

# Reeling in the Real

review

## The Return of the Real

### The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century,

Hal Foster

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OVER TEN YEARS ago, writing in the preface to his widely-read anthology *Postmodern Culture*, Hal Foster proposed a distinction between two types of postmodernism. "In cultural politics today," he observed, "a basic opposition exists between a postmodernism which seeks to deconstruct modernism and resist the status quo and a postmodernism which repudiates the former to celebrate the latter: a postmodernism of resistance and a postmodernism of reaction."<sup>1</sup> One of the virtues of *The Return of the Real* is that Foster hasn't forgotten or otherwise neglected this distinction, with his new book holding to an all-to-often dismissed concern for a radical and far-reaching critique of the reactionary avenues of postmodern art and culture. But whether or not it is actually possible, today, to develop and to act upon an extensive, effective critique of capitalist culture is a question Foster, in the final run, appears unable to answer.

But such a question as that posed by Foster regarding the status and effectivity of critical practice is perhaps the kind of question that can't easily be answered, and certainly not in any direct sense. Nor can the role of the critic and of criticism itself be reduced down to a few smartly argued positions and theories. *The Return of the Real* virtually begins with an acknowledgement of this intractable situation, with Foster launching straight into a fistful of difficult questions concerning criticism itself: "what is the place of criticism in a visual culture that is evermore administered—from an artworld dominated by promotional players with scant need for criticism, to a media world of communication-and-entertainment corporations with no interest whatsoever? And what is the place of criticism in a political culture that is evermore affirmative—especially in the midst of culture wars that prompt the right to threaten *love it or leave it* and the left to wonder *where am I in this picture?*" (p.xv). The emphatic tone thrown out by such italicised speckles of text as are found in this and other similarly searching passages of prose might very much irritate the reader where he or she not also presented, throughout this work, with many instances of a much less table thumping tone. Foster's postulates, his outline map of recent and contemporary critical and aesthetic practice is, most of the time, subtle enough to support the occasional conveyor-belt questioning. There isn't too much finger-pointing actually. You don't often feel that the local SWP representative is knocking on your door, pen and clipboard in hand, asking you to sign up for "revolutionary" activities about which they assume you so far know nothing.

In other words, *The Return of the Real* is not a patronising book smugly plugging, as its title might all too readily imply, a "return" to "commonsense" accounts of art and its relation to politics. The "return" of the title doesn't carry with it the sort of conservatism that was evident in, say, the "return to painting" of the early 1980s, a loose but influential move within the academic and curatorial art community that called for the resurrection of good, "solid" technical skills and subject matter, these being pushed as a morally uplifting response to all that funny conceptual stuff from the late 1960s and 70s. In a recent interview Foster summarises the focus located, if obscurely, within his title. It is, he tells us: "...meant to evoke two different ideas of the real which govern much art and theory

today. The first is... the real of the obscene, of things that are too close, too gross, to be represented, of things that resist the symbolic or (better) that reveal its order to be in crisis, of which the damaged, diseased, or dead body is then presented as evidence. The other is the real of identity, of community, of site-specificity..."<sup>2</sup>

One of the readings of the real that the book examines is, as Foster says in the Flash Art interview, that of "...the present fascination with trauma. In both popular and vanguard culture there is a reconception of appearance as *traumatic*—of experience as its own loss, without punctual presence or coherent narrative."<sup>3</sup> Chapter 5, the title of which echoes that of the book, examines a range of artists whose work confronts the dismembered or otherwise disaffected human body—the Warhol of car crash disasters and race riots, Andres Serrano's morgue photographs, the oddly sectioned models of bodies installed in galleries by Robert Gober, Cindy Sherman's paradoxical self portraits—these works and those of other artists are subjected to analyses grounded in the psychoanalytical considerations of Lacan and Kristeva. It is the body and notions of self and other which are most directly addressed here, a theme which is further taken up in the following chapter, a study of the "otherness" of the Other and, indeed, of the very construction of concepts of "the Other." If the issues at stake are complex the writing is clear and to the point. Foster is at pains to stress what he argues is now *the* dominant model of the artist: "the artist as ethnographer." No longer championing the downtrodden proletariat (itself an extreme denomination of alterity), contemporary practitioners have changed the site of their gaze to that of the "Other" in terms of racial and cultural difference.

