

One Way Cul-de-Sac: Benjamin Buchloh's Art History

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Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth-Century Art, by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015, 592 pp., 114 b. & w. illus., £42.95 hbk

In 1937 Bertolt Brecht offered what he took to be the collective terms of contemporary art making. The new theatre, he wrote, aimed to achieve 'an exact picture of the world', one that 'admits of objective, non-individualistic criteria'. Given that the world was defined by change, the artist's aim was not to achieve a fixed picture, but rather 'create images informative of the world'. While Brecht's world and ours differ in key respects, the desire to provide an 'exact picture' of it remains a guiding impulse of artistic practices and accounts of them. The challenge, especially for self-consciously Brechtian accounts (but it holds for all forms of analysis), is whether the picture it offers – its accounts of artists, works and movements – is 'exact' and 'informative' about the world (of the artist and of ours). Exact does not mean art history as political science, but rather art history as informative about the world we inhabit now, and as offering tools for further analysis. This is the measure by which to address Benjamin Buchloh's collection *Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth-Century Art*. This volume, a companion to his *Neo-Avant-Garde and Culture Industry* of 2000, brings together twelve essays dating back to 1977 (the title essay) through to 1996 (an essay on sculpture and the end of public space). Buchloh's aim throughout is to provide assessments of putatively avant-garde artists and works in terms defined by their more or less total, more or less resistant, assimilation to advanced capitalism.

And yet the book's guiding premise – assessing the 'validity' of prevailing avant-garde practices (38, 46, 61, 72, 90, etc.) – seems to be invalidated by the terms laid out in the new introduction. Here Buchloh rejects the possibility of 'any criteria of judgement whatsoever [that] might be reinstated' for art (the insertion of 'whatsoever' here captures the specific nature of the melodrama, as does 'reinstitution', implying that there were obvious

shared criteria in the past). Buchloh wonders to what 'social and subjective experience and construction [these criteria] could possibly refer' (note the role 'possibly' plays) when 'simply by invoking the term "criterion," it becomes instantly evident that the very concept is charged with a profoundly reactionary structuring of experience' (consider the roles that 'simply', 'instantly', 'very', and 'profoundly' play here) (xxxvi). What does Buchloh's present claim to disown judgement divulge about the prior judgements that drive this book? Or, given Buchloh's guiding investment in institutional critique, could we cogently ask what the institutional setting is for these kinds of (non-)claims? How, above all, since the book comprises essays written between 1977 and now, do these (non-)claims stand in relation to the 'laissez-faire neoliberal capitalism' (xxxv) that Buchloh presumes to resist?

Whatever the rhetorical aversion to judgements and criteria, the book is saturated with judgements based on the exclusive criteria of whether artists foreground, make apparent, thematize, show or reveal the 'underlying conditions' of production (346) (good artists) or whether they hide, conceal, disavow, mythicize, organicize, auraticize, or displace them (bad artists). Yves Klein, for example, appears as a kind of Platonic ideal for total assimilation to capital (he is 'crypto-fascist' [17]). From the 1977 essay we read how Klein, in his monochromes, 'tried to conceal his sources ... with a hypertrophic affirmation of his absolute originality that is symptomatic of his fraudulence and historical disavowal' (14). (Again, consider the use of the words 'hypertrophic' and 'absolute' here. The game played throughout is to make one's judgements into something more than that – historical necessity – by flourish, if not argument.) Assimilation to capital is thus identified by Buchloh with more or less complex strategies of concealing the historical nature of one's enterprise, assuming the mantle of self-critical avant-garde but in fact performing a kind of degraded replay of formerly critical gestures. The assumption of the 'absolute' criticality of works by Duchamp, for instance, is the ontological foundation of *October* (Plate 1). In Buchloh's terms, failed and neo-avant-gardists (those who do not understand the implications of Duchamp or Russian constructivism) share a commitment to 'Intellectual acrobatics ... to make [their] ideological stance look like an organic historical necessity, as opposed to a construct determined by extreme social and political factors' (138). Alternatively, there are critical practices that are critical 'only to the extent that it ... recognize[s] its alienated state and reflect[s] on its actual functions of furthering alienation

captures hierarchy and that hierarchy is at the base of capital. Because the latter is mistaken (hierarchy misidentifies the structure of capital), the former is deluded (mirroring back the secondary effects leaves the mechanism intact).

