

Hal Foster Interview

Originally we (Leigh French, Peter Suchin and Billy Clark) had prepared a formal interview with Hal Foster. We met him after his lecture at Glasgow School of Art recently, which mainly focused on the work of Robert Gober, and on his request decided to adopt a less structured format which would incorporate more of an exchange of opinion.

Billy Clark: Your talk struck me as very aesthetic and psychoanalytical. My expectation was that it would be a lot more political.

Hal Foster: Yeah. This is just one talk. What I said was what I thought might be relative to concerns here. I think that there's interest in the subject: the traumatic. I was interested in how that might be worked out differently here, but if it wasn't I thought I might be able to bring a little news. I have a fairly authentic—which I hope is not to say non-rigorous—take on critical work, which is that presented with a problem you also have to construct, presented with an object I have to construct and it's not necessarily given beforehand how you do it methodologically. I'm also at work on questions to do with visual culture, questions that are much more institutional, they're much more political than psychoanalytical. I want to do a series of texts, maybe a book, on developments in art, also developments that are technological, very critical of psychoanalysis. I think there's an enormous inflation of the image and the imaginary with psychoanalysis that abets rather than resists.

Peter Suchin: You mentioned this in your talk about having 'doubts' about psychoanalysis: you seem to rely on it quite a lot on *The Return of The Real*.

HF: Yeah I do, I use it as a way to think about historical narrative, as a way to re-think avant-garde temporality, but I don't think I rely on it too much. I take up the concept as an analogy. I don't feel I work within the psychoanalytical model, I'm not a Lacanian or a Freudian. I'm not in a church and that's precisely the difference for me. I take theories as broken tools and you do what you can with them in relation to what objects you want to work with, it's not given beforehand.

BC: So one could admire the scientific rigour of Freud, how he brought that rigour to bear on a certain subject, but not the whole thing?

HF: Yeah, but the reason I'm sensitive to your remarks is I think we limit the culture of psychoanalysis. Even though I think Freud is under massive attack—this is the thing we can talk more about—the terms are just colloquial now. The people on the streets in New York will talk about how 'hysterical' they are, how 'repressed': everyday people. They don't say that about (*laughs*) ideology critique, they don't talk about political economy in the street. There's a funny way in which the language pervades everyday thought. But the real question that interests me is *what counts?* And I'd like to hear you guys talk about it—what counts as structure in art now? What counts as a valid model theoretically, methodologically? I think the modern masters are in full flight: Marx, Freud, Nietzsche. The returns to these figures in the 60s, that structured my generation and the generation before and after: all these things are in real crisis now. It's hard to know what way of thinking has much validity.

PS: I think you use the word "toolbox" of critical thought—a kind of bricolage: you are inventing models, not willy-nilly, but from different models that are already in circulation.

HF: There are two problems, or, there are two versions. One is the theory of pastiche, which we all know and love and hate (hate mostly). The other is this model of bricolage.

PS: One might take some of Marx and think that's still valid now, and other bits aren't. And you might take bits of Freud—and I don't mean certain bits that are fashionable. They might seem to explain something—but not the whole edifice.

HF: I wonder if we can still do it in these ways. The people who really want to hold on to these characters do so in a very funny way. Marx is turned back into a philosopher or Freud is turned into an art critic. The clinical dimension or political dimensions are dropped out. So maybe there is a need to not worry so much about master models. Invent more and bricolage less.

PS: That's a very difficult task though because we're trapped in a way by the weight of these models.

BC: It's what they engaged in themselves though. You used the phrase 'constellations' in a way that reminded me of Walter Benjamin.

HF: Yeah, he did invent out of other pieces, some wacky pieces. He had this real soft spot for the marking of evolution—characteristics that our parents somehow developed in the environment—wacky stuff. It's a time when you can, or should speculate theoretically, because it's not clear that given models work. I think that's true of our experience. What do you all think about this idea of a 'post-medium age'—it's a question of what you do in it?

BC: Could you try to clarify what you mean by post-medium: are you saying that certain mediums don't have the same shock value?

