

On Performing the Critical

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Critique must also be seen as a search for alternative forms of living, different from the martial dominance, clerical and patriarchal order, and as a battle for education, as a battle over language, as a battle for broader knowledge production.

Gerald Raunig, "What is Critique?" (Raunig 2008)

The "critical" has become an unexceptional adjective in the field of art.¹ In today's neoliberal capitalist environment where everything is at risk of becoming absorbed as an image, an attitude, or a marketable style, critique is no less innocent. One goes to art school to become more "critical," to acquire "critical" skills, and to develop a more "critical" practice. What is heralded by the "critical"? How does something qualify as "critical"? Who gets to practice it, and in what locations? What does it have to do with the *other* "critical" as in urgent, dire, and precarious—a *critical condition, a critical matter, a critical time*?²

Choosing art as a vocation is a contested negotiation of various intersecting factors that include race, class, gender, culture, family, support systems, and mental health. Poet and activist Audre Lorde spoke presciently about the stakes of creative labor not only for the poor and disenfranchised, but in the age of late capitalism. Lorde connects the material demands of art and survival and the unacknowledged class and race differences that separate those who can and cannot labor as "artists" with the larger societal structures that delineate who gets to engage in "rigorous" or "serious" art forms. Poetry is the "voice of the poor, working class, and Colored women" because it is the most economical of art forms in time, energy, and material; it can be executed between shifts, on napkins, and while working exhausting hours (Lorde 1984: 116). In the end, she asks: "In this day of inflated prices of material, who are our sculptors, our painters, our photographers?" (Lorde 1984: 116). In *this* day

of inflated prices, who gets to go to art school and what does art school teach?

With the recent proliferation of masters and doctoral degrees in the fine arts, critique as a defining pedagogical module has become a naturalized mode of transaction and performance. The production of more art degrees and artists has resulted in an impoverished notion of critique that has failed to uphold a self-critical stance towards a radical repositioning of its own inequalities within. Unfortunately, art schools neither adequately address nor sufficiently prepare students for the asymmetrical relations of power and social hierarchies of the art industry, let alone of the art school itself. With more artists being produced as subjects of and through critique than ever before, we might ask what is being replicated in the name of critique.

This chapter proposes that critique must be in reference to a specific object of critique that is against normative, hegemonic, and oppressive value systems. For Judith Butler, critique is “always a critique *of* some instituted practice, discourse, episteme, institution, and it loses its character the moment in which it is abstracted from its operation and made to stand alone as a purely generalized practice” (Butler 2001). In this regard, this essay is based on the premise that we live in a time of multiple critical conditions and art education is an important site of struggle. In what is to follow, I reflect on what I see is critical for art and art education in this current moment and how we might understand and/or recognize the forms of critique that can materialize from fraught locations. I draw from my own experiences both as a student and as an educator, as well as from recent events that support my impressions. In doing so, I hope to make some gestures towards a reengagement with critique in its productive capacity.

Critical pedagogies: Art, education, and subjectivity

A semester into my MFA program at Yale University, I began to feel a sense of disenchantment.³ I felt like my program, and other elite spaces of the art world, had been drained of their potential to be rich spaces of dialogue and exchange. Although these were rarefied spaces where those invested in the effusive project of contemporary art gathered to participate in and witness the making and unmaking of its meanings, I felt a disconnect. This demoralized sense was shared amongst many of my peers although it wasn't explicitly talked about. This disconnect was evident in group critiques, or “crits” for short, where our shared

language for working through issues of political and cultural difference were not as developed as our language for discussing formalism. The different frames of reference from which we look and engage were rarely questioned. Discussions around artwork that dealt with more culturally specific contexts were not met with the same level of nuance and sophistication to take the conversation into productive directions. Also, the more challenging and controversial content too frequently went unquestioned or was left hanging at the ends of conversations. What were the conditions for these misfires and senses of disconnect?

