



Dave Hickey © Eric Minh Swenson

Everyone's a critic

DAVID HAWKES

Dave Hickey

WASTED WORDS

The essential Dave Hickey online compilation
586pp. PCP Press. £29.03 (US \$42.95).
978 1 5172 8710 8
Julia Friedman, editor

DUST BUNNIES

Dave Hickey's online aphorisms
124pp. PCP Press. £10.12 (US \$14.95).
978 1 5232 7266 2
Dave Hickey

25 WOMEN

Essays on their art
192pp. University of Chicago Press.
978 0 226 33315 1

Dave Hickey has always been a meta-critic, eager to speculate on the nature and function of criticism in the very act of employing it. A master of the aphorism whose wit can sometimes mask his profundity, he packed considerable theoretical insight into the very title of his collection of essays, *Air Guitar* (1997). The phrase refers to the head-banging, hair-whipping dance performed by teenage heavy metal fans in somewhat ludicrous and pathetic imitation of their heroes who play with real instruments. It wittily captures Hickey's ironic, self-deprecating attitude towards his craft. These new books continue Hickey's investigation into the nature and sources of critical authority. They are best understood as reflections on Marshall McLuhan's famous epigram, "the medium is the message". The medium in question here is the internet, specifically Facebook, and the

messages are those of postmodernism: the triumph of image over identity, the dominance of representation over reality, and the demise of rational judgement in the evaluation of art.

Social media has been hailed as embodying McLuhan's "electric *agora*", a decentralized, non-hierarchical model of discourse in which, as McLuhan put it, "dialogue supersedes the lecture". Throughout *Wasted Words*, we are presented with Hickey's daily threads, which are allowed to meander through their courses and reprinted in their entirety. Hickey's own comments are privileged only by bold type, and the threads are printed in backwards chronology, as on a computer screen. The results range from the sublime to the ridiculous, as Hickey and several interlocutors of varying taste and intelligence banter and rant about art, money, politics, sex and above all the nature of the medium on which they are engaged. A "companion volume", *Dust Bunnies*, consists of Hickey's most memorable epigrams isolated from their context.

Both books modernize the aphoristic tradition in the manner of Nietzsche and Adorno: pithy observations of quotidian minutiae replace totalizing claims to absolute truth. Gnomish generalizations such as "Language is a prosthetic we all share" or "Boredom is the mother of progress" jostle entertainingly with flashes of insight into particular people and places: "Dublin is square, until you get drunk", "RuPaul is the best god". It might seem that such texts vindicate the idealistic view of social media as a newly democratic mode of discourse, in which neither reputational nor institutional authority can wield their traditional heft. Technology may appear to have swept away the intellectual elitism that distorted the twentieth-century art world, leaving us free to enjoy what Julia Friedman, the editor of *Wasted Words*, calls "the transition from a critical to a post-critical society".

These assumptions harmonize perfectly with Hickey's long-standing critique of academic elitism. The publication of texts like these seems to vindicate his protests against the influence of "tenured theory professors", and perhaps he ought to be happy. Yet these transcripts actually reveal this to be very far from the case. Hickey laments the condition of the contemporary art world with sincere passion: "Did any of you whiz-kids out there see this trainwreck coming? – the dissolution of critical discourse, the apotheosis of the hedge fund oligarchy, and the proliferation of relational aesthetics . . .". Of course none of his interlocutors did see it coming and, more to the point, neither did Hickey. We might profitably ask, why not?

Hickey's intellectual hero is J. L. Austin, the English analytic philosopher who developed the concept of the "performative" statement. A "performative" is a sign or series of signs that achieves an objective effect in the real world, as when a priest declares a couple married. In Derrida's post-structuralist reading of Austin, all signs become performative, so that our experience of reality itself is constructed through systems of representation. These systems can be linguistic, semiotic or

aesthetic; today they are increasingly financial in nature. As philosophers like Elie Ayache and Arjun Appadurai have shown, the financial instruments known as “derivatives,” which have recently achieved predominance over the financial sector and thus over the entire economy, are fundamentally nothing more than performative signs with no reference in any material or real world beyond the realm of representation. In the twenty-first century, such media of representation have achieved practical power over the reality they once claimed to represent.

