

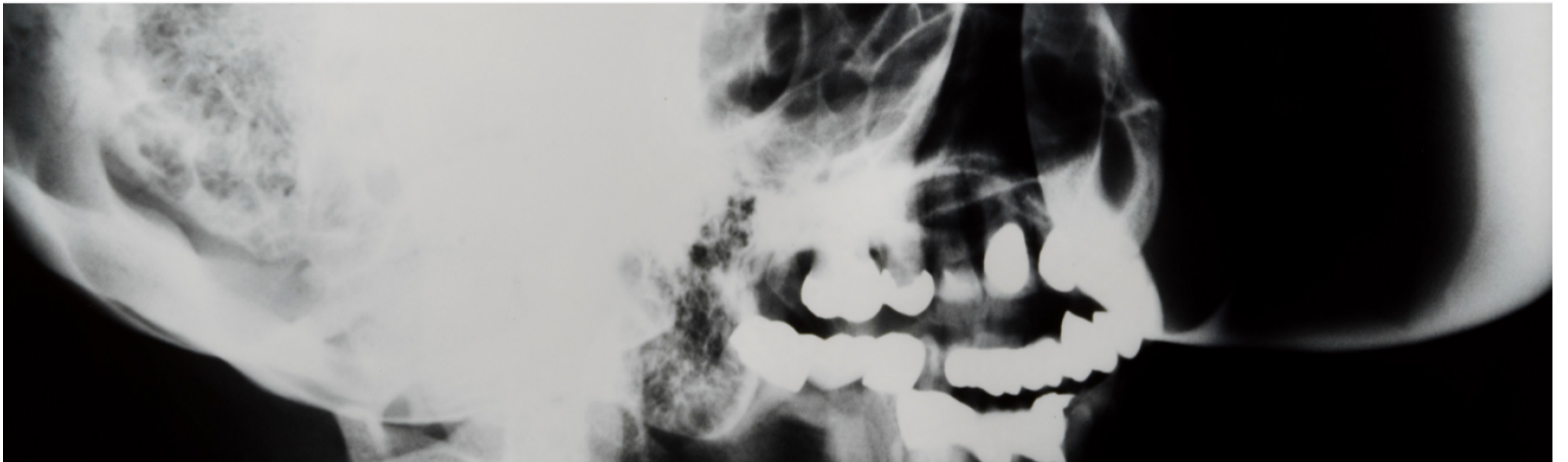
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Are We Post-Critical?

On Hal Foster's *Bad New Days: Art Criticism Emergency*

G BY [GILDA WILLIAMS](#) IN [FEATURES](#) | 13 NOV 15



A *New Yorker* cartoon featured a fashionable woman at a cocktail party, chatting with a less well-heeled young man. 'Oh!', she says, relieved. 'You're a *terrorist*. Thank God! I thought you said you were a *theorist*.'

American academic and critic Hal Foster recalled this vignette (in a recent interview) to drive home just how low 'theory' – and its equally unloved cousin, 'critique' – have sunk today. Foster, a noted player in postmodernist art history and co-editor of *October* magazine, knows well his imbrication within the now-maligned genre. Nonetheless, in *Bad New Days: Art Criticism Emergency* Foster's commitment to his strain of art criticism has, if anything, redoubled. Divided into five, roughly chronological terms ('abject'; 'archival'; 'mimetic'; 'precarious'; 'post-critical?'), much of *Bad New Days* concentrates on his noted monographic analyses of Tacita Dean, Thomas Hirschhorn, Sam Durant, *et al.*. Most has been published before – even multiple times – in *Return of the Real* (1996), *The New Left Review*, *Artforum*, and elsewhere.

For those familiar with Foster, the first four chapters read like selected highlights – like the opener of a new-season box-set: indispensable for newcomers requiring a rapid catch-up; surprisingly helpful for devotees. Sentences expressed in the interrogative in *Return of the Real* (i.e., were abject art's only options Oedipal naughtiness or infantile perversion?) are upgraded in *Bad New Days* into statements, question mark-free. He updates artists' rosters from his 2004 essay 'The Archival Impulse' (Liam Gillick, Mark Dion, Renée Green) by lacing with new exponents (Omer Fast, Josiah McElheny, Danh Vo), bringing the archival turn up to date. And Foster proves an excellent self-editor, clarifying and streamlining the often dense writing which gave his generation a bad name. For those just tuning in, *Bad New Days* is the clearest exposition of Hal Foster's thinking, so you can safely skip his earlier iterations and start here.

