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ART CRITICISM AND THE APPEAL TO DEMOCRACY

Craig Peariso

ROUTLEDGE

Art Criticism and the Appeal to Democracy

While engaging with the interconnected concepts of communication and democracy in postwar American and European art criticism, this book provides a historical assessment of how these two related trends pertain to modern and contemporary art theory and practice.

Looking at both the history of artistic and curatorial efforts to "empower" viewers by facilitating different forms of audience participation, and the critical attempts to evaluate the success or failure of these efforts, the author looks to historicize the investment of each in both the idea of communication and the language of democracy. Beginning with experiments in exhibition design in the years immediately following World War II, and continuing on to address the fascination with digital media and "Relational Aesthetics" at the turn of the millennium, this study seeks to understand just why those writing from the (self-proclaimed) centers of Western democracy insist on presenting democracy and the empowerment of the individual as the radical import of contemporary art.

This book is ideal for researchers interested in the History of Art, Art Criticism, Philosophy, Cultural Studies, and Politics.

Craig Peariso is Professor of the History of Art and Visual Culture at Boise State University, USA.

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For Sarah and Sophia

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Introduction

Communication, Technology, and the Appeal to Democracy

In his 1976 book *Architecture and Utopia*, Italian critic Manfredo Tafuri takes up Thomas Jefferson's designs for Monticello and the University of Virginia, explaining that, while revered as a statesman for his commitment to democracy, Jefferson's work embodied the "ambiguous conscience of American intellectuals, who acknowledge the foundations of the democratic system while opposing its concrete manifestations."[1] Though Jefferson's designs had often been interpreted as monuments to democracy, Tafuri argues, their repeated appeals to agrarianism ultimately suggest a profound discomfort with the "logical economic consequences of democracy": "capitalist competition, urban development, and the birth and growth of an urban proletariat."[2] Though my own interests lie neither in early America nor in architectural history, Tafuri's critique is nevertheless a useful place to begin. Democracy, after all, has been an incredibly common theme in postwar art and criticism. Unlike Tafuri, however, most, if not all, of those who invoke that notion in relation to the visual arts have shied away from any consideration of the "concrete manifestations" of the concept. Rather, it has served as something of a political aspiration. From the 1950s, when Bauhaus emigrees and others looked to devise exhibitions and forms of art that would prompt viewers to draw their own conclusions from a set of pre-selected images and sounds, to the 1990s and early 2000s, when critics like Nicolas Bourriaud, Claire Bishop, and others debated the political implications of different forms of audience participation, one finds repeated claims for the democratic significance of works of contemporary art. Instead of considering the "logical economic consequences of democracy," critics instead have devoted their efforts to determining which works most closely approximate the ideal. Democracy, they seem to have agreed, is an indisputable good. And as much as that position is understandable when articulated by those who fled Nazi Germany, was democracy still a self-evidently noble goal in America and Western Europe at the turn of the millennium and beyond? Why would these artists and critics, writing from the centers of liberal democracy, have felt the project of democracy to be so urgent? Just what is it that leads them, time and again, to find it at the heart of emerging modes of aesthetic practice?

Questions about this apparent critical commitment to the ideal of democracy lie at the heart of this study, but it is important to understand that the turn to democracy as a political ideal has unfolded alongside an increasing fascination with new theories and technologies of communication. As media historian Fred Turner and political theorist Jodi Dean have both shown repeatedly, the increasing emphasis on democracy in Western societies has been inseparable from the development, in the decades since World War II, of new, and more rapid, means of communication.[3] As virtually any resident of the United States and Western Europe can attest, over the last three decades, we have been almost

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constantly reminded that new technologies are providing us with more and more ways of voicing our opinions and connecting with others who might share them, thus empowering us as individuals and making true political equality possible. Turner traces this "digital utopianism" back to the 1950s, suggesting that theories of communication and information developed during the Cold War—from Norbert Wiener's writings on cybernetics to the ideas that came out of New Jersey's Bell Labs—laid much of the groundwork for our current fascination with communications technologies. While many are familiar with the grand visions of a society transformed by electronic and digital media presented by people like Marshall McLuhan, Stewart Brand, Nicholas Negroponte, and others, the influence of these ideas on the arts has only more recently begun to receive attention.[4] Up to this point, however, the connection between this interest in communication and the rhetoric of democracy has remained unmarked in that field. For me, therefore, it seems urgent that we begin to consider whether the regular conjunction within the arts of hopes for improving both communication and democracy, for improving democracy by improving communication, is in fact the mark of a progressive politics, or as an indicator of what Dean describes as a broader "neoliberal fantasy."[5] Taking up this pair of critical fascinations, the chapters that follow ask not only whether improved communication, whether interpersonal or technological, is the secret to an improved democracy, but also, and perhaps more importantly, if democracy is really the panacea so many have assumed.

