

BEWITCHED, BOTHERED, AND BEWILDERED

Will Straw

MY TITLE WAS DEVISED in a hurry over a year ago when the publisher asked for one and I plucked a song title from my preconscious. It would, I hoped, enumerate the contradictory feelings I was anxious to describe. These feelings are the fuzzy substance of an ongoing ambivalence which, for myself and many others, has been a common response to newly emergent relationships between Art and Theory. In my own case, as one who taught Film Studies for a decade, this ambivalence first emerged in response to the preponderance of theory-films produced over a decade ago—films which my students invariably found less interesting than the writings on which they drew. These feelings have congealed over a half-decade or so of observing the signs of an expanding Art/Theory Scene: the artworks whose reference to theoretical writings is increasingly explicit, the gallery catalogues and magazines, and the increasingly congested two-way traffic between universities and the spaces of art practice and criticism.

Many of the questions raised for me by the emergence of this scene have found their way into the preface jointly authored by the co-organizers of the conference; I see no need to repeat those here. What follows, briefly and somewhat randomly, are more personal responses, mixed with gestures towards a broader analysis of the art/theory interchange. These may appear to bear the marks of a curmudgeonly

cynicism. One of the peculiarities of art/theory worlds is that their two defining sensibilities are profoundly contradictory: a deeply rooted critical suspicion, on the one hand, and a well-meaning, even platitudinous faith in activist good intentions, on the other. The weight one gives to either of these relative to the other always risks being inappropriate for a given moment or context. My own commitment to the politicized spaces of the art/theory interchange may not be obvious in what follows, but I would hope it may be assumed.

I will turn in a moment to the most striking feature of the art/theory interchange: the regular insinuation of theoretical references into contemporary artistic works. Privileging this movement, however, leads easily to the claim that the significant migrations at stake here are unidirectional, that we are dealing merely with a theorization of art. For reversals to be observed, we must cease thinking about Art and Theory in terms of the possible relations between them and consider the institutions, forms of productivity, and criteria of value which have taken shape around each. We might, in particular, delineate those ways in which academic work (in many corners and some centres of the university) has been produced and has come to circulate in ways or spaces more typical of art worlds.

Organizational sociologists will sometimes distinguish between those careers which unfold along the rigid pathways of institutional rank or status and others devoted to accumulating prestige elsewhere, within more informal, geographically dispersed hierarchies of influence and reputation. These are rarely separable, of course; the politics of universities or art worlds are driven by attempts to enact conversion between these different forms of capital. Indeed, it is through such conversions (failed or successful) that intergenerational battles for succession or disciplinary squabbles over turf are often resolved. Newly appointed deans may remake departmental boundaries in ways which are meant to reveal long-nourished visions of intellectual community, but which work, in fact, to freeze innovative moves towards broad interdisciplinary contact. Similarly, young academics

nurtured in the entrepreneurial celebrity culture of modern cultural politics may find the skills acquired there being deployed more and more in the service of institutional processes. Increasingly, they arrive at university posts with ranges of contacts and skills in grant-seeking, conference organization, and publishing, which in another era would have come only with seniority of rank.

In the academic humanities, the relative weakening of disciplinary boundaries, as the contexts from which intellectual work derives legitimation, has nourished new modes of entrepreneurship more typical of non-academic spheres of cultural activity. The coincidence of a shrinking academic job market and an explosion of art/theory activity outside the university has produced a partial unmooring of individual reputation from institutional or disciplinary status. It has increased the importance and lure of those extra-institutional spaces within which a “reputation” may take shape, circulate, and realize an exchange value: the parallel gallery and exhibition sectors, the conference circuit, and the more amorphous, overlapping spaces of graduate-student cultures, artist-run centres, and small-scale publishers. It is within and across these spaces that something like an art/theory scene has taken shape.

Like many university teachers, I have been bewitched by this scene, often succumbing to the sense that it offers a more glamorous and immediately gratifying context for intellectual work than the university. (Returning to university life in Ottawa after a talk for Public Access in Toronto in 1992, I felt like Cinderella after midnight.) I retain, nevertheless, an unshakable suspicion of the motives (or of my own, at least) which lead us to gravitate towards this scene. What is so often framed (to oneself, or to others) as a move “into the community” is very often capitulation to the lure of a scene less socially diverse and stratified than one’s own undergraduate classes. Within this scene, it should be acknowledged, there are generally fewer restrictions on the scope of rhetorical gestures or the political claims one may get away with; its appeal is entirely understandable.

The entrepreneurship which has come to organize a good deal of academic practice manifests itself in time spent cooking up events, planning journals or anthologies, and testing new forms of collaboration across a variety of boundaries. This is only partially the result of institutional pressures to produce. (In any event, the activities described here have an ambiguous status within institutional evaluations of productivity.) It has much to do with those developments which Jody Berland's contribution to this volume insightfully describes – developments which have enhanced the exchange value of the authorial "signature" and made the unfolding career and autobiography to which it is attached a principal context within which works assume significance.