Postmodernists see a liberating potential in performative signs because they do not refer to any reality beyond themselves, and thus allegedly offer freedom from the constraints of *logos*, identity and similar relics of patriarchal essentialism. Hickey likes to emphasize this discussion’s theological origins, connecting artists such as Ed Ruscha and Robert Mapplethorpe with the “canonical Catholic” tradition of “using the incarnate word, which is not the referential word but the word as flesh”. In *Wasted Words* he even announces a genealogical stake in the fight: “My quadruple great grandfather was Jonathan Edwards . . . I keep trying to clean up the mess he made”. Hickey is a self-declared *iconodule*: he is politically and ethically committed to the efficacious power of images.

In the late twentieth century, Hickey did much to advance the epistemological and ethical claims of performative representation. He made his name with *The Invisible Dragon* (1993), a collection of trenchant arguments for the efficacious power of visual beauty. In that book, Hickey claimed that the very existence of criticism is founded on the assumption that signs do things: “if images don’t *do* anything in this culture, if they have not *done* anything, then why are we sitting here at the twilight of the twentieth century talking about them . . . the efficacy of images must be the cause of criticism and not its consequence, the subject of criticism and not its object”. Why should such a committed advocate of performativity lament the current state of the art world, or decry the postmodern condition in general?

The root of the problem lies in Hickey’s disarming confession that “I came out of the dealer world and that is still how I think”. While his dual role as a prominent dealer and star critic positions him perfectly to reflect on the intersection of economics and aesthetics, it also blinds him to the homology between aesthetic idolatry and commodity fetishism. He recalls the art world of the 1950s and 60s as being “driven by the market”, with aesthetic value largely determined by market-oriented critics such as himself. In the late 60s, however, “we had a little reformation privileging museums over dealers and universities over apprenticeship, a vast shift in the structure of cultural authority”. This “reformation” was iconoclastic in spirit, imposed by a puritanical professoriat which scorned the market’s imposition of exchange value: “these hierarchical authority figures selling a non-hierarchical ideology in a very hierarchical way”.

Throughout the 90s, Hickey labored lustily to expropriate the cultural capital of such “elitist” authorities, and his campaign was highly successful. By 2007 he could remark that “in twenty years we’ve gone from a totally academicized art world to a totally commercialized art world”. Yet these books suggest that Hickey now regards that victory as pyrrhic. For example, he has written with approval of Andy Warhol’s integration of marketing and advertising into aesthetics. In

2007 he described the resulting invasion of character by persona as part of the aesthetic effect: “most famous artists are created by their work *and* the idea of them as a character, and if they’re smart and ambitious, they reinforce that character because they want to win”.

Wasted Words confronts the consequences of that position a decade later. As one of Hickey’s interlocutors points out, “when you guys are gone the world will be run by a generation of people born into branding as if it’s a personal expression”. This represents the point at which economic representation overrides essential identity, as opposed to supplementing it. Now commerce ceases to be merely an influence on aesthetics, as in Warhol. Instead, the market and the art world merge into a unity. When a contemporary artist uses Facebook or Instagram to spread his reputation, he is not promoting something outside the promotion itself. The advertisement is also the advertised. The medium is the message.

Hickey’s suspicion of such developments is partly born of self-interest. In a “post-critical age”, after all, everyone’s a critic, and Dave Hickey is just one cranky internet persona among many others, as his impertinent Facebook friends are quick to remind him. Although he declares with apparent gusto that there are “no stars on Social Media”, Hickey is understandably reluctant to surrender his hard-earned, richly deserved cultural authority to a bunch of nutters on the net. He frequently refers to Michel Foucault’s image of the internal policeman, the fascist in the psyche, who scrutinizes and judges our thoughts and actions as if from a prison guard tower. Foucault and his followers identified this interior totalitarian with *logos* and its manifestations as reason and conscience. Against this oppressor they advance the forces of performative representation, which constitutes its own truth and does not refer to any transcendent signified.