As it should be clear, the work that follows will not necessarily offer what one expects from an art historical text. There will, of course, be references to artists and works of art. My primary concern, however, is not so much the works themselves but the way we discuss them. For that reason, the bulk of this work will be far more concerned with readings of critical texts than with analyses of works by any particular artist or movement. From the Cold War examples discussed in the opening chapter to the later discussions of "new media" and participatory art, the focus of my investigation will be not the objects and images, but the political significance different critical analyses have found in them. What emerges from this is the story of a concept and its deployment in different social and historical circumstances. Where, in the early years of the Cold War, the appeal to democracy is understandable given that many of the artists and thinkers in question had lived through the rise of fascism in Europe, by the 1980s and '90s, those appeals take on a different valence—one might say an irony—coming, as they do, from the centers of Western democracy. In short, it is that irony that sparked this study. Why, that is, would critics living under democracy at the turn of the twenty-first century write of democracy with an almost utopian longing? For most, the answer to that question will seem obvious: those living in purportedly democratic societies at the turn of the millennium have called for a renewed commitment to democracy because it had, in practice, become corrupted. Governments had ceased to be guided by the will of the people, and for that reason, a real correction was needed.

Yet, while that answer may be satisfactory for many, what draws me to this question is the way that the research for my previous book, *Radical Theatrics*, complicates any easy assumptions about the restorative effects of increased democracy.[6] As recounted there, the late-1960s writings of Herbert Marcuse raised serious questions about the value of personal expression and open political disagreement at the very moment many associate most closely with those ideals. Most of what follows is not concerned with the 1960s, of course, but ideas of personal expression and individual contribution structure the rhetoric all the same. As a way of leading into these discussions, then, I have chosen not to summarize my previous work, but to focus, instead, on the kinds of arguments of

which Marcuse would have been critical. From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, sociologists, philosophers, activists, and others all argued for a new emphasis on interpersonal communication as an essential part of any effort to move beyond what they saw as a vexing social and political predicament. Decades before critics celebrated the personal empowerment inherent in the "digital revolution," or suggested that the restoration of a lost social bond was vital to the project of democracy, C. Wright Mills, Jurgen Habermas, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and others made the rhetorical link between communication and democracy explicit. To establish the critical stakes of what follows, then, it is their work that constitutes the focus of this introduction.

Before turning to the works of those thinkers and activists, I would like to begin with the art critic who illustrated, albeit unintentionally, just how much the prevailing attitude toward processes of communication changed after the war. In 1939, Clement Greenberg had famously explained the modern avant-garde as the dialectical complement to the mass culture he derisively labeled "kitsch."[7] While this was not necessarily a new move in the realm of critical theory, Greenberg's opening paragraph makes clear the type of thinking he hoped to counteract.[8] Where some might struggle to offer a cohesive view of a culture that presents such apparently divergent forms, or simply dismiss mass culture as unworthy of real attention, he explains, seeing the two as inseparable might ultimately offer a better understanding of the historical predicament facing Western culture. Both, after all, were products of the industrial era, responses to the new needs and demands that arose in European urban centers of the nineteenth century. "Kitsch," for example, catered to those who had only more recently moved to the cities seeking work. Their relocation, Greenberg notes, resulted in a dramatic rise in literacy (in one of several exaggerations found in the essay, he uses the phrase "universal literacy," though, obviously, that goal remains elusive even to this day). This meant that, in contrast to earlier periods, when culture was restricted to those few who could read and write, the redistribution of the population that followed industrialization necessitated a culture accessible to a much broader audience. And, as the experience of living and working in the city was undeniably different than that of a rural existence adapted to agricultural rhythms, the various forms of folk culture that had been so common in earlier centuries could no longer perform that role. They simply did not speak to city dwellers. The growing working-class population of the nineteenth century needed some form of diversion, therefore, but wanted neither traditional forms of painting and sculpture—luxuries that had never been made with them in mind—nor folk culture. This was the situation that had given rise to "kitsch," a culture that, Greenberg explains, took existing cultural traditions and converted their basic strategies and processes into something like a system, enabling the manufacture of easily assimilable products. Those who might say that the art of earlier generations eventually trickles down, as it were, to become the popular art of the day were thus half correct. But what that assertion misses, according to Greenberg, is just how profoundly those earlier works are transformed in the process. No longer living artworks, they become products, commodities existing only for the purpose of exchange. All of this led to one of the most famous (and most famously condescending) paragraphs of the essay, in which he writes,

> Kitsch, is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time.[9]