

Left Cold By Frieze

By Christopher Collier, artist & writer

Frieze Art Fair 2009

15-18 October 2009, Regent's Park, London.

Frieze Talks

Scenes from a Marriage: Have Art and Theory Drifted Apart?

12pm, Friday 16 October

Simon Critchley (Chair & Professor of Philosophy at The New School for Social Research, New York), Robert Storr (Artist, Critic, Curator and Dean of Yale School of Art), Barbara Bloom (Artist)

Chair: Jörg Heiser (Co-editor, *frieze*)

In Theory: Sylvère Lotringer (general editor of the journal *Semiotext(e)*). Credited with the introduction of French theory to the USA)

5pm, Friday 16 October

American architectural theorist Charles Jencks once claimed that modernism ended at precisely 3.32pm on the 15th July 1972. This was the exact time that award-winning example of modernist architecture the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in Missouri was demolished. The brutalist edifice fragmented into flows of indistinct dust and with it a certain utopian belief in progressive art and the avant garde. Others saw the end of the modernist project amongst the shattered barricades of the failed May '68 Paris revolution but whenever and wherever this epochal break is placed most would recognise the fundamental difference of the age that succeeded it, the era imaginatively titled postmodernism.

Postmodernism is a discourse characterised by the fragmentation of the so called 'grand narratives' of ideology, by re-appropriation and reference, deconstruction and an instability of meanings or identities as found in the conditions of late (multinational, post-industrial) capitalism and articulated in the writings of a certain generation of French theorists. Long fascinated by the influence of such theories upon art I embarked for the Frieze Art Fair in Regent's Park, specifically to attend a pair of talks scheduled as part of the Frieze talks programme. These talks, involving some of the leading thinkers in the field, dealt with the changing relationship between art and theory and so it was with a sense of anticipation that I stepped into the huge, bustling bubble of the Fair pavilion.

The impact of postmodern thought on art practice since the 1960s and the subsequent supposed death of ideology and homogeneity has apparently had a pronounced impact contemporary art. Postmodernism as a theoretical approach to art however is now largely felt to be waning and the economic crisis has the potential to herald a new paradigm of ideologies, therefore the natural question for cultural commentators to address is 'where next?' If postmodernism is taken to reflect the social conditions of late capitalism, is this crisis in global capitalism reflected in new trends of art practice? Is it the case that postmodernism's rejection of ideology indicates the end of ideology or has the ideology of our most current art practice yet to become clear?

Arriving at the fair early, my first experience was of over zealous, black-clad security staff attempting to refuse me entry with my camera, apparently on the grounds that 'it's got a lens'. I politely pointed out to the security officer that in fact the majority of cameras have lenses and that my humble 18-55mm was likely to possess inferior capabilities to those featured on the majority smaller fixed-lens cameras (which *were* permitted). However, still being refused entry I was forced to conclude that this must be a case in point of 'art' operating heavy (and invisible) handed 'megamachinery' under the influence of theory. It truly seemed that camera-wise at least size mattered: there was *différance* between what the camera signified for me and what it signified for them. But rather than drown anyone in semantics or semiotics for that matter and rather than resist the man's territorial imperative I simply feigned a movement for the cloakroom and gave him the slip. I don't know what they were fearful that I might do with the camera: might I use it for a spot of artistic appropriation? Perhaps I might use it to capture and reference other works for my own purposes? If that's not deemed appropriate then 90% of this work should have been denied entry on those grounds. Perhaps they were afraid that I might use my camera to steal the artworks' souls? – to wither their auras? – it's possible, this is art in the age of mechanical reproduction after all. At this point I realised I had been reading too much lately and needed to get out more.