HF: This is my take, and again my take is very situational. After the war there was an insistence on a very restrictive idea of modernism that was mapped onto mediums, disciplines of mediums. This aesthetic field not only took parts of modernism, but it stood *for* modernism. It was a very delimited field. Precisely because it was so delimited, one could work against that. There were transgressions that happened. When the transgressions went flat one could also do deconstructions. Every transgression re-inscribes limits too: to be John Cage or Robert Rauschenberg or Fontana or whatever; but there's a way in which those mediums are preserved in cancellation—preservation through negation. So that they needed to be deconstructed. That was a project of serious work in the 60s and 70s. But now it seems that the field has become so entropic, the work is so ad hoc. I don't think this is necessarily a bad thing—far from medium specific, work is debate specific or discourse specific or even just context specific.

Leigh French: Going back to your talk and *The Return of the Real* and the artist as ethnographer. Again it comes down to the individual confessional—the artist is ethnographically plotting their own existence. Maybe more specifically in the UK more than in the States: an artist comes in to whatever kind of community and represents it in some way. Yet on the other hand you have (in the UK) within a certain young British art scene, very much the confessional of the individual, it's almost a kind of ethnographic mapping of the individual.

HF: This is why there is this desire for structure that would not be so idiosyncratically personal. I think you're right, there is this funny way in which the confessional or the traumatic, or the ethnographic or the contextual come together, because the desire to go out into the community, into other sites not identified as art spaces is a kind of way to get out of personal limits, identity or style. Because often these projects are very provisional, artists are parachuted in, there's no connection with the community. It's more a self-portrait in disguise at the site.

LF: The thing you also talk about in the book is the pressures on museums to go out and develop and attract new audiences—which is very much a pressure in the UK, in Scotland.

HF: How is it worked, what are the manifestations of it? In the States it means—and this is not all bad by any means—it means that education departments become very primary in museums. We've all come to see international shows where the curators really become the stars. International curators are hired to mediate among artists that are parachuted into a place. That's like the grand version of the problem. In the States it's about a sense of the demand for relevance. I assume here, there's also a tradition of Socialist pater-

nalism, where there's a sense that there are cultures that need to be represented: that's part of the multiculturalist's paternalism. Is that part of the mix, how does it work out?

BC: In Glasgow it has taken on completely lunatic proportions. And I mean lunatic. The arts in Glasgow: 'culture', this word has become used to mesh with economic redevelopment, in the sense that you make the city a tourist venue.

HF: That's what those site specific shows are, the national ones, they're really tourist trips.

BC: A classic one would be when there was a meeting of heads of the EC in Edinburgh. They sealed off the streets, moved everyone away. Basically, as they drove down to where they were meeting it was all lined with artworks, mostly to do with light—all sponsored by things like arms industries—specifically for the people just to look out of their car windows and see an artwork: that's it. It had no other relevance to anything other than that. Now that's been writ large upon Glasgow as a whole.

HF: In terms of the redevelopment of Glasgow over several years?

BC: Which has plummeted to the depths—the whole thing has collapsed, but it still carries on.

HF: Why has it collapsed—the money?

BC: Well, when they had the Year of Culture in 1990 there was massive fraud. You're talking about a very 'corrupt' town council that's suddenly given all this money—and they get these massively inflated ideas. It's just gone berserk, and they keep on doing it.

HF: But there must be positive aspects, progressive ones, no?

PS: Perhaps because culture when it is packaged in such a way, the artwork cease to be able to be read in the way the producers might want them to be.

BC: I'm talking about a wider scale, rather than just the artwork, I'm talking about the actual community, the people of the city. In Scotland and in Glasgow you have a notion that our culture is not valid—it's a very colonised country. Culture 'has' to be imported. My voice 'isn't' a 'proper' voice, my accent 'isn't' a 'proper' accent—it's as bad as that. So there's no notion of a nascent or intrinsic culture in their equation at all: yet we have a 'renascent' project in the city. They were actually trying to ban books. There's a book called *No Mean City* it's about Glasgow in the past, the 'violence' and so on. They tried to ban that, it was published in the 40s or something, that's just one example. A faction of the artists took no part in the 1990 'celebrations' and they were castigated for even daring to criticise it; yet they are the artists. All it was was just massive cultural administration, all the money is in consultancy, administration and spectacular events that mean nothing. OK some people get money but that's it.

