

NOËL CARROLL

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ASAGE (Nada Gatalo and Katherine Tullmann): In the introduction to your book Danto characterizes you as “a participant observer, someone who stands within and without of the life they seek to bring to consciousness.” Do you think that you’ve gained a unique perspective of the artworld in your dual role as critic and philosopher?

NOËL CARROLL: Well it certainly has enriched my own philosophy. I tend to think of aestheticians as getting into aesthetics in one of two ways. Some come to aesthetics through metaphysics and epistemology. They are already involved in philosophy and then they become interested in the special metaphysical and epistemological questions of the artworld. And others come from the artworld one way or another – whether as a practitioner or as a critic. They formulate their questions and their standards for success in different ways. I’m definitely a case of someone who comes from the artworld. I was in film school at the time I was writing the reviews in this book. I was making films, and I think that was very informative. Hume says that a critic should be practiced and I think that the practice of making art gives you a very important internal view which I hope is reflected in my own writing in that I try to actually say how things work rather than, say, place them in an ideological framework. As a critic I also had that tendency to be more interested in how things were being put together, so questions of criticism have probably been much more important to me than questions of metaphysics. I have the attitude that if you get things right at the level of the artworld then whatever metaphysical position turns out to be right, it should be compatible with that rather than working in the other direction.

I think that being immersed in the artworld as a practitioner who is also a critic makes certain problems more important to me. It also influences the kinds of theories that I have tried to put together. That includes my tendency to prefer what I call narrativism as a way of identifying works of art. I thought that was reflected not only in my own practice but just seemed to be the way that critics proceed. They proceed by supplying some kind of background for the work. That has to do with the requirements of writing an essay for someone who hasn’t seen it or maybe has no background in that art form. But I think that narrative is not just simply a pedagogical, literary device; I think that it reflects one’s own thinking. For example, you think of the context in which a work occurred, maybe in terms of a category or genre. Or with avant-garde art, where it’s less clear what the categories or genres are, you consider certain preoccupations that the artist had. Then you try to place the work in terms of its being a rational response to certain situations and problems. Of course, narrative is the best device we have for explaining actions and the creation of artifacts.

A: Can you tell us about the climate of the artworld that you captured in your essays and reviews?

NC: One thing that was distinctive about that artworld when I entered it – the period of minimalism and the other art movements of the 60s – was the real concern about what, if anything, counted as art. There were lots of attempts to try and dissolve the difference between art and everything else. Lots of artists were obsessed with philosophical questions about the nature of art. You even see footnotes to Hume and Wittgenstein and Husserl in *Artforum*! So I suppose that, as the post-structuralists like to say, it was no accident that my philosophical positions look as though they are beginning to emerge in that time.

For example, in his essay “Art and Objecthood” Michael Fried attacked what he called literal art--what we now call minimal art – on more or less philosophical grounds. He thought that it was too “theatrical,” by which he meant that it elicited the audience's response and invited the audience to examine its own response. He thought art proper should emphasize its objecthood, its discreteness and its difference from other objects. Fried was a student of Greenberg’s and colleague of Stanley Cavell’s, so it’s easy to see why he developed his elaborate philosophical essentialist defense of art. We would sit in bars – like Magoo’s, which was just off of Canal street – and argue into the middle of the night about articles like “Art and Objecthood.” We’d worry about its relevance to painting and sculpture and also about whether you could expand these thoughts and the ideas of Greenbergian modernism to other art forms. So it was very congenial for a graduate student with philosophical pretensions to be immersed in that artworld. Things changed though even during my time as a critic. Political questions became more and more dominant and those kinds of questions about the nature of art and its relationship to ordinary life receded to a large degree.

A: So essentialism was the prevailing theory in the beginning of your career. Was this why you set out to demarcate the boundaries of modernism and postmodernism in your essays?

