

Criticism/or/Between the Lines

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February 1979

The following notes were prepared for publication after I participated in a symposium on art criticism organized by John Goodyear and held at Douglass College, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, April 20, 1978. The panelists were Joseph Kosuth, Rosalind Krauss, Morse Peckham, Alan Coleman, Leon Golub and Howardena Pindell, with Donald Kuspit as moderator. The following questions were addressed to the panelists by Kuspit prior to the symposium:

Is the critic a legitimator of values? The artist carries the burden of his/her own justification, but what is the role of the critic in this? Is it possible to eliminate any hierarchical relationship between artists and critics—to eliminate any residue of feeling that the one is better than the other? The working relationship between the artist and the critic: how does one deal with the possible promotional value of criticism, both bad and good, favorable and unfavorable to the artist? Does criticism exist as a thing in itself, can it exist as such, or does it only function along with the works with which it deals?

The effects of criticism on the art work are rarely confronted. Somehow the examination of any activity in the art community, criticism being only one, is taboo, "tasteless and crude." I decided to tackle the subject despite the anticipated disapproval, motivated partly by some of my riper experiences in the art world (during my exhibition at A.I.R. Gallery in 1973 a young white male critic confided to me that he hesitated to review my exhibition because he heard that I was black—and told me how relieved he was to find that the work was good). In spite of some experiences to the contrary, I recognize that a few critics, and even a few dealers, those who pioneer in showing work considered "difficult" by the "art world," do attempt to be open and fair and aware of their own motivations. It is to the remainder that I direct the following.

I have decided to take a rather subjective approach to the questions presented. When I read through the topics to be discussed, my first response was a feeling of negativity towards

criticism and the institution of art writing as it is manifested in art periodicals, mass-produced art books, and newspapers. From my vantage point as an artist, I find that critics usually view an artist's work while it is on exhibition in a gallery and, occasionally, while it is on view in a public institution. A number of critics do not as a rule go to the studio independent of an exhibition. More often than not the gallery exhibition brings them forth, prodded by the dealer or the artist, or coaxed by financial necessity...the need to earn money or "brownie points" by having reviews or articles published. The critic is therefore viewing work which has been preselected by the dealer. A gallery is a business. Making money is its primary objective. The critic is used by the dealer as a means of endorsing the "product" (work of art), ripening it for sale. (If a reproduction of a work appears in a review or an article, it is often sold as a result of the endorsement.) Criticism is contaminated by the fact that it is used to market a "product." A parallel in the non-art world can be seen in the subtle manipulations utilized by advertising to create a need for a particular product in order to increase profits. The critic is therefore used as a means of "hyping" an artist's work.

A number of unconscious factors determine what is marketable and what is not, who is written about and who is not. These unconscious factors include learned attitudes reflecting the negative and positive fantasies and taboos of a culture. In this culture work by white males is more marketable than work by non-white males or females. (Occasionally "honorary status" is given to a non-white if a market is temporarily created for the work.)