PS: This reminds me of that old Situationist slogan where they describe art as the commodity which sells all the other ones—everything else.

BC: "To make the city a showroom," they actually talk like this. "To make the city into a supermarket" that's their avowed ambition.

HF: But is it? There must be an edge there. If you feel in a bizarre way that you're in a post-colonial situation...

BC: Not so much of the post actually...

HF: Well I wonder about the post in post-colonialism. But that must give an edge to a project for artists that are so inclined.

BC: Well there's still some sort of 'underground' feeling in Glasgow—because the culture is literally repressed...

HF: Is there not enough difference, or is the difference so eradicated that you cannot use it as a way to generate positions?

BC: The main line that they are trying to do is to make art a de-politicised zone.

HF: Who?

BC: Funding bodies: the gatekeepers.

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PS: Where I live, in Newcastle, it's just come to the end recently of The Year of the Visual Arts, which is a big promotion of art in the North of England and that was basically, again, a spectacle. You get the tourists in, the local people who don't normally go to art events. You get them in and you give them some art. It's a very patronising thing. Then the money stops and the people who've benefited are not curators really but administrators. It sounds like a gripe, but the point is culture is controlled.

HF: Yeah, it's so tricky. I mean that sounds bad. I still want to get back to this sense of an edge that you might have in colonial relation to say, London. In the States it's so different. Your problem—you've got the state, the bureaucracy of culture, there is this administrative level. In the States we often long for 'the state'. There is private money but it's very fickle, and contemporary art is now associated with pornography as much as anything. So even it is pulled away. As a result we have these brand new museums in major cities: in Boston, Atlanta or LA. But you feel like you're in the mansion of a private family without an invitation. There's no sense of a public culture.

LF: I think this is something that Bordieu talks about: the difference between what actually exists and what is actually presented as disinterestedness. The fact is that it does go on, that it is a family, that it is constructed on similar terms. Except it's also presented in terms of disinterestedness. So the paternal funder is also the cultural banker—but present themselves in a very specific way, while still controlling both production and dissemination.

HF: Right. It's almost total in the States, whereas before there used to be the residue of the idea that the museum was part of a public sphere and that a curator, say, was also, however feebly a (*laughs*) guardian of public culture. No such thing exists.

PS: Hasn't that function been taken over by the media, the culture is unified by the media.

HF: Sure, you don't go to the sites of the residual public sphere to be socialised. But my point is how different it is. I mean you resent the presence of the state—without putting too fine a definition of it—and we long for it as some point of intervention in this otherwise private party.

PS: Moving on from that, but connected with it, talking about the world of curating. I can't think of any examples off the cuff, but it seems that a lot of curators put together a show, and then they find the artists to prove the point that they're trying to make in the show. It sounds like the curators have become the artists—the makers of meaning. And perhaps it was like that for a long time.

HF: That's a specific development within art too. Many artists have taken on a curatorial role as well.

BC: On the rise of the artist professional: there's an interesting article in *After Image* [Jan 93 'The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public, Grant Kester] about the history and development, the political drives of all this. They'll go for an electoral base: so maybe they'll fund the arts because they're democrats and they want to go for the working class; the Republicans aren't bothered with that so they're quite happy with art remaining as corporate entertainment.

HF: But for me it has also to do with this anthropological model of post-modernism say.

LF: You could go back to the Second World War—the Nazi's say, with the setting up of the anti-art exhibition. It's exactly the same—an anthropological exercise—to do that. The thematised show is not new. The idea of mapping an anthropology onto that work is not new.

BC: Look at Barr in *The Museum of Modern Art* with his little graph of modernism—a Darwinian tree.

HF: That's not exactly what I meant (*laughs*).

PS: Who makes meanings in culture? Is it the curators, is it the artists? You were talking about the idea of an avant-garde. Is that a constructed avant-garde by the market? Is there scope for an avant-garde? The art market needs new commodities doesn't it? We need an avant-garde in that sense.