NC: The labels of modernism and postmodernism become mixed up and hard to track in a lot of work. It wasn’t clear what people meant by them. Much of the tension relates to essentialism. There were really two different approaches to these questions about the nature of art. First, there was the essentialist heritage that came from the very influential work of Clement Greenberg that people tried to extend beyond painting to every art form. For instance, people tried to extend Greenbergian positions about painting and sculpture to film, which was ill-suited to that model, since film doesn’t really have a surface, which is central to Greenbergian theory. But where is the surface of a film? On the film strip? Was it back there in the projection room? Is it up there on the screen? So you couldn’t talk about the surface or even the flatness of the film in the same way you could discuss them in reference to painting.

Moreover, there were also the anti-essentialists. Very often these were people influenced by John Cage, who suggested that the dividing line between music and noise or between music and everyday sound was something to be dissolved and overcome. Likewise dancers who practiced at Judson Church, down by Washington Square, were very interested in presenting ordinary movement in a dance context. Think here of Rauschenberg’s ideas about exploring the gap between art and life.

The essentialists and anti-essentialists represent two attitudes towards the distinction between art and everything else, emerging around the same time. At the time, it was not always apparent that there really were two different sides. In my book, I draw an explicit distinction between the modernists and the integrationists. But at the time there was not as much of a recognition how different these strands were because they seemed to be addressing similar issues.

A: So these labels of “modernist” and “integrationist” came after the fact? How did you see these views developing?

NC: Well, in retrospect I can see that there were a number of things that I was not particularly clear about. A lot of what we thought of as minimalism struck me as on a continuum with the kind of modernist work that Greenberg defended, such as the work of people like Jules Olitski. That is, it seemed to me there was a “natural” movement from asking about the conditions of the possibility of this or that kind of artwork (Greenberg’s concern), towards a more phenomenological stance in which questions concerning the audience's perception were foregrounded (the minimalists’ concern). In both cases there was this kind of meta-position, on

either the nature of the object or on the nature of the object in relation to the audience. Because of that, back then, I didn't see a sharp break between Modernism and Minimalism and, for that matter, Pop Art.

Now I don't think I was the only one who was trying to extend the language of Modernism to apply to all sorts of things like Judson Dance, maybe the work of Warhol and Johns and Rauschenberg and Morris. At the time, I wasn't all that sensitive to there being a juncture there, the juncture that was signaled by Fried and also by Greenberg earlier and could be read off of their dislike of Minimalism. Minimalism didn't seem to me that different from Modernism. Ironically, when we get to the post-post-modernists in post-1976, they don't see such a difference either, since for them minimalism is grouped with previous modernist practices insofar as both of them are being charged with being formalist. So, they're not so sensitive to the different ways you can be a formalist—as one concerned primarily with the object or as one concerned primarily with the relation to the audience to the object.

A: I don't think that any interview on *Living in an Artworld* would be complete without discussing the point of art criticism. Can you tell us about your changing views of the role of the critic?

NC: Well, when I wrote those articles I tended to go along with what was a very dominant view of criticism at the time, which I've reacted against since. That view was that criticism should not be concerned with evaluation. In those days we thought that our job was to historically contextualize and interpret works of art. All of the reviews in my book are about the avant-garde, and my goal was to make the work accessible to a broader audience by explaining the context of the work and offering interpretations. My tendency as an interpreter was to find the unity of a work, even avant-garde works. For example, if the work is about irrationality then the overriding choices in the work will be ones that defy rational connection. I thought of that sort of explication as the primary critical task, and downplayed evaluation. Arthur Danto still holds this view; it follows from his theory of art that works of art are about something and are embodied in the appropriate form. Thus Danto criticism follows a standard rhythm: he tells you the artwork is about and then he tells you how it managed to articulate said theme given the structures that the artist employed. Danto has said things as wild as it is not his job to evaluate at all, that the curators and the gallery owners have already taken care of the evaluation by presenting the work. His job is to figure out what the work is about and show how it managed to convey its message.

In my book *On Criticism*, contra Danto and my earlier self, I regard evaluation as essential to criticism, but my current view still has vestiges of the Danto-line, because I take it that part of a critic's job is to show what's worthwhile or what's good in a work and one does this by showing that it embodies its point or purpose appositely.