This foregrounding of signature is a rarely considered effect of moves towards interdisciplinarity within the university, moves normally described in a language of democratic collaboration and exchange. As I have suggested elsewhere, the installing of a transdisciplinary space of dialogue has also instituted a vantage point from which the relative status of individuals and their work may be judged.¹ From this vantage point, gestures of authorial bravura are more readily seized upon as indices of value than is one's place within the slow, circumscribed unfolding of a discipline's history. There is much to be welcomed here: the steady accumulation of cultural sites in which one's work is known may feel like progress on the road to becoming a "public" intellectual, an ambition with platitudinous status in contemporary academic life. Arguably, however, what looks like a dissolution of barriers between the academy and a network of sites outside it (magazines, galleries, the spaces of public speaking) is to a considerable extent a movement outwards of these boundaries so as to encircle both.

The dilemmas implicit in this encirclement reveal themselves when academics undertake to write about new art practices. Confronted with artworks which are quickly reducible to the theoretical citations which underlie them, we often feel a rising scepticism, but we are already in a

world where works which lack these underpinnings will seem naive and outmoded (and critical writing upon them will recuperate those qualities as having theoretical interest). If, amid galleries full of works which literalize the insights of film theory, we cease to feel inspired, we are nevertheless unable to imagine what might acceptably take their place. Attempting to write about such works, we struggle to avoid either of two slippery slopes: one ends in a renewed intentionalism, the critic reconstructing or, at best, reshuffling the theoretical references concealed in the work; the other, in a new and often desperate aestheticism, leading the critic to grope for those elements she or he may claim are in excess of a work's theoretical propositions. The disarming choice here is between a subservient compliance with the work's theoretical agenda and the pre-emptive move to claim that what is significant about the work lies outside that agenda. If this discomfort were the symptom of a genuine incompatibility between artistic and theoretical discourse, we might embrace it as a productive tension. More typically, it is marked by an irritating sense of excessive familiarity.

Despite this discomfort, the reconciliation of Art and Theory continues to be posited as a goal towards which we should all struggle, rather than as a defining reality of contemporary art worlds. In a dialectic lazily conceived, the bridging of the gulf between art and theoretical criticism is still imagined as the condition of some imminent future, when long-standing dilemmas concerning the artwork's knowledge-effect will be resolved. The relationship between art and theory is persistently framed in language which invites earnest effort towards a moment of projected reconciliation:

In terms of the thematic focus of this panel, we would like to examine how the disciplinary segregation of the functions of art production and art criticism has been traditionally utilized to preserve patterns of cultural specialization which may now require serious re-evaluation. We are interested in addressing

whether such conceptual and practical distinctions are still legitimate, or whether they merely serve to reinforce the institutional frame of high culture for the sake of particular marketplace interests. Specifically, we want to reconsider how certain types of art production construct and enable modes of critical engagement—for example, the critique of art history, the deconstruction of aesthetic ideologies, the analysis of socio-political conditions, the de-coding of ethnic and gender identities, etc.—in other words, to re-evaluate those strategies which may go far beyond the current disciplinary boundaries of art criticism.²

The assumption that this reconciliation has yet to transpire has set two traps. The first is a refurbished vanguardism. Typically, works which, it is claimed, have breached this divide—which have given artistic form to theoretical propositions—are held up as markers of a road to be followed, rather than as characteristic present-day practices which raise their own, persistent questions. Such works are perpetually invoked as signs of hope and progress, even when the long-standing, admittedly dull questions of accessibility and social locatedness linger on. The persistence of such questions need not paralyse a theoretically informed art practice (though it might dampen their self-congratulatory veneer). Nevertheless, one should not imagine such questions obsolete because new works triumphantly offer bridges to recognizable bodies of ideas or theoretical work.

More significantly, exhortations towards future reconciliation conceal the extent to which the institutional/discursive economies of art and theory are already intimately intertwined, at least within those cultural spaces self-defined as oppositional (and especially within countries like Canada, with their strong traditions of artist-run centres and critical publication). The teleology of imminent reconciliation requires that we keep alive the sense that art and theory are divided in the present, partly so that the concrete consequences of their convergence need not be scrutinized.

Arguably, the insinuation of theoretical work into artistic practice is less the result of historical reconciliation than it

is the product of institutional and sociological realignments. What is needed are analyses which specify the dispositional, institutional, and social economies within which theory has come to occupy new relationships to artistic practice. In a variety of ways, and bracketing the question of its specific and variable substances, theory has assumed a diversity of new functions: as a competence which has displaced art-historical knowledges; as guarantor of a work's link to an activist politics; as that through which the work is inserted in a larger history.

