works such as Gloria Anzaldua’s *The* *Borderlands/La* *Frontera: The New* *Mestiza*, a cross-genre work interlacing essays, theory, poems and autobiography.

The term fictocriticism itself is frequently linked with writers such as Chris Kraus, perhaps the most recognizable proponent of fictocriticism within the field of contemporary art. Kraus adopted the term in the absence of suitable alternatives to describe a university course she was teaching though it derives from writing practices in disciplines such as anthropology and ethnography (e.g. autoethnography). Michael Taussig’s 1997 genre-bending book *The* *Magic of the State* is a notable example, blending ethnographic observation, literary theory, documentary, archival material, fact and fiction.

To define these approaches as ‘art writing’ is more complex than the other broad categories I have outlined so far. Their relationship with art criticism is less clearly identifiable, but by virtue of their close association with the art world, these authors frequently operates within the field of contemporary art rather than literature. Many writers working in this vein are art school educated, work with artists as friends, lovers and creative collaborators and are commissioned by, or publish work through, art publishers. Chris Kraus has done much to establish highly personal, intimate and anecdotal forms of writing through books such as *Aliens and Anorexia* (2000) and *Torpor* (2006) and through her role as commissioning editor of the Semiotext(e) *Native Agents* series, whose list includes fiction, memoir and autobiography by artists, poets, performers and writers including Gary Indiana, Eileen Myles, Penny Arcade, David Wojnarowicz, Kathy Acker, Lynne Tillman and Bernadette Corporation.

But beyond the positioning of many of these writers as operating within or in close proximity to the art world, the texts themselves frequently refer to artists, artworks and visual culture within broader creative-critical narratives. There are extended passages of critical analysis in Chris Kraus’s 1997 autobiographical novel *I Love Dick,* which details ‘Chris’s’ encounter with an R. B. Kitaj painting and refer to works by Eleanor Antin and Hannah Wilke, amongst others. The work of Yves Klein and Andy Warhol features in Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*, while Rebecca Solnit’s *The Faraway Nearby* takes its title from a painting by Georgia O’Keeffe and weaves together stories from art and literary history.

In formal and stylistic terms, this kind of writing can often be differentiated from creative criticism or criticism-as-literature through its partial retention of established academic conventions such as citation, referencing and footnotes and the insistence on personal and biographical, rather than purely fictional narratives. The inclusion of literary elements drawn from sci-fi, folklore, magic realism, fairytale and surrealism, present in contemporary creative criticism, for instance, is less in evidence in the majority of these texts. Less allegorical and allusive, these modes of creative non-fiction, often presented as long-form essays, often feature polemic or rhetorical argumentation. They engage explicitly with a range of theoretical perspectives, particularly those pertaining to feminist, postcolonial or queer identity politics. Unlike more established forms of art theory, which almost exclusively adopt the third person as a detached and omniscient authorial voice, in auto-fiction, critico-fiction, fictocriticism and related cross-genre forms of art writing, the narrative voice is almost always first-person singular. There is a notable focus on intimacy, sexuality and detailed depictions of the quotidian and ‘trivial’ in such writing; the critical and political dimension of the writing is embedded within the forms it adopts, and personal anecdotes are recounted ‘for the theoretical insights they afford’ (Gallop 2002). Some texts written in this mode could be regarded as forms of marginal or minor literature, or ‘literature of lesser diffusion’, at least in relation to the status quo or to the established, authoritative voices of institutional journals and mainstream publishing ventures.

While fictocriticism is the critical *soup de jour*, similar styles and approaches can be identified in the work of slightly earlier writers such as bell hooks, whose writing, like much contemporary fictocriticism, has similarly been accused of being unscholarly and informal. But it is precisely through her idiomatic style of writing, embracing slang, dialect and vernacular that hooks’ criticality is revealed. It is these very characteristics that bring to light hidden ideologies which appear ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ and the insidious structures of power contained within language on the part of the reader. And while Chris Kraus’s feted, almost iconic *I Love Dick* is now a mainstream commercial success (it has been adapted as a TV series, commissioned by Amazon), it is worth noting that Dick Hebdige himself wrote an essay that prefigured Kraus’s approach. ‘The Impossible Object’, published in *New Formations* in 1987, appears to be a classic academic essay for the first six to seven pages. A lengthy 30-page text, it is composed of numbered sections, extensive notes and peppered with high theoretical and philosophical references (Kant, Nietzsche, Bourdieu, Lyotard, Marcuse, Kristeva, *Tel* *Quel* amongst many others). Written in the third person, Hebdige’s tone is formal and detached and the argument is developed according to a clearly structured framework and typical academic conventions. But suddenly, a few pages in, the text is interspersed with anecdotal, subjective, autobiographical, first-person, ‘non-academic’ paragraphs in italics (Hebdige 1987).