HF: No, well, I think it's too quick to dismiss or reduce problems to the 'commodity', the 'market', 'global capitalism'. Obviously these things are there and they structure our lives. I think the model of recuperation is too easy. Work can get out, even within a horrific festival of the arts in a city: it doesn't damn the whole thing necessarily. If you begin in a defeatist way you get nowhere.

BC: Our description of it is to promote resistance to it really. You're saying there must be some acceptance of all this. Yes, there's a human level which is beyond it...

HF: When I say I want to hold on to this idea of an avant-garde, I do so with real reservations of course. But I also think it is an idea—there are all kinds of myths associated with the avant-

garde, as we know, and they're critiqued well at this point. The idea of the avant-garde stands for articulation of the aesthetic and the political that should not be given up. It's too easy to give up to other people. You know who wants us to give it up: the Right wants us to go away, it's not the Left.

PS: That seems to go against the idea of a political avant-garde art practice; would be counter to that plural culture we seem to be in now: that kind of 'anything goes' art world, which you've written about in *Recordings*, that it's a meaningless set of practices.

HF: Yeah, that's why I think there is an urgency around this question of what counts as structure in art, what counts as an edge in cultural practice. If you go back to your question: "who or what makes the meaning happen?" It's a hugely complicated deal. But if we do not have enough in common in the description of the major problem, then we're all fucked basically. There is a way in which this diffusion, this dispersion of different projects is terrific. There is a way in which work almost has to be ad hoc, because it is debate specific, site specific. And there's also a way in which that makes it very difficult to begin to have a sense of where anything is. I know that as a critic—and I wonder about how you feel about this—but my experience is that I go from studio to studio or show to show and I have to scramble for the terms, the languages. I do feel like an anthropologist. It is in part, because we feel that we work in an expanded zone area called culture.

PS: It's like that Wittgenstein thing of private languages, by definition not common and no coherent set of values.

HF: Yeah, on the one hand yes, on the other hand there are all these connections: we are driven towards the same questions: what is the status of the body, what counts as an image, why this imperative to work in a communitarian way? The answers are difficult and the institutional frames are different, but they come up in Glasgow, New York, Copenhagen.

LF: One of the things I'm interested in, and haven't thought through, but needs mapping in some way is the position where 'once upon a time the personal was political' and a development from that, to the aspect of the personal as promotion. Also we have the development of political correctness (however vague a term, however misused). How from not being able to talk about anything other than personal experience, you've got from one stage where you cannot talk for anybody else: from 'this is my opinion', through to something which is a lot more defensive. I don't know where that actually leaves those debates around the body. Maybe we need to step back and explore what's happened historically.

HF: This is one thing I want to know from you. There was an enormous interest in the 60s around precisely these questions. I think if you could trace what you want to trace, everybody would want to know, because that is crucial. To be glib about it, I think that where the model used to be: 'the personal is political', now the model would be: 'the political is the personal'. This assumption is made, it's reversed, I mean literally turned around its value. One point in between that 30 year trajectory—this is how I'd begin to map the field that you want to trace—is that there is a moment when this idea of a constructed subject came into play, which in a way displays that first moment of its insistence on bodies: on an essential femininity (God knows an essential masculinity was not the point). But when this idea of the constructed subject came in, we began to think about how we were constructed symbolically, socially, in a way that wasn't so physical. But, at a certain point this idea of the constructed subject, however aesthetically important and politically incisive, at a certain point it became a consumerist idea. This idea of the performative too—which is related to the constructed—that we can change our gender or whatever as if it were a costume. You know there's a certain way in which that was disruptive and it has become absolutely consumerist—you just get the right look. That's one reason why I think the art world and the fashion world have come together *mad* today. They both believe in a certain idea of performativity that is fundamentally consumerist (*laughs*). And I think that the one reason why artists have begun to return to the kind of brute matter of the body—if there is such a thing as brute matter—is to look for things that are not simply constructed, that are not simply *fashioned*.

PS: So there's a notion of the authentic again, isn't there?