Although the art school is often a site of critique—producing critical artists who challenge normative ways of seeing and making—it has historically been blind and recalcitrant to the ways it forecloses opportunities for critical engagement aligned with forms of liberatory antiracist pedagogy. Despite the success of artists of color in the last few decades, the dominant art world (in which the art school is undeniably a part) is still a scene of whiteness and white privilege. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Junot Díaz described his MFA experience as a traumatic space of white privilege for persons of color.⁴ He reflects that the workshops silenced writers of color who wrote from their experiences and accused them of focusing too much on race. Díaz writes: “In my workshop we never explored our racial identities or how they impacted our writing . . . we never talked about race except on the rare occasion when someone wanted to argue that ‘race discussions’ were exactly the discussion a serious writer should *not* be having” (Díaz 2014). In response, writer Matthew Salesses recounts: “For a writer of color, the defense of one’s work quickly becomes a defense of the self” (Salesses 2014). In this way, these spaces meant for feedback function as unsafe spaces for many students whose race, ethnicity, class, gender, or sexual preference have been historically excluded from dominant frames of analysis. The types of questions asked, the way particular signifiers are read, what is said and not said—the silences or lack of comments—are correlative to forms of oppression and marking the “other.”

As an artist of color working with themes of race, subjectivity, and diaspora, I often felt that I had to avoid all references to race or identity for a white audience allergic to them. I often resorted to speaking about my work more abstractly and formally to avoid the confrontation of a racist response. In turn, this impacted the kinds of discussions that took place around my work and the feedback I received. Ultimately, these self-censoring impulses were not helpful for my own growth or for connecting with others about the underlying political issues around our work. Coco Fusco, a visiting critic at Yale during my time, has long stood as a much needed contrarian voice. She has pointed out that students who

refer to identity politics in their work “would either be socially excluded by peers, reminded that identity politics are ‘over,’ or admonished by mentors for not realizing that such concerns fall outside the boundaries of the aesthetic appreciation” (Fusco 2014). As she has put it, “the message being driven home [is] that for artists of color to succeed” they have to “avoid talking about racial politics and concede that their presence at the school [is] sufficient evidence of a post-racial art world.” In order to have the conversations that I found missing in my program, I sought out visiting critics like Fusco for support.⁵

To be clear, this essay is not about assessing debates on identity politics. Rather, I am interested in questioning the ways that the management of race and subjectivity go unchecked in spaces relegated for critical discourse. “Crits” and workshops, the staples of fine arts and writing programs, are part of larger sociopolitical arenas that regulate whose experiences are made legible and illegible. They manage and reproduce what can be said, heard, and made intelligible as acceptable discourses within the regimes of the avant-garde. In *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that teachers and students need to “develop a critical analysis of how experience itself is named, constructed, and legitimated in the academy” (Mohanty 2003: 204). “The very act of knowing is related to the power of self-definition” (Mohanty 2003: 195). For historically marginalized peoples, their very location in the academy or the art world is about realizing a space of opposition alongside the dominant episteme that misrecognizes them. These struggles are not new, but are grounded in the civil rights and Third World liberation movements of the 1960s that led to the formation of women’s, black, and ethnic studies departments where new critical knowledges were given space to manifest. Yet, since the backlash against identity politics and multiculturalism in the 1980s, these struggles have become increasingly delegitimized through uncritical cultural relativist and post-racial viewpoints.

In this vein, it is not uncommon in studio “crits” and elsewhere for someone to insist that an artwork is not racist because it was not intended as such. More often than not, racist or sexist statements by white artists are perceived to be socially acceptable. While artists of color are admonished for working with notions of race, white artists who deal with race do not undergo the same scrutiny. For example, when artist Howardena Pindell reported allegations of racism in art institutions to the Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts in 1987 she was told, “artists are independent contractors and have no right under Title 7. You cannot prove racism when it comes to ‘artistic choice’” (Pindell 1988: 158).

Moreover, white artists typically view confrontations of racism as “censorship” or “political correctness,” as was the case with artist Donald Newman whose 1979 exhibition *Nigger Drawings* at Artists Space in New York City garnered much protest the same year. Pindell proclaims, “They have their First Amendment right to express their racism. (We did not, on the other hand, have the First Amendment right to express our outrage) . . . We should encourage the upcoming generation not to turn away from the visual arts because so many doors are now closed” (Pindell 1988: 161).⁶

In ways that recall the reaction to Newman’s exhibition at Artists Space, nearly thirty years later at the 2014 Whitney Biennial, Joe Scanlan appropriated the identity of an African-American female artist in a project that resulted in the protest and withdrawal by the collective HowDoYouSayYaminAfrican, also a part of that year’s exhibit.⁷ In response, Fusco writes:

Yams Collective’s rupture with the Whitney is symptomatic of the lack of other discursive means within studio art practice for addressing social issues that implicate the institutions that sustain the practice of art in broader practices of exploitation and oppression . . . Unfortunately, artists are often at a disadvantage when it comes to debating the cultural politics and historical legacies that inform the gestures they make—because they’ve been educated in the formalist hothouse of the art school crit.