In the four models of critical practice discussed, form and function are reciprocal and intertwined, and notions of critical distance and objectivity largely abandoned. In the emphasis on anecdote, narrative, jokes, appropriation and fiction as ‘ways of telling’ aspects of critical writing that had been marginalized in dominant critical and theoretical writing of the preceding decades were reintroduced. But how do these speculative, open-ended texts function as *criticism?* When compared with established critical modes of writing, what do they challenge and do they have ‘contestative potential’ (Charlesworth 2003)?

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In 2016, the critic Oliver Basciano, citing Mike Kelley’s essay ‘Artist/critic’, wrote that the late American artist had argued that ‘the oppressive, institutionalized version of art history peddled by straight-up critics had silenced nuance in the development of art’s narrative’. Basciano points to institutional and commercial strictures, the journalistic traditions of art media and the expectations of audiences as key factors within a radically altered context for criticism in the last few decades (2016:133). As I have suggested, it is perhaps *because* of these accelerated changes within institutions, the market, journalism and audiences for art that criticism has been forced to shape-shift, adapt and adjust to ever-changing contexts and circumstances. With traditional or disciplinary strictures relaxed or abandoned, and academic and journalistic conventions subverted or opposed, the expanded forms of art writing I have described could be seen as a critical redefinition of criticism itself, a necessary response to continued claims that criticism is moribund and exponentially poorer with each decade. But rather than regarding various models of art writing as opposed or in conflict or identifying the emergence of each new manner of writing as representative of criticism’s decline and fall, the vacillations of style and formal experimentation in art writing can themselves be seen as critical strategies that question the accepted criteria for art criticism and question the policing of its boundaries. As Robert Storr noted in 2002, ‘if criticism is not being taken seriously, part of the fault may be that the things being said, or at least the language and style that are used to say them, are no longer effective or useful’, ‘you must realise’, he continued, ‘that many younger artists are disenchanted by the assumptions and tone of criticism that dominated the seventies and eighties’ (2002).

Since the mid-1980s, the accelerated increase in the production of specialist, non-academic art publishing, exhibition catalogues, gallery texts and art magazines (especially those produced by artists) accounts in part for the emergence of ‘alternative’ models of critical practice. With a rise in the range of publishing platforms for art writing, the possibilities for writing itself expanded through the loosening or absence of the usual constraints around house style, editorial control, loyalty to advertisers and fixed commissioning processes (such as those found in broadsheet journalism and peer-reviewed academic journals). Art writers as a group also increased in both size and diversity. In particular, the rise of visual artists themselves contributing to written discourse on art and the growing interest in commissioning writers from other disciplinary backgrounds (as opposed to professional art critics or institutionally- affiliated art historians) generated a polyphony of voices contributing to the field rather a small pool of established figures with identifiable, often fixed critical agendas.

Artists’ crucial role in the development of expanded forms of criticism came about through their participation in art publishing, both as freelance contributors to new art and cross-cultural magazines such as the UK publications *Frieze*, *The Modern Review*, *Flash Art*, *Art Review* and *Cabinet* and through the foundation of artist-run magazines and journals such as *ZG*, *Bomb*, *Real Life*, *Variant*, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, *Acme*, *Flux*, *Product*, *Untitled*, *Black Diamond*, *MAKE* and many others. Artist-run spaces and artist-initiated projects similarly contributed to the increased production and range of writing on art through the publication of catalogues, gallery leaflets, zines and artist’s books.

