

Parasites in Love

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I understand why folks get such schadenfreude out of puckish work like Jasper Johns' *The Critic Sees* (1961)—a gray brick with eyeglasses and mouths where the eyes should be. It's a good joke. But I enjoyed it more before I started writing criticism. Johns, who has said he made the piece as a retort to a needling critic,¹ belongs to a generation that saw critics as snobs and bloodsuckers, subsisting on artists' nutritious ooze, and so refused to see the critics in themselves. Another, more recent "critical" work, Rosemarie Trockel's *The Critic* (2015), cuts closer to the truth. It's a realistic sculpture of a young woman in black clothes with a pot full of Alpine goat beards perched on her head, her hair rolled into large curlers. She has been out for scalps. What makes this sculpture honest is that Trockel's mannequin looks a lot like her.

Both of these sculptures appeared in a 2019 show at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York called *The Critic*—a perennial subject, maybe because it pricks the professional anxieties of everyone involved. The gray specter of *The Critic*, courtesy of Greenberg, still represents a certain soul-breaking view of the art market, with its winners and (mostly) losers. Also in 2019, the poet and critic Raphael Rubinstein wrote a searching article about the dwindling audience for old-fashioned art criticism (while citing new collections of essays by art critics like Peter Schjeldahl and Chris Kraus). He wrote that "however brilliant a piece of criticism might be, it will always be secondary to that art that inspired it."² To me, this rings like critics' most nagging doubt about what we do—that criticism is superfluous, and no one cares. It also sounds like the kind of viewpoint that Schjeldahl describes in

his latest book as one of those "dreary, timid, deadening attitudes toward art, of kinds that have changed in form but that never die."³

To argue that art is primary but writing is not, you need to believe that art is original—the way a baby thinks they are the first person on earth. Perhaps birth is the start of the conflict between originality and repetition that Rosalind Krauss described in "The Originality of the Avant-Garde" (1981), and why we value the former, not the latter. "The self as origin is safe from contamination by tradition because it possesses a kind of originary naiveté," Krauss wrote. Forty years later, art's originality remains a comforting fantasy, the way the American Dream still whispers that *you are different*, unique enough to make your own fortune—just like everybody else. This isn't a coincidence. The self-starting, bohemian vigor of the historical avant-garde has prototyped the modern gig worker with their brand of one. In that social-Darwinist vision, it's the over-promised, underdelivered, final state of comfort and success that makes life worth living.

In fact, it's this existential pressure that pits artists and critics against one another, while also muddling their individual virtues into some idea of a "creative class." In that mindset, artists and critics (and curators and gallerists and collectors) can only commit to the obvious capitulation of high art to worldliness, no longer dreaming of escaping the ivory tower so much as, like the basement-dwelling family in the movie *Parasite*, just hoping for a gig in a fancy house. That hope is addictive. Even Greenberg wrote of the golden umbilical cord that ties artists to the real nourishment, issued by that big, wealthy, bloated—but still throbbing—body of capital. The artist and the critic and billions of others are united in their hunger.

But that's not the whole story. Yes, critics do rely in a very real way on the work of others. But artists *also* respond to the world—which includes other art. As Trockel's sculpture reminds us, the

1. Emma Brockes, "Master of Few Words," *The Guardian*, July 26, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2004/jul/26/art.usa>.



Rosemarie Trockel, *The Critic* (2015).
Mixed media, 67 × 23.75 × 23.75 inches.
© Rosemarie Trockel. Image courtesy of
Matthew Marks Gallery.
Photo: Aaron Wax.

artist and the critic often share a body. Schjeldahl's book ends with an essay on Oscar Wilde's "The Critic as Artist" (1890). The Socratic pundit in Wilde's dialogue thinks that those who can't do, critique. But Wilde argues that both artists and critics share a common "critical faculty" to tear down the old and invent the new. "The tendency of creation is to repeat itself," wrote Wilde, but "it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms."⁴ Clearly, the Greenbergian style of art writing has given way to a livelier, more equally distributed discourse on apps and online magazines, undertaken by people in all areas of the arts. In a sense, what defines the artist is a certain performance of originality, while the critic plays their role as an omnivorous student of existing information. ("Criticism is in large part a performing art," writes Schjeldahl.)⁵ The difference between the two is vocational: intelligent, critical thinkers playing their respective roles. Krauss notes that Rodin, even as he promoted himself as an originary genius, worked in multiples.⁶