Fusco locates the deficiency of critical discourse in art school training. As she makes known, the “formalist hothouse” does not adequately teach artists to understand or take active responsibility for the cultural and social implications of their work.

Indeed, the art world has yet to fully address the ghettoization of race in its educational and exhibition spaces as well as the ways in which art schools function as key sites where these discourses are put into practice. Dominant frameworks of critique work to privilege stable Euro-American heteronormative cultural subjectivity and aesthetics, while simultaneously displacing and misrepresenting those that are other. Cultural theorist Lisa Lowe has expounded that aesthetics works as a type of subject formation that is codified and organized through material histories and processes of racialization (Lowe 1996). Aesthetics is a conduit for the various registers on which political agency can be sublimated or reconstituted for racialized subjects in a given moment. In this way, she has insisted that we must acknowledge the “epistemological or evaluative boundaries” on which aesthetics are interpreted and regulated (Lowe 1996: 157). Upholding

critique entails questioning whose agency is enacted or constituted by the critical frameworks at play and what modes of feeling/being/doing fall outside of the margins.

As an educator, I have come to see that these issues are not only specific to dominant art world spaces. At my current institution, the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, the university is a particularly contested site of knowledge and cultural production with ongoing legacies of settler colonialism, as is on the mainland. For students of Native Hawaiian, Asian, Pacific Islander, European, and mixed ancestry who are interested in exploring cultural issues specific to Hawai'i and the Pacific, having supportive and knowledgeable faculty who can speak to the specificity of this location *is critical* for a counterhegemonic and decolonial education. Students who examine Indigenous identities repeatedly state that they do not feel safe sharing their work with the mostly haole (Caucasian) faculty. One of the students in my art theory seminar at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa commented: "I haven't found a single Hawaiian faculty in the art department . . . lots of white faculty teaching art to brown and yellow students." In her examination of Eurocentric art education in Hawai'i, visual studies scholar Karen Kosasa writes: "Art students are educated to misrecognize these very spaces and their visual representation as democratic terrains and to associate them with freedom of speech, equality of opportunity, and the sites of almost unlimited artistic creativity" (Kosasa 1998: 47).

Reflecting back to my own MFA education, by the last year of my program, I had come to see the art school as a failed site—not only of possibility, but also of solidarity among artists. This was also during the global economic crisis that illuminated the precarious material conditions of many lives, particularly devastating for marginalized communities already living in conditions of precarity. The lack of social engagement between the students and the school in a time of crisis tacitly reinforced the notion that all of this—the lack of diversity, the economic crisis, the stratified art world—was a problem of individuals. It was not the responsibility of the institution to *actively* confront and support the students in transforming these matters to look towards a more equitable future. If one of the most well-endowed universities in the United States could not provide a space for artists to imagine a more sustainable and ethical practice, the future of art was not here nor was it in the dominant spaces of art. Nearing graduation, the chair of the department held a meeting for the graduating class to see if we had any questions or concerns as we were getting ready for post-MFA life amidst the economic crisis. Although the gesture was welcomed by the

twenty students in the room, hardly anyone spoke or asked questions. This was not because no one had questions or concerns, but because we had not spent the last two years of our time together developing the language or safe spaces to be able to have difficult conversations such as this one. We had failed each other as well.

Graduating with my MFA during a period of global economic crisis, I was at a loss for what I had in fact earned through this degree. What this experience had crystallized for me however was that I was no longer invested in an (art) world that could not seriously engage in the deep intersectional commitment that artists like Lorde had exemplified for us in decades past. These matters are all the more pressing today. In an era of debt, uncertain job markets, uncontrolled gun violence, police brutality, and global crises, for artists to be able to have difficult conversations across difference is crucial for building coalitions towards a different kind of (art) world.