Buchloh presents his readers with two aesthetic and political worlds: avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, liberal and neo-liberal capitalism. We already have a sense in which revealing and hiding, foregrounding and displacing the conditions of production are the terms of aesthetic and political evaluation. Of course there are no actual evaluations, only assertions as to the 'validity' or 'invalidity' of an artist's strategy according to a presumed – enforced – set of historical 'determinations'. What exactly are the terms of a 'valid' (good) work? Buchloh offers a convenient formula: 'to the extent that internal relations are purged from [the work], external conditions become manifest' (341). Niele Toroni's introduction of a 'new dialectic' consists in the 'systematic differentiation of the constituent elements of painting' the result of which is to eliminate 'the last gestural residue of painterly facture' (66). Buchloh's analyses hinge on these dialectical turns when artists do or do not become acutely aware of precisely what relations necessitate purgation at a particular historical juncture. The more awareness an artist has of the specific levels of required purgation the more 'valid' the result. Artists like Broodthaers (but also

2 Marcel Broodthaers, *La Conquête de l'espace, Atlas à l'usage des artistes et des militaires* (The conquest of space, Atlas for the use of artists and the military), 1975. Thirty-eight page artist's book, offset lithograph with slipcase, 4.2 × 2.9 × 1 cm. New York: Museum of Modern Art.



Broun, Manzoni, Toroni, Buren, Birnbaum, Richter, until they face their inevitable – willing or unwilling – reconciliation with capital) are able to conceive of a 'whole range of undetected determinations' and make them present to the viewer (51). Once these determinations have been detected and foregrounded, every artist that comes after them must come to terms with their results or face the dustbin of history.

Almost everything in Buchloh's analyses depends on whether he or any of the artists that he considers has correctly identified the generative determinations of capitalism. If he has not, his analyses amount to another elaborate distortion of the world, one that serves capital rather than critiques it. At the centre of all his critiques is the question of hierarchy and the classical subject that is thought to sustain it. Over and over again we read about works that reinforce 'dead hierarchic figures in centralized grounds' versus ones that offer the 'innate radicality' of a 'decentered field' (11) ('innate', again, turns subjective assessment into a putative fact). Buchloh thus affirms works that invert 'traditional hierarchies', that question 'the origins of the power of the hieratic image' (43) – there is a persistent slippage between hierarchy and hieratic, which are not exactly related terms – that affirm the 'non-hierarchical commonality of the painterly sign language', that – as Buchloh asserts without a hint of irony – 'would eventually induce actual transformations within the hierarchies of social reality itself' (50). What vision of the world could one be labouring under that construes the critique of figure/ground relations – be they pictorial, sculptural or conceptual – as inducing a shift in social hierarchies? Following Buchloh, I am tempted to say it is the necessary vision of the world for someone that sees capitalism as a matter of how people see one another (good/bad, master/slave, male/female, white/black), and that changing how people see one another inevitably changes how people treat one another. Then again, Brecht's basic lesson – about the limits of empathy – is to see that hierarchy is how capitalism sorts its victims, not how it makes them victims in the first place. Not only does endless hierarchical redressing fail to alter the structure of exploitation, it can only serve the exploiters when severed from an analysis of class structure, which it is here. It is in his analyses of institutional critique that Buchloh is both closest to and furthest from grasping the limits of anti-hierarchy. Closest because we can begin to see how Buchloh's anti-hierarchical mode of analysis is tied to the institutional structures he serves (Harvard, for instance); furthest because it requires second reflection to see it.