Art in the age of mechanical reproducibility is the art of reference, of context, of interaction—from appropriation to relational to research-based forms, and on up. For Oscar Wilde, unoriginality is a virtue for those concerned with what he calls an "intellectual relation to their age."⁷ We've got to work with what we've got. DIS, a millennial collective that spans art, fashion, and media, has learned this lesson well. When they curated the Berlin Biennale in 2016, they packaged the sacred original in the language of advertising. The work they selected looked like it belonged in its venues year-round—a juice bar by Débora Delmar Corp. (a company of one) in the lobby of an art academy; displays about blockchain by Simon Denny in a business school. DIS and the ambivalence they exhibited not only tweaked critics' anxieties about the relevance of their own form, but also the anxiety of artists, apparently doomed to play the role of your average white-collar entrepreneur.

"Couched in airy naïveté and ironic enthusiasm," wrote critic and artist

Hannah Black, the biennial embraced the parameters of "a world dominated visually, ethically, and ontologically by capital, in which long-standing forms of struggle—the protest, the union, the political party, even critique—seem like nostalgic curiosities or reenactments, ultimately doomed to fail."⁸ The pursuits that Black identifies as outdated on capitalism's terms are versions of the "moral imperative" Schjeldahl attributes to the critic-as-artist, and—along with art—remain ways of orienting yourself critically to the world: ways not of taking but of giving back.

DIS' biennial was a cynical, pragmatic attempt not to burn down the system, but to climb inside capitalism's ruined body and keep warm. Art and criticism are both food for that survival: acts meant to be taken up, discussed, dissected, digested, used—and made again—from one parasite to another. Relegating the critic to a secondary role, the artist to a primary one, might help to keep the order of events intact—the art is made, the critic responds—but any question of hierarchy between the arts, however off-handed, obscures the common cause of responding to our age. It so happens that our moment, our new form of old trouble, is one that rewards some over others, making our relationships antagonistic and competitive, while at the same time compressing our roles into soulless full-time jobs. We work and think and live in an age that is fighting against understanding and resisting its own analysis, by rewarding ignorance and cynicism over curiosity and love.

"Art critics are generally poets who have betrayed their art," wrote Robert Smithson, a failed poet himself, in *Artforum*. Critics of this kind try to "turn art into a matter of reasoned discourse" and, when that fails, they "resort to a poetic quote."⁹ Art criticism as we know it has its roots in ekphrastic poetry, verse written on the occasion of the experience of art. The first critics were actual poets: Baudelaire in the 19th century; Auden and O'Hara in the mid-20th. Schjeldahl gave up writing poetry decades ago; Bruce Hainley continues the tradition today, while other critics,

2. He makes an exception for "agenda criticism," with axes to grind and discourses to shape. In that case, though, the art is secondary to the critic's own (still secondary) mission. Raphael Rubinstein, "The Ghosts of Art Criticism," *Art in America*, October 2019, <https://www.artnews.com/>

art-in-america/features/where-is-the-audience-for-art-criticism-now-63661.

3. Peter Schjeldahl, "Credo: The Critic as Artist: Updating Oscar Wilde," *Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light* (New York: Abrams, 2019), p. 374.

like Hannah Black and Travis Jeppesen, are writers and novelists in a similarly poetic vein. What these forms of making and writing share is a critical relationship to the contemporary. Capitalism wants us to think capitalism is all that we have in common. In fact, artists and critics are both adept at thinking beyond the crushing, pragmatic logic of the contemporary itself—the way a parasite might live, for a moment, without a host.

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4. Quoted in Schjeldahl, p. 375.

5. Schjeldahl, p. 378.

6. Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition," *October*, Fall 1981, pp. 47–66.

7. Quoted in Schjeldahl, p. 376.

8. Hannah Black, "The 9th Berlin Biennale," *Artforum*, September 2016, <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201607/the-9th-berlin-biennale-63010>.