HF: Yeah, well, I think these terms come back with a whole other meaning. You're right, there is this sense of authenticity, experience. You know we all hate it because we were told by the French to hate it, that it was gone: the 'lived' is no more, the 'experiential' is no more. It's back in an absentee way, this is

what I meant by the authority of the traumatic. You have this absolute authority but you're not really there as an 'I' to have it. All these terms have come back, and aesthetic terms too like specificity, autonomy, but what they mean is up for grabs.

PS: But they've got to come back in an informed way, haven't they, as opposed to a cliché?

HF: Oh yeah. If they just come back in the old form it's a reactionary return. That's one thing my book is at pains to at least sketch, that all these different kinds of returns that are at play: which ones are really inventive and which ones are just reactive, just calls to order.

BC: Just to pick up the threads here. We were still talking about notions of the avant-garde. I don't know what you think are the main texts, there's surprisingly few, but take Renato Poggioli: he talks partly about reconnaissance, another military metaphor—troops who identify the position of the enemy. That has a lot of meaning as regards art. To pick up on Leigh's point: people are saying, 'well society at large, it's us who make it', it's an inner voyage if you like, rather than a political avant-garde. Now what is being brought back, who is the enemy, who is it being brought back to, how is the enemy being spotted—how are we a vanguard? Do we all just go along to another show and come back a better person? Is art a priesthood after all?

PS: Who makes the avant-garde? An avant-garde is only an avant-garde if it is a leading group that others follow.

HF: I think there's an avant-garde of resistance—this is one thing that I wanted to argue a long time ago in *Recordings*. Its position need not always be research and development. It can also be resistant, but I'm not sure if I would insist on it in the same way. I think it's good to be sceptical of this idea of the avant-garde. I'm not paranoid. Everything is a conspiracy when it seems like institutions—however you want to name them—tell us what to do and what to think. My stance is that the avant-garde has returned, as I say in the book, from the future under the pressure of contemporary practice. To be honest it's not that I thought surrealism, for example, was intrinsically of wild interest. I felt compelled by recent work to think about it because it was there that a certain problematic of sexuality, difference, a certain relation to politics, theory—that were all concerns of the present—drove me back to think about surrealism: because the present made it important. I think artists that feel paranoid or conspiratorial do not see how they drive the big press. There may be some smart critics out there, smart curators, even one or two intelligent directors but their press—I think the agenda comes from somewhere else, mostly from below. I mean that may sound sappy but...

BC: There's a monstrous form of popularism in Glasgow being used...

HF: That's a different force, the pressure of artists is only one of many—and it might not be the most important at any given moment. The popularist pressure.

BC: Well it's just used. The big institutions will put on a very liberal façade—they wouldn't put on a far-right exhibition, maybe really they should, if they're so liberal then they should represent that as some kind of notion of freedom. There is I suppose a different notion of freedom in America: you can do what you want if you're prepared for the consequences. Anyway, there's this notion of Liberalism put forward in a modern contemporary art gallery, but the higher up you go, if you look at the people on their boards, they become more and more right-wing. So they have no fear about this at all: they actually promote it, they're not threatened by it.

HF: Well look, I think avant-garde culture historically needed a fairly confident bourgeoisie—not just to shock—but there was a way in which the bourgeoisie wanted to be tested too, wanted to see its values worked out another way.

BC: As Gombrich said they wanted a 'crunchy diet'.

HF: (*Laughs*) I think, you know, the classical idea of the avant-garde that we have now, of these extraordinary movements in Paris, they required a bourgeoisie that was informed enough to press them—the artists. I think there was a way in which a version of this relation is all that's needed. That's what I don't see. It doesn't come from the States, it doesn't come from a few rich people. I think there is enormous withdrawal from contemporary culture, just in general, for all kinds of reasons in the States. So those old conditions of avant-garde culture have to be replaced by other ones. Whatever the other conditions are they're never particularly happy—there's too much state; not enough; too much private interest; not enough. These are all in there by default. By default of a self-critical bourgeoisie.

PS: Presumably we're talking about a notion of the avant-garde. Something that one wants to bring with this notion is the idea of political change. Not simply a new set of artists who happen to be the ones who get discussed in all the articles for a while. You want something that's more 'radical' for want of a better word.