There are further ways to understand these examples of ‘alternative’ art writing as critical. The frequent and enthusiastic embrace of cross-, inter- and trans-disciplinary modes of writing, for instance, stands in contrast to traditional and more established forms of art theory and criticism, which tended to maintain an exclusive commitment to methodologies and approaches derived largely from art history and the philosophy of art. In adopting modes of writing derived from disciplines and fields as diverse as journalism, literature, music, architecture, sociology, history and ethnography, these expanded forms of art criticism were hybrid, fluid and cross-genre by their very nature. In terms of content and subject matter, many writers, particularly in the late 1980s and 1990s, employed a deliberate and strategic inclusion of pop cultural references within discussions of contemporary art, highlighting a postmodern concern with cultural mixing, the juxtaposition of high and low culture, a reconsideration of the tenets of the canon and the dissolving of hierarchies of form. While art historians such as Julian Stallabrass saw the emergence of art criticism within new ‘lifestyle’ or cross-cultural magazines as an Adornian death-knell for ‘serious’ criticism, where writing on art, he wrote, included ‘whimsical references to music, literature or popular science’ (1999: 267) these ‘zeitgeisty’, glossy, albeit populist magazines nonetheless displayed a crucial awareness that artists and their audiences did not exist in discipline-specific vacuums. This position was supported by the artist Peter Halley who bemoaned the lack of intertextual criticism and the tendency for publishers to divide periodicals into medium-specific sections. As he has acknowledged, ‘artists are just as influenced by pop music, architecture, literature or movies as they are by work in their own field’ (Halley 1997). In art schools, too, tutors realized that new generations of art students no longer looked solely to art history in order to situate and contextualize their practice but were interested in the way their works could be positioned in relation to broader cultural, creative and political contexts. These developments gave rise to the teaching of visual culture, cultural studies and visual studies as the historical and critical component of fine art degrees in British art schools in the late 1980s and 1990s and coincided with a renewed interest in art criticism and writing on the part of visual artists themselves, as evidenced, for example, by the increase in student-led art magazines and the presence of writing by artists within mainstream art publications such as *Frieze.*

The increased participation in art writing and criticism on the part of visual artists from the 1980s onwards could itself be seen as a clear critical intention to contest the traditional, assumed power relations between the roles of artist, critic and art historian. Many artists engaged with critical writing and curating alongside their own visual art practice in an attempt to create an unmediated culture and to eliminate ‘secondariness’ in the production, exhibition and reception of art. The long-held understanding of the critic as arbiter of taste or cultural gatekeeper became unpalatable in an era of DIY culture and self-determination. Artists were no longer reliant on theorists and art historians to critically frame or interpret their work. Rather than devolving their critical agency to an intermediary or middleman sought to reclaim it through direct participation in the written discourse on art, as Peter Suchin has noted:

[…] artists began to challenge the current subject positions of the artist, the critic and the curator. Boundaries between established categories were deliberately blurred, because the identities of such divisions were no longer either convincing or acceptable […] The important point about artists becoming writers and curators […] is that the model of the inarticulate artist will no longer suffice. It is not up to the critic to think and theorise on others behalf.

(2004: 13)

Leanne Carroll, in a discussion of Robert Morris’s writings, has also argued that ‘the phenomenon of artist-as-critic can be seen as an assertion of authority on the part of artists against critics’ (2008).

The plurality and diversity of new voices contributing to writing on art ushered in a concurrent shift in the tone and register of writing on visual art, often towards the same critical ends: namely, an intention to move away from the dogmatic, paternalistic style of ‘top-down’ criticism. While post-structuralism had mitigated against the idea of unified, fixed or absolutes truths and had challenged the very notion of objectivity and universality, there was a sense in much of this writing that the tone and timbre of expanded forms of criticism or critical paraliterature sought, indirectly, to subvert the ‘language of knowledge’ through which these ideas were often discussed. In terms of the four broad groupings of writing discussed earlier, this opaque oppositionality can be seen firstly in the irreverent, nose-thumbing mood of neo-gonzo criticism. While these writers rarely took on critical opponents directly, there were regular references in these texts to the stuffy, turgid prose styles of ‘academia’ and the out-of-touch perspectives of the assumed gatekeepers of art criticism. Writing by artists, critics and writers such as Hickey, Saltz, McLaren, Sinclair, McKee and Calcutt, mentioned earlier, often read a knowing, somewhat sophisticated take on sixth-form humour: cheeky, rebellious, slapstick and self-deprecating. The style of such writing reveals a self-conscious attempt to poke fun at the seriousness and self-importance of conventional criticism, to ‘subvert the cult of seriousness instead of sucking on it’ (O’Brien 1993).