After a cursory glance around the stands I headed for the day's first talk, *Have art and theory drifted apart?* Resisting the urge to conclude on the basis of my previous experience that authority and theory clearly haven't, I sat down. There followed a fascinating discussion, artist Barbara Bloom elucidating her own highly eclectic and almost nomadic use of theory as a source of inspiration. Artist, critic, curator and academic Robert Storr was critical of a logocentric, territorialized, assumptive and jargon-intense practice reliant on name dropping the likes of Deleuze by way of an argument. He was also critical of a tendency to irony. Philosopher Simon Critchley argued that a certain model of theory had become tiresome, especially criticising the intensive reliance on theory that he identified in institutions such as Goldsmiths in the 1990s which he provocatively deemed a 'terroristic model'. He argued that many capable students were hindered by an over-reliance on theory and that art should think in its own terms, not in theoretical terms as such. He implied that theory was reductionist as opposed to essentialist and that rather than what he dubbed 'philosifugal' models of interpretation we should aim for something more 'artipetal' (drawing theory into arts orbit, rather than applying art examples to overarching theories after the fact). What he seemed to be arguing was that postmodern theory has in fact become the very thing that it came about in order to challenge, an authoritarian 'grand narrative' or metalanguage. He postulated that rather than allowing a system of fruitless mutual legitimation between increasingly disparate and divergent practices of art and theory, that rather than this unhappy couple continuing to play out scenes from a marriage, perhaps they have instead entered promiscuously into a *ménage à trois* with other a string of other influences, including education, work or most convincingly politics. He claimed that art and theory remained bedfellows when engaged with politics (in a non-ideological, party political sense). This would certainly make for an interesting relationship, politics back in bed with old flame art whilst theory looks on, indeed it sounded like a scenario from a tabloid scandal. Dashing our hopes of a happy reunion however, this engagement with politics that he eluded to he rather cynically termed 'the memory of resistance as mediated by capital'.

The discussion progressed and the panel seemed to arrive at something of a consensus. They largely agreed that art no longer had much use for theory, stating a belief that theory failed to properly understand contemporary art and tended towards a canonical elitism and alienating jargon that excluded many artists and imposed encodings from above. The

panel appeared to be implying that theory should serve art rather than art serve theory – 'art needs a theory that needs art' it was said. Critchley, who largely led the discussion, claimed a phenomenon, ie. art, should take precedence over any wider code and that considering its place at the very heart of contemporary culture, art is often not taken seriously enough by philosophers who don't take the time to truly look and describe. Storr drew on the distinction found in Wittgenstein between showing and telling, arguing that art should show whilst theory should tell. Especially criticising Deleuze for his assertion that philosophy creates concepts, art creates sensations, Storr stated that art creates concepts too, it just presents them differently. The panel effectively concluded that art had become divorced from theory to a greater or lesser extent and that this was largely to be welcomed as art's role should be rather to create situations that frame debate and that artists should think for themselves as opposed to relying too heavily upon theory. To this end there was a call, rather counter intuitively I felt, for more writing from artists themselves (after all if the argument had been that artists should stay away from theorising too much about their work and that their processes of understanding were distinct from theoretical ones it then seems illogical to call for artists to pause from making art, 'showing' as it were, and start 'telling' through theoretical writing). The panels conclusions were interesting if hardly surprising, I felt that they started off with a subtext of hostility towards theory and perceived their arguments as liberating art from its over-bearing and over-coding influences.

In contrast the second talk that I attended given by Sylvère Lotringer perhaps unsurprisingly took a different view entirely. In an inspiring, fascinating and excellently informed talk, the charismatic Lotringer essentially adopted a spirited defence and in my opinion a successful vindication of theory from its critics in art circles and beyond. Agreeing that art and theory have indeed become less closely related since the 80's and 90's he provided a though overview of French theory's engagement with art; the art world's fickle love affair and ensuing boredom with theory. He illustrated how most criticism of theory from artists and the art world is ultimately as a result of not only a misunderstanding of theory but of a misunderstanding of the circumstances of its appropriation by art. Whereas the morning's talk had been implicitly critical of theory, Lotringer was overtly critical of many aspects of the art world today. Rather than ask 'what happened to theory?' (as Jörg Heiser had done), he instead posed the question 'what happened to art?' claiming that since the 80's both theory and art underwent a process of commodification that resulted in the relationship being pushed further than was ever intended to go. He stated that French theory was regularly misunderstood, generalised and the finer points lost as it was lumped together for convenience of reference. This fact, combined with a general and possibly xenophobically exacerbated mistrust in the American media, led to the once fashionable French theory becoming increasingly unfashionable. However he stated, theory never really needed art in the first place, art was rarely its primary concern and the self-aggrandising concept of 'art for arts sake' does not particularly fit well with a discourse for which art was never a principal obsession. He conjectured that much of the recent hostility towards theory from the art world derived from a defence mechanism against a narrative that it found intimidating and which thus created a degree of anxiety.