Yet the conclusion to which these books point is that, in the “post-critical age”, *logos* is no longer the enemy. Indeed, *logos* has been overthrown by *eidola*. The manipulation of persona, brands, multiple identities and images that the internet simultaneously reflects and facilitates does not have a liberating but an oppressive effect. Online discussion and perhaps even thought are constrained by interior inhibitions: peer pressure, group think, public shaming, fear of political incorrectness. External sources of authority are eliminated, as social media abolish distinctions between author and reader, critic and consumer, teacher and student. But the overt, top-down censorship of the tyrant is replaced by the more insidious, implicit, censorship of the self.

Hickey certainly knows how to provoke such self-censorship among his Facebook friends. A predictable point of contention arises over the gendered language which he uses with unreconstructed abandon. He adopts a notably uncompromising persona during this discussion. A poster known as “Mia P” mildly enquires “why preface artist with ‘woman’”, to be met with a withering flame from Hickey: “Jesus; Mia. Lighten the fuck up”. This inevitably provokes the intervention of the thread’s male “white knights”, one of whom “had to shuffle over to express my dismay at the ‘woman artist’ title. It’s of a vintage that’s gone sour, Dave. That modifier says more about the person using it than the modified”.

At such moments we begin to understand these threads as artworks in themselves, compositions or perhaps improvisations, with Hickey as their author. The reactions of his public are assimilated into his art. The same is true of *25 Women*, which consists of essays by Hickey on selected contemporary female artists. Hickey pulls off a remarkable triple bluff here. By devoting a book to female artists he naturally piques curiosity about his agenda. In the introduction, however, he claims “there is no agenda here”. His subjects’ gender is of no special significance to their art, he claims, and his only motive for writing such a book is that “damn it, I *like* women”. Yet the book he has produced makes gender absolutely central to aesthetic practice and evaluation. Hickey interprets each of the women discussed as exponents of the performative. He portrays them as advocating through their art the same postmodern virtues for which he argues in his criticism: “a bunch of women and queers . . . recreating a redeemed image of the protean self in a fluid culture – as an image of an image of an image”.

The cumulative effect of these commentaries is to construct an *écriture féminine* for the visual arts. An assemblage of movie posters by Alexis Smith summarizes its message with a quotation from John Barrymore: “I don’t live, I act”. The odd, de-contextualized domestic objects of Vilja Celmis exemplify Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s “nomad art”, while the distorted documentary photographs of Sarah Charlesworth inculcate the basic postmodern propositions that “logic is a branch of ethics, and ethics a branch of aesthetics” by forcing

the viewer to confront the inevitably subjective construction of meaning in an image.

Vanessa Beecroft’s work succeeds because of “the mystery and opacity of women”, while Barbara Bloom is admirable for her “obsession with the fluidity and slipperiness of the relation between names and the things they represent, between mediums and messages”. The influence of literary theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray is largely unspoken here; it nevertheless dominates Hickey’s conception of the female artist.

Hickey’s hostility to the academy and his positing of the market as a preferable determinant of aesthetic value are still in evidence in these books. Yet with the contrariness of a habitual rebel, he recoils from those positions to the extent that they have triumphed. His prose is tinged with dismay, verging on despair, at the ethical and aesthetic implications of hyperreality. Although the medium dictates that its argument is polyphonic and sometimes circular, *Wasted Words* nevertheless contains an unmistakable development in mood. In the early entries, Hickey knocks out, with happy approbation, postmodern clichés like “why not shallow when there is no such thing as depth”. Several thousand posts later, having assimilated the message of the medium, his mood has soured: “I tried to be serious, but FB is a Potemkin Village. Nothing behind the façade”. Wasn’t that supposed to be a good thing?