Collage/montage forms went even further, often rejecting the singular authorial voice altogether to weave together associative threads that left often left interpretation and coherent meaning to the reader. In contrast to the densely substantiated analyses of traditional approaches, post-critical, collage/montage and creative criticism presented a series of writerly entry points or parallels to the work of art. Like neo-gonzo, fictocriticism represented a challenge to the precepts of objectivity and critical distance, but without a wholesale rejection of theory. In its deliberate incorporation of elements of writing and narrative assumed to be the anathema of standard academic forms (the anecdotal, personal, confessional, intimate), fictocritical and autotheoretical writing questioned the foundations and orthodoxies of criticism while adhering in part to many of its conventions. All of these forms, to varying degrees, have been lambasted for their alleged narcissism, self-indulgence and solipsism. Detractors read the subjectivity and foregrounding of the personal or intimate as critical weakness rather than (as their authors would have it) as a lens through which to consider broader ideological concerns. In *The Argonauts*,Maggie Nelson recounts the public denouncement of Jane Gallop’s work by the critic Rosalind Krauss on these grounds, and many of the critics and historians cited earlier in this text have made similar claims in their condemnation of ‘literary’ or explicitly subjective forms of art writing. While some of these claims may hold true, the rationale put forward by supporters of the personal, lyrical, intimate essay form as one with radical critical potential is convincing, especially if we understand these texts as examples of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guttari deemed ‘minor literature’. They are critical in terms of signaling ‘a resistance to forms which insist on the last word, the magisterial statement’ (Kerr and Nettleback 1998: 1–18). For fictocriticism in particular, the presence of voices once marginalized by the canon on the grounds of gender, race and class is significant, as Helen Flavell has noted in her discussion of fictocriticism’s appeal, and its political underpinning: ‘many women writers have been excluded and alienated by the authoritative, colonizing practices of traditional academic writing’ (Flavell 2004).

And yet Rosalind Krauss’s conviction that such forms cannot function as criticism, whatever other merits they may have, is long established. In 1980, discussing texts such as *Roland Barthes on Roland Barthes* (1977) and *A Lovers Discourse* (1977), texts that can now be regarded as both the catalyst and theoretical bedrock for contemporary manifestations of autotheory, fictocriticism and fragmentary collage/montage writing (Nelson’s *The Argonauts* makes this debt explicit in taking its title from Barthes), Krauss spoke of Barthes’ ‘intention to blur the distinction between literature and criticism’. Writing of the paraliterary as texts in which ‘criticism finds itself caught in a dramatic web of many voices, citation, asides, divigations’, Krauss refused to regard such writing as criticism, stating instead that ‘the paraliterary cannot be a model for the systematic unpacking of the meaning of a work of art that criticism’s task is thought to be’ (1980: 37). But it is precisely the notion that criticism *should* act as a ‘systematic unpacking’ of works of art that the forms of writing I discuss here seek to contest.

If alternative, hybrid, literary and creative forms of writing on art can be regarded as critical through their dismantling of the hierarchies between artist and critic and through their undermining of an authoritative critical voice, they can also be seen to question the understanding of criticism as attendant or parasitical, as tools to ‘unlock’ meaning in works of art. If criticism’s job is to move from knowledge to judgement or evaluation, as it is frequently said to be (see, for instance, Noel Carroll’s 2009 *On Criticism*), judgement is still extant in much of these texts. What differs is that judgements are presented as one amongst many possible. It is also too rarely acknowledged that critical judgements do not cease to be critical when they affirmative or positive. The fact that these critical forms tend not to be overtly opposed to specific works of art or individual artists does not undermine their critical function more broadly. The difference, largely, is that in paraliterature and expanded forms of criticism, judgement has moved from being explicit to implicit, from stated to inferred.

In presenting writing as a complement or parallel to an artwork, there is an understanding that visual to verbal analysis is not always possible, however systematic or methodical a theoretician or historians’ skill set. That is why, in many instances, artists have carefully and deliberately chosen their specific forms, forms that embed and perform a critical function without the need for textual decoding. Expanded forms of criticism, particularly creative criticism, do not undermine the primacy of the visual or seek to detract or provide critical contingency, but nor are they subservient or deferential to the artwork. In this respect, ‘expanded criticism’ avoids the assumed parasitical relationship between traditional criticism and its subject matter. Rather, there is an understanding that criticism itself is a creative practice. In this sense, criticism might be reciprocal and reflective in its relationship with art, but it is not in service to art and artists. By refusing to project a pre-ordained meaning or theoretical perspective ‘onto’ works of art and in avoiding using art to illustrate an established thesis, it could be argued that expanded forms of criticism have developed a more nuanced understanding of art’s function. Such approaches allow both creative practices – visual art and criticism – to retain their agency and understand criticism as a poetic text concerned with the poetics of the text. It could be argued that without poetics there are no means to express politics or anything else.