Lotringer went on to explain how theory had often been taken up by artists as a fashionable self-promotional tool in order to project an aura of elitism and gravitas and to legitimise works intellectually by filling the vacuum left by the end of avant garde agendas. Despite the obvious clash between Barthes' *Death of the Author* and the burgeoning egos of the booming 80's art world, the essay became influential and art was often rendered purposefully empty with theory left to fill the gap. Another influential text was Baudrillard's *Simulations*, again only superficially understood, this was utilised as a

legitimation of appropriation strategies within art that were developing during the 1980's. The flowering of neoliberalism in that decade remodelled the art scene on the template of corporate, global capitalism and it quickly transformed from art world through art market to art industry in which career orientated arts practitioners replaced the romantic myth of the avant garde artist. Beginning in earnest with the 'glitz and blitz' neo-expressionist invasion of New York in the early eighties, self-promotion became as essential as creativity and to this end artists found the idea of theory an effective tool to project the image they wished to cultivate. In an atmosphere of hysteria and euphoria theorists became stars to fans that had never read them. Complex and often obscure discourses were the latest targets on contemporary art's appropriation list, taken up more often than not for their aura as opposed to their content. The relationship escalated, in Lotringer's view, out of hand and eventually the inevitable backlash came. He argues that art existed fine before theory, it just accessed philosophical knowledge in other ways, concepts do not need to be commodified literally, it can suffice for theory to resonate indirectly with an artist's concerns, in this respect Lotringer seemed to be drawing closer to the conclusions of the first panel on this issue. He also conceded that, owing to the French art scene at the time, the French theorists never especially claimed to be expert in contemporary art nor fully engaged with it and should not therefore be critiqued as such. Any hostility on the part of the French theorists towards contemporary art was not to be ascribed to the fact (as Jörg Heiser had earlier implied) that they were bitter that America had taken over France's status as cultural capital, but rather that capital itself had taken over culture.

Though art and theory have grown apart, Lotringer claimed that there is still a relevance for theory in art. It is especially prescient in an art world that doesn't appear to know where its going, contemporary art has become self-referential and often fails to engage with a wider world, if the concept is the art then its relics are the intervention of capital, art needs to find what it can be as it tests the limits of a world without limits. Art has potential he declared, it now infiltrates all plateaus of society, it spreads out and deterritorializes with only the art market and institutions holding it together. He argued that if art could uncouple itself from these retrograde influences it could, resonating between its dispersed points, provide a progressive, creative alternative to the increasingly oppressive world order. Theory can play its part in this, reassessing art's place in the world, it has outlived its hype now it can truly be put to work. He argued that art may have ceased to move in a linear developmental fashion but that it may now be moving laterally, out into the world. He also postulated that something was happening, he couldn't put his finger on it, but something has been stirring since the financial crisis, things have been beginning to change. If art could deterritorialize itself from the art market then it could become once more relevant, exciting and radical.

Whilst the morning panel gave a stark illustration of how much art had become decoupled from theory, Lotringer gave a compelling presentation on why theory was still relevant for art. A consensus was perhaps reached that the love affair between the theoretical and artistic discourses was often based upon a mutual misunderstanding and need for legitimation and that it progressed further and faster into the realms of hype than was ever advisable. What both talks, despite their distinctly differing positions, appeared to agree upon was the enduring relevance of theory in the art world, not necessarily as a direct source of material for artists themselves but as a resonance that enriches the interpretation of their works. With some caveats, based largely upon better understanding and seeing each discipline for what it is rather than making generalised assumptions, then it could be that the partnership is back on. It seems to me that the critics of postmodern theory ultimately take a Postmodern approach to that criticism: they attack it with an essentially deconstructionist argument, claiming that it has become an authoritarian metanarrative in itself. To me it therefore seems unlikely that you can kill off a theory by attacking it with

its own theory and if anything this merely shows just how deeply the postmodern mindset penetrates our psyche.