The last of these functions is perhaps the most symptomatic. In a period when artistic styles and forms are multiple and fragmented, the space of shared theoretical references has taken over from the artistic school or medium as the terrain on which historical time is marked. This is of particular importance when the dispersion of identity politics seems likely to install an artistic pluralism. It is the common space of the critique of representation, with its shifting hierarchies of authors and paradigms, which locates the theoretically informed work in a temporal continuum. When, for entirely legitimate reasons, no one feels comfortable discussing political causes in terms of curves of fashionability, the rhythms of replacement and obsolescence may be more acceptably noted in lists of influential authors or works.

It is for this reason that reminders of how art has always been implicitly "theoretical" miss specific features of the current situation. The crucial questions have less to do with whether a practice is somehow "theorized" than with its links to an unfolding history and geography of theoretical developments. These links will position a given practice as indigenous or cosmopolitan in its theoretical underpinnings, and more-or-less naive or out-of-date, efficient, clumsy, coy, or obvious in its staging or specifying of theoretical propositions. Whereas in an earlier period the function of theoretical reference within criticism was to remove a work from the continuum of art-historical time, rubbing it up against broader socio-political phenomena, that function has now been reversed. It is the critical elaboration of a work's

theoretical project which now restores it to a larger collective endeavour, that of a generalized cultural critique in which diverse activist communities are presumed to collaborate. The sense that different activist practices have anything in common—that a magazine can legitimately cover them all as instances of a singular phenomenon—is more and more dependent on the threads of theoretical reference which lead them all back to a common intellectual space.

The sociological shifts which have produced recent convergences between Art and Theory are, I would argue, rather easily grasped. As intellectual politics in Canada and elsewhere have come to revolve around questions of social identity, they have, at the same time, become increasingly cultural. The observable politicization of art worlds is in many ways a residual effect of broader shifts through which activist political currents have come to privilege the cultural as their terrain of intervention. One of many significant effects is a waning of the real or perceived social distance between activist cultural communities and their political referents—a distance which forever haunted a now declining class-based, political militancy. In a very real sense, the urban subcultures of activist identity politics have become (or take themselves for) the communities they seek to serve; the question of a broader accessibility for ideas, which haunted earlier traditions of cultural militancy, has (rightly or wrongly) lost much of its resonance. The problem of the insinuation of theory into artistic practice—of how works might embed particular knowledges within themselves—has displaced attention from the older problem of how either might come to circulate within broader discursive fields and social spaces.

It is the perennial illusion of an art-world politics that its crucial moments are those in which individual works resolve, embody, or communicate questions of political significance. I would claim, instead, that artworks and writings assume their primary importance inasmuch as the moments of their production or circulation become those in which solidarities or fractures between particular communities are

produced. It is clear, for example, that the interweaving of art and theory and of both with an activist identity politics has heightened the identification of all of these activities with youth, as they have become intimately bound up with the institutional and wage economies of graduate study, freelance writing, and such sites of social interaction as the dance club. The significant phenomenon here is not the role assumed by artistic works in the communication of theory, but the social continuities produced between a theoretical education, political militancy, and particular definitions of hipness.

At the same time, arguably, what is significant about a magazine like *Fuse* is not the specific knowledges it appears to offer, but the image it conveys of certain knowledges (and the activities or communities in which they are cultivated) properly belonging together in ways presumed to have political effects. As constituents of the material culture of particular overlapping communities, what works of art and theory signify are the terms and forms of involvement characteristic of such communities: the competencies they presume, the collaborations and inter-institutional relationships they require or enable, and the instances of empowerment they manifest. New convergences of art and theory have produced new ways of partaking in particular communities and social spaces, but only minimally as a result of changes in the cognitive role of artworks themselves.

This is to suggest, in a sense, that processes occurring within the worlds of art/theory-making are little different from those common in such subcultures as that around computer hacking (to invoke the most contrastingly unappealing example). Around certain practices, people occupy places within – and work to alter – particular relations of power, institutional interchange, and social differentiation. One should take the self-defined vanguardism of neither of these subcultures at face value. The broader effects of what goes on within them have little to do with the ways in which they imagine their relationship to a larger world as allegorical. What may unite art and theory in politically meaningful

ways is not (or not merely) that they stand as forms of knowledge whose disempowering separation has now been overcome—neither art nor theory, in this interchange, has truly resolved the problem of its place within social hierarchies of intelligibility. More importantly, the production and circulation of these forms, as processes which transpire within (and link themselves to) specific social histories and geographies, are loci around which the broader contours of social and intellectual relations take shape and are remade.

Notes

1. See “Shifting Boundaries, Lines of Descent: Cultural Studies and Institutional Realignment in Canada,” *Relocating Cultural Studies: New Directions in Theory and Research*, ed. Valda Blundell, John Shepherd, and Ian Taylor (London: Routledge, 1993), 86–102.

2. Joshua Decter, in a presentation made during the roundtable “Sites of Criticism/Practices: The Problem of Divisions of Cultural Labour,” *ACME Journal*, 1, no. 2 (1992): 39.