HF: Yeah. The avant-garde, again, is this term that in the past articulated the artistic and the political. I don't think that necessarily you go seek out the political in this neighbourhood or that province. I don't think it's ready-made in any community. I think sometimes it happens in form. I'm modernist enough to believe that you can still be political within the materiality of your own work.

PS: Well in a sense it has to be in terms of art practice, that's what it must be surely. Otherwise it's just politics layered on.

HF: Yeah, like it's illustrational. There's a lot of problems: there's theory illustration, there's political expressionism. There's lots of problematic formulations it seems to me right now. Maybe the pressure to form all these things together in work that is also innovative in its own terms is too much to ask.

BC: The grand unification theory of the avant-garde.

HF: I don't think that's a grand theory—it can't be guessed beforehand, I think it happens.

PS: But that's a very different position from a modernist position of De Stijl or some sort of group like that, where they're trying to make the future happen in a certain way.

HF: No, that's beyond us, thank God.

BC: You're talking about the rediscovery of past artworks. I think there's an industry about destroying people's reputations, but even just re-readings. One is constantly surprised though by the facts. I remember finding out that Jackson Pollock's tutor was Thomas Hart Benton. Early on you'll see Pollock making these big floats for political demonstrations with stereotypical capitalist effigies. Then again you have this thing that when the state did intervene in the arts in America with the WPA, that gave rise to this massive grouping which was then again taken up by the state through the Congress for Cultural Freedom and all that: it was done twice. Is that what you long for?

HF: (*Laughs*) Not exactly. I don't see the early work of

Pollock as that divorced from the later work. For me there's not a huge divide between those moments in Pollock. There is a moment where the political, the aesthetic and the institutional come together in the work. It's obviously canonical, classical now, but there's a way in which Pollock really knew where painting was at that moment. He saw that innovation in form could also be political in the sense that there was still enough of a structure to old ideas of painting that if they were messed with, that would have political ramifications. I think it did, liberating ones at least. That's an example, obviously a very privileged one, but I don't think it's unique and I don't think it will never come again.

BC: It's fundamentally presented as some kind of aesthetic leap, as if it's some sort of scientific breakthrough. If you look at his work, OK he does break, but he's also coming back to something, it's still drawing.

HF: But not at that time. Smithsonian is another example of a person who 'leapt' in this league, gathered up all these different forces in ways that could not be expected. Those are two heroic examples, I think you could find humble ones too.

LF: The thing about photography and the use of attempts at justification through the use of a painterly language: Pollock talking about drawing or anything else can be as much about a sense of justification—in the same way that photography went through, and still is.

BC: But it's also very, very hyped. That film he made, the Time magazine article. And it's the same with Duchamp and the urinal: who took the photograph?—Stieglitz. Who's show was it?—Stieglitz's, he put up the money. Duchamp even wrote the 'scandalous' article. What did he set up afterwards? The Société Anonyme—taking all that money from little old ladies and ambassador's wives (laughter). I'm not condemning it, don't get me wrong, I'm drooling with jealousy. But there has to be these readings too.

HF: (*Laughs*) Oh sure.

BC: Lets not get too romantic about it.

HF: Oh I'm not romantic about it at all. That's what I meant about my longing for a proper bourgeoisie. It may sound absolutely perverse but...

PS: It's like Hegel's master slave dialectic, you need a bogeyman to have an avant-garde.

BC: Well look at those Yves Klein photographs, the ones with the naked women and that extraordinary audience.

HF: Yeah, there was a great moment when Benjamin Buchloch, in *October*, a long time ago, reproduced the image of Klein's audience with Malevitch and Lissitzky and students headed to Moscow, and this very different sense of a practice collective etc. His whole deal, Benjamin's, was a before and after: this is real collectivity and this is spectacle. But there's a way in which this is true. That's his story—of massive precipitous decline, you know. I think the other way is to see other possibilities. I think it's important to be grim, as grim as possible, but there's always possibilities.

PS: Because if there weren't presumably culture really would be sewn up by the powers at be.

HF: Yeah and we can all go home.