I used the time between the talks, aside from a brief detour into over-priced sandwich territory, to take a *dérive* around the fair and to essentially make my own mind up on the issue by looking at the work directly. There had been some talk in the press that the fair was more austere this year, plenty of monochrome and grey, a more subdued Frieze they claimed, but that was clearly just a marketing angle. Artists have always mimicked the lifestyles of their patrons and much of the work on show struck me as just that, exercises in novelty, flattery and distraction - a spectacle if you will. So much for the austerity, there was the neon and the gloss and the flickering screens indeed there was what appeared to be the distinct current of a new aestheticism, an art that very much existed for its own sake. The result was much of what Lotringer termed 'glitz and blitz' without a great deal of substance. I was reminded of the controversial work of Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Here at the Frieze Art Fair we had entered the realm of hyperreal simulacra, 'signs without referents, empty, senseless, absurd and elliptical signs'. This was the culture war that did not take place, an art disneyland. Strangely enough I am no great fan of painting but I felt it was on the whole paintings that were most compelling works at the fair. Perhaps they are the genre most suited to be shown in such conditions, most accessible and most swiftly decodable (owing to the years of practice) from the overwhelming mass of works, decoding them above all other genres was simply easier in this context and so the least engagement was required with them. This in itself is an indictment of the fair as a context for art: this is no place for engagement, this is show business.

There was the self-conscious window-dressing of the Frieze Projects, many of which were peripheral attempts at engaging with social or political concepts. I actually enjoyed this aspect of the fair the most as it gave an audience a real opportunity to engage with works of greater depth and wider reach. I am not surprised however, I would not have expected Frieze to do anything else, radical politics sits somewhat embarrassingly alongside the capitalist free for all, the falsely inflated glamour and prices of the main stands. Hence such material is mainly relegated to the likes of these fringe-style projects (even if the irony of films dealing with the financial crisis and works deconstructing commodity exchange being sponsored by Cartier is slightly eyebrow-raising).

I also found more interest in a few of the artists from the Frame section of the show (the area Frieze generously claimed they were giving over to younger dealers and less well known artists in order to conceal the weak market and fewer exhibitors. A great way to fill space without detracting from the value of your main brand - stick the galleries not 'exclusive' enough for the main fair round the back with some fake lo-fi, cardboard signage). Some of the artists displayed here seemed willing to engage more deeply with audiences and issues, the fact that these were solo presentations no doubt helped. I also got the impression that this area was less about making sales and more about showcasing talent and as such provided a more rewarding and less showy experience for the viewer. I particularly enjoyed Ida Ekblad's ephemeral assemblages, Aurelien Gamboni and Mike Bouchet's varying installations and Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor's collaborative and politically engaged works. Vatamanu and Tudor's ironic banner 'Long Live and Thrive Capitalism' perfectly captured the spirit of this year's Frieze for me, springing back glibly in the wake of its perilous state last year. This underlines the fact that ultimately whatever I, or even Sylvère Lotringer, may think Frieze will go on doing what its doing, perhaps with the occasional nod, in the form of peripheral projects, in the direction of something vaguely engaging whilst continuing to rake in the millions from a still over-inflated market. It is an art world inhabiting the symbolic architecture of the hyperreal and it will take more

than the biggest financial crisis for seventy years to demolish this edifice.

So is postmodernist art over? From my excursions around the fair it would seem not, however the issue is as ever more complex and the answer becomes clearer when we define what we mean by postmodernist art. There is essentially a difference between postmodernism as a genre of art and postmodern as a cultural paradigm. If by the question we mean is art that directly engages with postmodern theory as a source material still as relevant as it once was, then the answer is likely to be no. Postmodern theory is no longer the fashionable inspiration behind much of today's more exciting work. However if we mean is the contemporary art of today essentially and intrinsically postmodern then the answer must be yes. The work of today inherently typifies and expresses the postmodern condition and as such postmodern theory provides an effective model for its analysis. Perhaps all of this is academic, if we were to go back to a traditional Marxist approach then perhaps both postmodern theory and art are merely reflexive symptoms of the economic conditions of late capitalism and so any discussion of the conscious adoption of this or that strategy on behalf of art or theory is futile. However if Lotringer is right, and I hope that he is, if something, some as yet undefined change is coming, then perhaps this type of art has had its day. I would agree there is *something* in the air at the moment but whether it will come to anything or whether it will fizzle out and evaporate as so many promising new hopes tend to do remains to be seen.

Perhaps when they write the theory of whatever paradigm succeeds this one they will say that postmodernism ended on the 15th September 2008. This was the day that Lehman Brothers collapsed, mortally wounding the crunched and discredited neoliberal consensus that had reigned for the past thirty years. Meanwhile over at Sotheby's, that UK artist most synonymous in the public mind with a postmodernist genre of art, Damien Hirst was holding an audacious auction. Amidst the diamonds and the memento mori Hirst was fiddling his prices whilst Rome burnt, his dealers allegedly propping up the binding whilst stock markets tumbled down. The wheels had come off this bandwagon and they knew it.

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