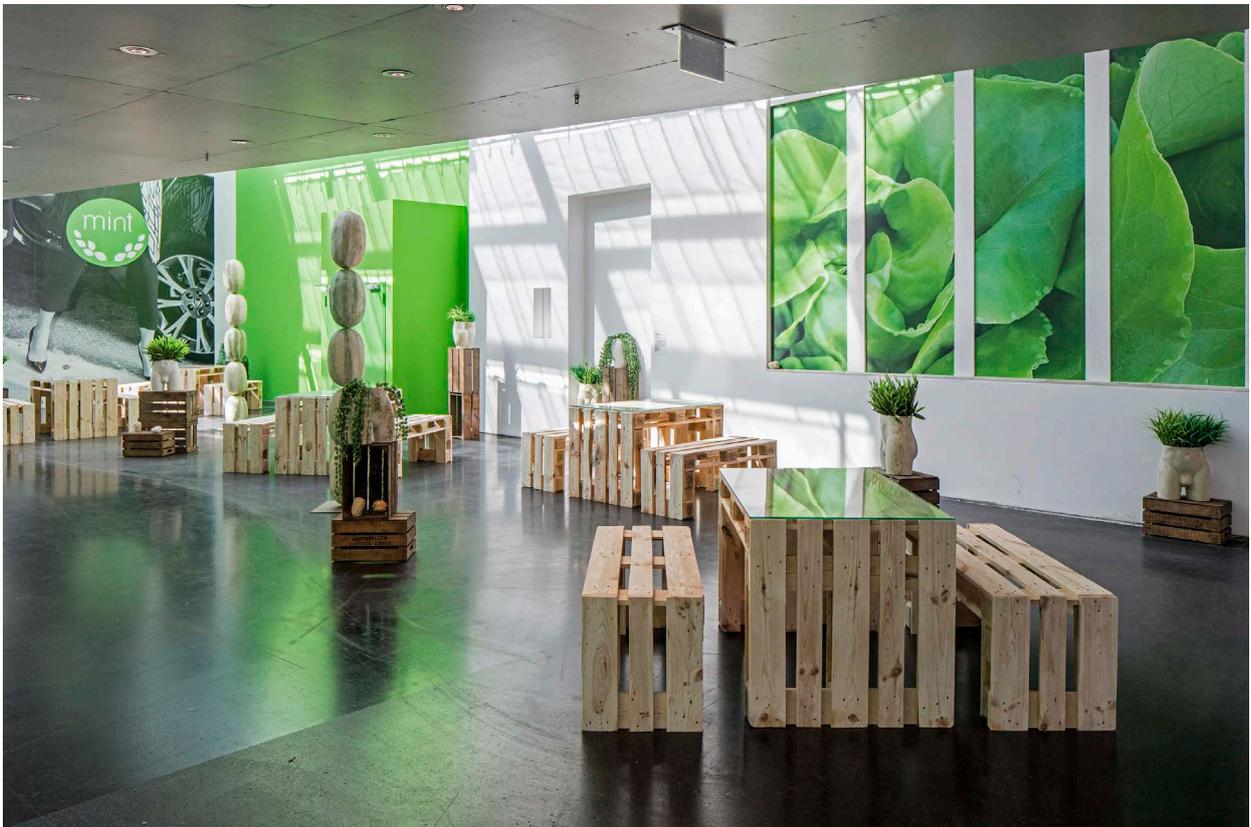
9. Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Proposals," *Artforum*, September 1968, pp. 44–50.



Above and Bottom on p. 15: Débora Delmar Corp, *MINT* (installation view) (2016). Juice bar, furniture, prints. Image courtesy of Debora Delmar Corp.; DUVE Berlin; and the 9th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art. Photo: Timo Ohler.



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Top: Christopher Kulendran Thomas, *New Eelam* (installation view) (2016). Mixed media, developed in collaboration with Annika Kuhlmann. Film Production: Klein and West, Mark Reynolds. Design: Manuel Bürger, Jan Giesekeing. Architecture: Martti Kalliala. Production Design: Marcelo Alves. Biosphere: Matteo Greco. Creative Director: Annika Kuhlmann. Image courtesy of Christopher Kulendran Thomas; New Galerie, Paris. Photo: Laura Fiorio.