Although cynical readers might worry this is merely a new and improved 'best of' Hal Foster anthology, the last chapter, 'Post-critical?', and final coda on museums (first aired in *The Brooklyn Rail* and *The London Review of Books*, respectively) sees Foster return to form as the feisty critic of his early days, fired up by the promise of postmodern critique. From chapter five, his ambition for *Bad New Days* comes into focus: he is tracking, across his own writings, a powerful lineage of late 20th-century artists who inform today's most effective art-making. Foster is taking up the unfinished labor of the avantgarde (particularly Dada and Surrealism) that 'does not pretend that it can break absolutely with the old order or found a new one [but instead] seeks to trace fractures', grasping with two hands his self-imposed responsibilities as a critic: to articulate terms that pull together distinct projects, to form a progressive debate. Foster does not shy away from identifying the artists whom he finds most 'salient': those intent on emptying 'the capitalist junk bucket' and exposing its ravenous destructiveness – but not in a spirit of voluntary allegiance (Koons), nor as 'socially engaged art', which implies that 'art' and 'social engagement' occupy distinct spheres that must be forcibly yoked together. (Spoiler alert: the two most promising art strands that Foster extracts are 'formal resistance', e.g., Jeremy Deller; and 'mimetic exacerbation', e.g., Isa Genzken.)

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He is generous towards colleagues, plucking out the smartest quotes even from critics with whom he can be at odds, such as Nicolas Bourriaud ('the society of spectacle is thus followed by the society of extras'), and Hans Ulrich Obrist ('Collaboration is the answer. But what is the question?'). Foster even finds merit in Bruno Latour and Jacques Rancière, the militant anti-critics who – originally trained in the methods of criticality – eventually turned their guns round to take aim at critique itself.

Hal Foster will never join their ranks, and indeed *Bad New Days* could have been titled *We Will Never Be Post-Critical*. Ultimately Foster's defense of his generation's methods is neither apologetic nor ideological, but urgently pragmatic. Look, Foster seems to say, the art world has successfully trained its recent generations to think critically, and has painstakingly constructed a language, platform and audience. Not only does the art world now reach globally, but few other functioning communities are similarly capable of publicly scrutinizing – systematically, in a timely and imaginative way – a capitalist-driven world evolving at hyperbolic speed. *And, in our era of routine surveillance and big data, the task of keeping an overbearing power in check grows more pressing every day: this constitutes an emergency.* OK, so 'critique' – with its tone-deaf jargon and annoying self-importance – is imperfect; but what is gained by killing it off? Rather than flee the 20th century as if escaping a burning building, dropping everything in a blind panic, let's stop to ask: is anything worth saving? For example, Foster suggests, might Greenberg's Modernist discussion of formlessness, updated in T.J. Clark's postmodern reformulation, now serve in understanding digital fluidity?

Besides, Foster continues, what alternatives are on offer? Museums behave as if their purpose is to compensate for the inherent deficiencies of both its visitors and its contents. Artworks on display are treated as if lying in state, prevented by rigor mortis to interact with their zombie viewers, who in turn require reanimation via forced 'participation'. 'Give me Piet Mondrian over a George Maciunas any day', Foster decries: that is, a thoughtful abstract painting packs more punch for Foster than the piano-destroying, ping-pong playing, attention-seeking antics of Fluxus. Plainly Foster is *not* the guy who tours the galleries clutching a museum-issued audio-guide, basically phoning a friend for help. Object-oriented ontology is a valuable school of thought, he recognizes, given that 'now more than ever, no clear line exists between the human and the non-human'; but is it up to the job of countering today's emergency state? Foster further dismisses object-oriented thinking for art because it emerged from non-art disciplines, but this argument frankly rings hollow, given Foster's own reliance on non-art thinkers from Marx to Freud, Lacan, and Habermas.

In the final paragraph of 'Post-critical?' Foster takes his foot off the gas, and his persuasive plea for the survival of criticality screeches to a halt in an un-commented list of recent artists – Yto Barrada, Emily Jacir, Isaac Julien, Hito Steyerl, *et al.* These names are well-chosen, but readers are left frustrated, awaiting an analysis within the 'mimetic exacerbation' framework he'd just talked us into, which never arrives. Similarly, rather than tweak an old text on Cindy Sherman in relation to the 1980s-90s 'abject', might Foster rethink Sherman as the first postmodern artist to dive into a peculiarly female 'capitalist junk bucket' of dime-store cosmetics, cheap wigs, thrift-shop retro fashions, and remainder bins overflowing with fading filmstills of forgotten B-films?

But these are minor complaints; Hal Foster remains the committed, starry spokesperson for all of us convinced that critical thinking – however unfashionable – still holds value for 21st-century art. Picture in your mind's eye the little boy whom Robert Smithson, back in 1969, ran round a sandbox. Picture him stopping for a few decades to build an elaborate sandcastle called 'critique'. Now imagine that child – egged on by Latour, Rancière, *et al.* – happily kicking that castle to wrack and ruin. Watch the boy delight in his destruction – only to find himself eventually stranded in a pile of mud: bereft, broken, and empty-handed.

We can all admit that 'theory' and 'critique' require updating, but – Foster seems to warn – beware: demolish them at your own peril.

Main image: Isa Genzken, X-Ray, photograph, 100 x 80 cm. Courtesy: private collection; photograph: Gert Jan van Rooij

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