A: Levinson ("Artistic Worth and Personal Taste," 2010) argues that a Humean critic could adequately criticize different kinds of artworks. In contrast, Stephanie Ross ("Comparing and Sharing Taste," 2012) argues that a critic's focus should be narrower--maybe emphasizing one particular art form. Where do you stand on this question? It seems like you're more in line with Levinson, since you have one general framework with which you critique artworks and it applies to various forms.

NC: Well, I hadn't thought of the opposition that way! But I'll claim that I'm in the middle and have the best of both worlds. In terms of the breadth of criticism, I think that Stephanie is right, because you've got to know the art form and the relevant categories and contexts in which to place a work. But I think you can know more than one art form. In the latter sense, I'm on Levinson's side.

One way I'm different from both Jerry and Stephanie is that I think the Humean model of criticism is obsolete. It's so much about taste--whether you approve or disapprove of a work. But if you look at how criticism is conducted, taste is nowhere as important as interpretation, analysis, and a sense of structure. I think that issues of meaning are much more important than the exercise of taste in criticism as we know it. It might be that bourgeois connoisseurs look at pictures by people like Constable and evaluate them in terms of taste. The part of Hume's account that I do like is his statement that the last requirement of the ideal critic is that the critic must have good sense. Good sense operates on the relationship between the part and the whole. The part of Hume I don't like is his non-cognitivism. His idea is that you first come to see what the relationships are between the parts of the work and the whole and once you've got that down, taste operates and you respond: "Ahh how fine!" I think that in as much as you buy into Hume, you've bought into a non-cognitive model of aesthetic appreciation. I differ from Hume, as well as Jerry and Stephanie, in that I emphasize the cognitive nature of criticism. In that respect, I am much closer to Danto.

A: There's a lot of dance criticism in the book. You're known for philosophy of film, narrative...etc. How did you become a dance critic?

NC: It has to do with the perennial graduate student avoidance of writing one's dissertation. I was writing my doctoral thesis on Buster Keaton and I convinced myself that in order to write about Buster Keaton I would have to learn about movement. So, I took courses in the Labanotation center at Union Square in order to learn about how to describe movement. I thought if I was going to be working on Keaton I "had" to do that. But learning that I was studying movement, one of the editors at *Artforum* offered me the post of dance and performance critic.

At that time, since many artists were interested in crossing boundaries, for example people like Rauschenberg and Robert Morris were composing dances, *Artforum* decided that they were going to begin to cover a number of these para-fine art activities like dance and, what was emerging then, performance art. My tenure at *Artforum* was pretty short because at a certain point the people who ran *Artforum* realized that there's nothing to sell with a dance or a piece of performance art so coverage of dance and performance wasn't going to bring in a lot of advertising revenue from galleries. There were also [similar] problems with film; nobody figured out how to market film to collectors. They tried, they tried marketing super 8 film to private collectors, but these attempts all failed. So my career at *Artforum* was brief. I think it lasted about two years, but by then I had a certain identity as a dance and performance critic, so I was able to ply my trade at other places. Anyways, I recommend dance criticism if you're avoiding writing your dissertation.

A: Maybe we should take your advice!

Noël Carroll, Distinguished Professor at the CUNY Graduate Center, has had an illustrious career as a philosopher of art, writing in topics from horror and humor, to narrativity and artistic intent. His forthcoming books include *Minerva's Night Out*, *A Very Short Introduction to Humour*, and *Living in an Artworld* (LIAA), which takes his work as an aesthetician into a whole new arena: actual criticism. *LIAA* captures an extended moment in recent art history from the unique perspective of an aesthetician who actually participated in the artworld.

Nada Gatalo received her BA from the University of Toronto and her MA from the University of Southampton. She is in the PhD program at the City University of New York Graduate Center.

Katherine Tullmann received her MA in philosophy from University of Missouri-St. Louis and is currently working towards her PhD at the CUNY Graduate Center. She works in philosophy of art, mind and cognitive science.