Elsewhere in the book several other positings of "the real" are given up to readings of acute scrutiny. One "real" to which there is a return is the substantial physical and intellectual reality offered by Minimalism and Conceptual art. With such examinations it becomes apparent that Foster's sense of return is in fact the opposite of that of the "return to painting" to which I above refer. Foster's contention is that the radical issues raised in the 1960s and 70s were themselves in part a return to an even earlier moment of radical questioning, that of Dada and Surrealism (and these via another "level" of return, that occupied by New York Dada, particularly that of Rauchenberg and Kaprow). One begins to get a picture, as one progresses through Foster's book, of an extremely clever intermeshing of events and questions, relationships between "key" moments of twentieth-century art practice and theory being drawn out in a convincing and subtly structured way. Thus contemporary art has, in its important manifestations, returned to what one might call "limit points" of previous practice. This "real" is not the ideological real of academic, naturalised practice but a reality that is that of the embodied human subject. Though two aspects of "the real" are brought out in Foster's Flash Art interview remarks, the book's title in fact appears to allude to a multiplicity of equally serious, equally important "reals".

Though long considered an outmoded notion, the entity of the avant-garde returns in Foster's work as an immensely important trigger, a kind of avenging angel returning from the future via the agency of innovative contemporary art. Throughout his text Foster is keen to stress a notion of delay (partly unpacked from the concepts of Freud) through which radical critique is retrospectively connected to other insistent moments of transgression. The figure of Walter Benjamin, particularly through his speculations upon the correlation between two idiosyncratic historical periods, haunts Foster's own network of moments, movements and spatial and chronological alignments.<sup>4</sup> The very idea of the avant-garde suggests a time of waiting, a holding out until the broader culture correctly (so to speak) connects with the advance party of artists and thinkers whose aim it is to assemble and activate the new reality. It is pertinent, then, that Foster's book begins with

the aforementioned set of questions about the function and possibility of critical practice today, and equally apt that the discussion of these concerns is immediately followed by a chapter scrutinising Peter Burger's provocative *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, of which Foster is extremely critical.<sup>5</sup> This leads into some consideration of the boundaries of art and its institutions. There are many insights upon which one might ponder at length—I'll quote just one: "...the institution of art may enframe aesthetic conventions, but it does not constitute them." (p.25)

Other points of concern in *The Return of the Real* include the "cynical" art of Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, Ashley Bickerton and Peter Halley (amongst other "Neo Geo" and related practitioners). Their "defiant complicity" (Bickerton) is carefully disentangled. Much also is said about poststructuralist theory and its direct connection with a great deal of the ambitious art of the last twenty or thirty years. As one progresses through the book a large number of discrete examples are drawn together to form a picture of late twentieth century practice. Even if one sometimes disagrees with the detailing and the dovetailing of contrasting territories, Foster's speculations generate a mass of noteworthy directions for critical pursuit. I began by suggesting that Foster isn't able to answer his own questions about contemporary art. What is important though is that, at a time when much of the legacy of conceptual art is scurrilously derivative in a shallow or more or less uninteresting way (I refer to the eponymous phenomena of "Brit Art") Foster's book convincingly suggests that work made in the 1960s and 70s provided the grounds for genuinely radical practices to emerge. There is a hint that the radical potential of much that took place two or three decades ago has not yet been realised. Such an actual realisation, indeed even, in a certain sense, the recognition of that period's latent potential, allows for a field of practice of greater significance than that of the limp one-liners upon which today's market spotlight all too tediously falls. There is an understanding of fashion and its fluctuations buried within Foster's analysis, one informed by a politics which, quite unfashionably, is not afraid to call itself by that name. If Foster retains a belief in the future emergence of a transformatory critical practice it is because he grasps the *unfinished* form of culture which, even in this time of "evermore administered" multinational capitalist expansion, is not open to reliable prediction. That's one more way of considering the "real" of the book's title: a real that has to be made in practice, in actuality, that isn't already part of the foreseeable future. "There is a new set of concerns amongst artists, critics, and audiences. I am not very active in this situation, but I think there are important stakes there. And it makes me feel focused again, for I see connections with what came before and what may lie ahead. It is strange to be optimistic in a depressive moment, but I am." [6]

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#### Notes

1. *Postmodernism: A Preface*, in Hal Foster (Ed.) *Postmodern Culture*, Pluto Press, 1985, pp xi - xii.
2. Miwon Kwon/Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real, An Interview with Hal Foster*, Flash Art, Vol. XXIV, No. 187, March - April 1996, p.63.
3. *Ibid*, p.63.
4. Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the philosophy of History*, in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Fontana, 1979. Benjamin's *The Author as Producer*, a lecture delivered by Benjamin in 1934, is another important work for Foster. It is included in Benjamin's *Understanding Brecht*, NLB, 1977.
5. Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Manchester University Press, 1984.
6. Hal Foster in Kwon/Foster Flash Art.