In summary, and to reiterate, the paraliterature of art criticism and theory did not supplant established and traditional forms of art criticism and theory. Rather, an expanded range of forms and styles of writing on art offered readerships an alternative to ‘high theory’ which came to be regarded (often unfairly) as deliberately obscurantist, impenetrable and elitist. Expanded criticism also provided a different textual engagement with art than that offered by the prescriptive, dogmatic and often bombastic paternalism of professional and broadsheet criticism, which had likewise become representative of an overly authorial, outmoded didacticism. In their endless self-referentiality, insularity and use of formulaic, idiomatic tropes, such critics often seemed as narcissistic, self-indulgent and stylized as the writers of the new critical forms they decried. As Matthew Collings has noted, readers can often lose heart when such writing (‘pompous’ ‘moralizing’) deteriorates into academic point scoring (Collings cited in Arnatt and Collings 2004: 12).

In attempting to trace the trajectory of emergent styles and forms of art writing, it is perhaps unavoidable to describe such divergent approaches to writing in oppositional terms. Reducing art writing to either/or suggests that critical and creative approaches are at odds with one another where it more often the case that ostensibly ‘critical’ texts can be creative in form, and vice versa. Assigning writers (or artists) to specific genres or stylistic models also assumes that their output is immutable. Even those art historians and critics associated with some of the most canonical books and essays on art in the late twentieth century have adopted more experimental and creative approaches to writing on art throughout their career – John Berger, Susan Sontag, Michael Fried and T. J. Clark amongst others have written novels, poems, memoir as well as their more scholarly historical and theoretical texts. Similarly, many of the artists and writers known primarily for fictocriticism, creative criticism or collage/montage forms of writing have shown that they are adept at writing complex, incisive, analytical ‘academic’ essays and articles – the art criticism of Carol Mavor, Chris Kraus, Lynne Tillman or Eileen Myles are cases in point here.

The vicissitudes of various critical practices can be seen (albeit reductively, and with a significant US-bias) through looking at the award-winners and critical ‘esteem indicators’ such as the College Art Association’s Frank Jewett Mather Award from its inception in 1963 to the present. The list of awardees shows the dominance of critical titans such as Max Kozloff, Harold Rosenberg, Barbara Rose and Clement Greenberg in the 1960s, the rise of critical theory, the New Art History and the *October* school in the 1970s and 1980s (Rosalind Krauss, Lucy Lippard, Linda Nochlin, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Douglas Crimp, along with established, fiercely judgmental critics such as Donald Kuspit and Robert Hughes) to a broader range of voices and modes of writing in the 1990s and 2000s, such as Thomas McEvilley, Dave Hickey, Jerry Saltz and Chris Kraus (all winners between 1993 and 2008). Saltz has been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism (2001, 2006). Hickey was awarded a prestigious MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 2001, and Kraus became a Guggenheim Fellow in 2016. These so-called, self-appointed, ‘bad boys’ and girls, the *enfants terrible* of criticism, have long been centre stage, and they always wrote for the most established, most acclaimed magazines, publishers and journals. Given their status and standing, it is surely wrong-headed to regard the latter names as mavericks or outsiders today, however paradigm-shifting their early work may have been.

Far from being in opposition to theory, some of the most experimental or transgressive examples of ‘expanded criticism’ are indebted to earlier experiments rooted firmly in canonical theoretical and philosophical writings on art, as I have discussed. The aim, then, surely, should be to avoid any one form becoming ‘the’ way to engage with art through writing. In 2012, Marina Warner asserted that it was ‘important to have a variety of stories, otherwise it’s propaganda, it’s Stalinism’ (2012). We might claim the same for all of the models of writing I have outlined here. When a singular form of art writing becomes dominant, orthodoxies are necessarily challenged and new forms emerge. When minor becomes major and margin becomes centre, it is always the style and idiom of art writing that are taken to task, as though language, the dress of thought, is separate to thought itself. In all of the modes of writing I have discussed, from scholarly art history to gonzo fanzines, there are countless examples of a descent into pure style, of linguistic critical posturing – this is no more prevalent in one approach than another. In conclusion, to paraphrase Baxandall, while *some* of the better things we might say about art stand in a peripheral relation to the work itself, some deal with it best head-on. In ‘The Writing Artist’, Jan Svenungsson discussed a 1993 text by Mike Kelley, provocatively titled ‘Playing with Dead Things: On the Uncanny’:

At first [the essay] comes across as thoroughly academic, dense and footnoted. And it is, but there is a but. It was written upon the invitation for an exhibition of radical site-specific projects in the Dutch town of Arnhem. With Kelley’s reputation he was obviously expected to go against the norm and break some rules, and not wanting to disappoint he decided to do just that. His solution: to mount a very well researched thematic and traditional exhibition at the local museum, complete with this highly academic catalogue essay. When transgression of the norm is what is expected, conforming to tradition can be the radical choice.

(2009)

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