Reengaging critique

“Let’s be clear about one thing. This is not an empty academic exercise. This is real. And it has everything to do with you.”

Adrian Piper, *Cornered* (1988)

A reengagement with critique in artistic practice must question the constitutive violence of dominant histories and practices in the spaces of art and art education in order for any vision of social transformation to materialize. “The primary task of critique,” according to Butler, “will not be to evaluate whether its objects—social conditions, practices, forms of knowledge, power and discourse—are good or bad, valued highly or demeaned, but to bring into relief the very framework of evaluation itself.” A deployment of Western art training demands a serious consideration of its pedagogical implications and what it ostensibly renders normative. We need to draw attention to what is left out of dominant pedagogical frames so that we can engage with power, privilege, and agency in all of its elusive and complicit forms.

For art schools to engage in an ethical and critical praxis, they need to redefine the project of critique in relation to its situated communities, not displace it. This entails a retooling of Eurocentric critical paradigms with decolonial, feminist, queer, and antiracist frameworks that enable alternative forms of participation

in the critique of oppressive and normative practices. Critique is a practice guided by a desire to feel and know why these practices matter, as well as to acknowledge that these are matters of concern for all of us. These reflections on the state of art education today reaffirm that to question the critical efficacy of art education at any level, one must consider the vectors of power not only in society at large, but also within the disciplinary structures that inform how artists learn to become artists. It is a practice that, as Gerald Raunig says, must be “in search for alternative forms of living” within and through the embattled sites of education, language, and knowledge production. It is a process of interrogating the limitations and assumptions of normative critical paradigms shaped by historical and social forces in order to imagine new forms of the social. We all have a part to play in performing and transforming the critical.

To be sure, the reengagement with critique being outlined here cannot be achieved through the mere presence of marginalized bodies or through the recognition of “difference.” A reengagement with critique that I am proposing takes seriously the historical, ideological, and material effects of Euro-American aesthetic and pedagogical practices and its privileges. Therefore, what some may propose as a post-critical paradigm risks further obscuring of power and hierarchies of these practices. The professionalization of art poses greater dangers for critical art education as it puts pressure on art schools to produce gallery-ready artists rather than socially responsible artist-citizens. We must work against art schools as signifiers of empty cultural capital and pathways for upward mobility and instead, work towards a counterhegemonic humanities-centered education.

The transformation of critique is an embodied practice of recognizing our own complicity in systems of oppression and power. Thus, cultivating discourses of opposition are important to linking what happens in the academy to spaces elsewhere in order to work towards broad-based political organization and consciousness raising. These modes of critique are alive in current day oppositional movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, student race protests on campuses of the University of Missouri, Yale, and others, as well as Indigenous solidarity movements. As such, critique, as defined in this essay, calls for a renewed insistence on oppositional analytic and cultural spaces in contemporary art. This not only requires adjusting pedagogical priorities, but shifting how we engage with issues of race in spaces of private and public culture as well as through our knowledge production. Only then might the critical be performed in ways that shape new coalitions across difference and color lines.

Notes

- 1 Special thanks to Karen Kosasa, Jonna Eagle, and colleagues near and far for their thoughtful and incisive comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.
- 2 I particularly gesture to the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the reported acts of racialized violence that had reached critical conditions during the time I was writing this essay.
- 3 I draw on my experiences in the Yale painting department from 2007 to 2009.
- 4 Díaz further elaborates that not much has changed since his MFA years in the 1990s: “I’ve worked in two MFA programs and visited at least 30 others . . . I can’t tell you how often students of color seek me out during my visits or approach me after readings in order to share with me the racist nonsense they’re facing in their programs.” For recent responses incited by Díaz’s article, see “Speak No Evil Forum” in *The Asian American Literary Review* 2(5).
- 5 Although visiting critic programs are valuable to an MFA curriculum and can often fill much needed gaps, visiting critics are often juggling several short-term contract positions at different schools where their transient presence in each student community can often work against building sustained engagements or lasting structural change.
- 6 See also Chang 2014.
- 7 For an astute response, see Wong 2014; for relevant resonances in the poetry context, see Friedersdorf 2015 and Hong 2015.

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