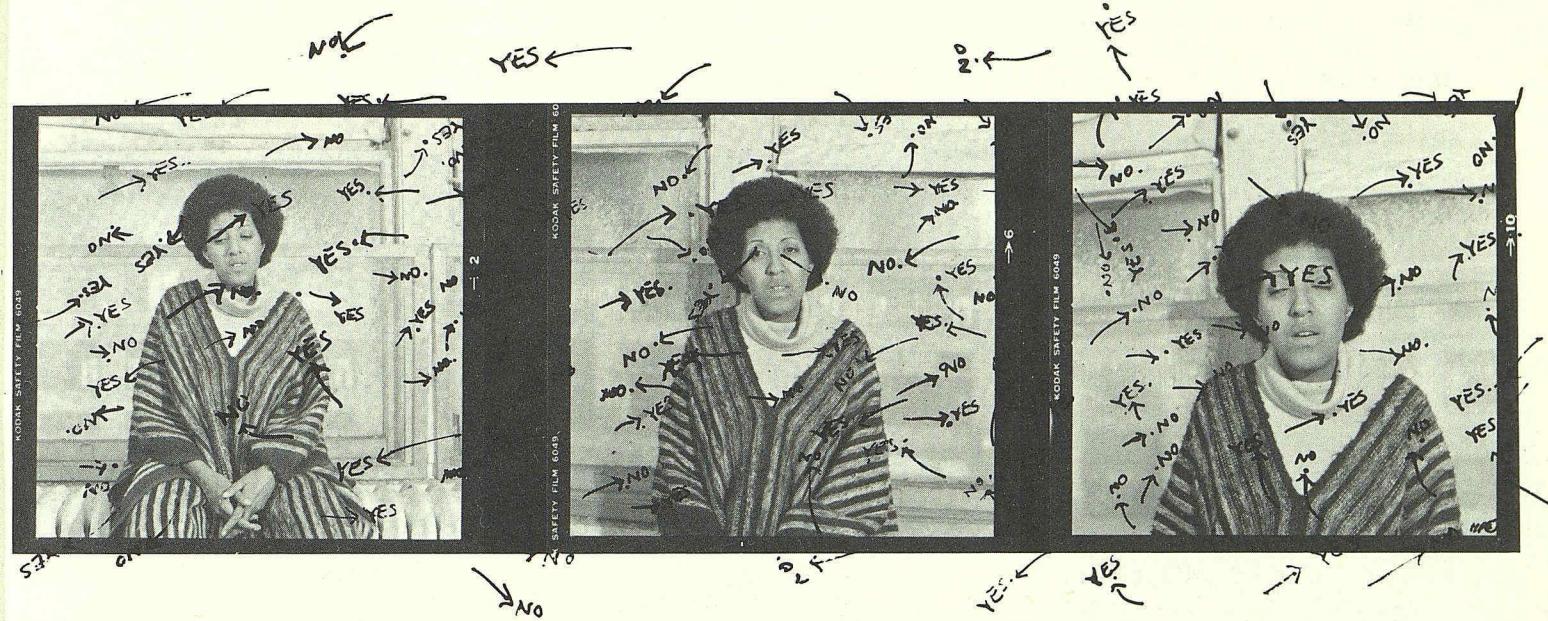
The needs of the buyer are based on class, caste, fashion, and personal preference, guided by unconscious factors. The buyer will tend to select that which appears to enhance self-image and improve status. The dealer is influenced by the needs of the buyer. The critic is used to "blessing" this interchange and making it appear on the surface to be something other than what it is...a form of barter with hidden incentives. The critic is often a pawn, although he/

she attempts to cloak the transaction in elaborate syntax in an effort to fabricate an artificial "moral" detachment. Critics rarely examine their own unconscious needs and goals for status or power, needs which seem to keep them locked into writing about what has already been approved and sifted by the dealers, avoiding controversy or controversial artists.

A simplistic allegory about the system could be set forth: Some critics are gourmets (others, gourmands) who prefer to eat at the best restaurants (i.e., galleries). The maître d' (i.e., dealer) knows the critic by name. Flattered by this recognition the critic accepts the menu (gallery staple) which lists the special of the day (current exhibition). The critic may praise or damn the cooking but returns for more. The critic rarely cooks at home (goes outside the established system to see work).

The "mongrel" hordes represent the taboos and negative fantasies of the tribe. The "mongrel" hordes, or alternate clans, are made up of men *and* women, shamans and bards who are non-white or whites who have been outlawed by the main clan. Honorary status in the main clan may be achieved through death or a temporary economic demand.

I would like to address a few of the topics suggested by our moderator. "The working relationship between the artist and the critic: how does one deal with its promotional aspects?" How is the critic influenced to select work to write about? It would be enlightening if a test could be devised to study how critics are influenced on a subconscious level by setting up a method for reviewing the same work in different settings. What would the critic say about the same artist who exhibits his/her work in a



Howdena Pindell. Yes—No. Pen and ink on acetate. Photo credit: Amy Stromstem.

One could see the art world and the critic's place within that world through the following: The art world is a neolithic, loose association of clans within a larger tribe. The clan chiefs are the dealers. The critics are the bards who sing the praises of the clan and its leaders. Artists are the shamans whose talents are sold through the chief. Rituals, reinforcement of the tribal structure, are performed in huts or compounds designated for this purpose (private and public institutions, auction houses).

Advancement within the clan to higher rank is predominantly achieved through strategies dependent on the buddy system and nepotism. White males hold most of the prominent positions as shamans, bards and chiefs; however, white females may be elevated to a position of prominence through personal financial status, ties of kinship or temporary bonds of affection.

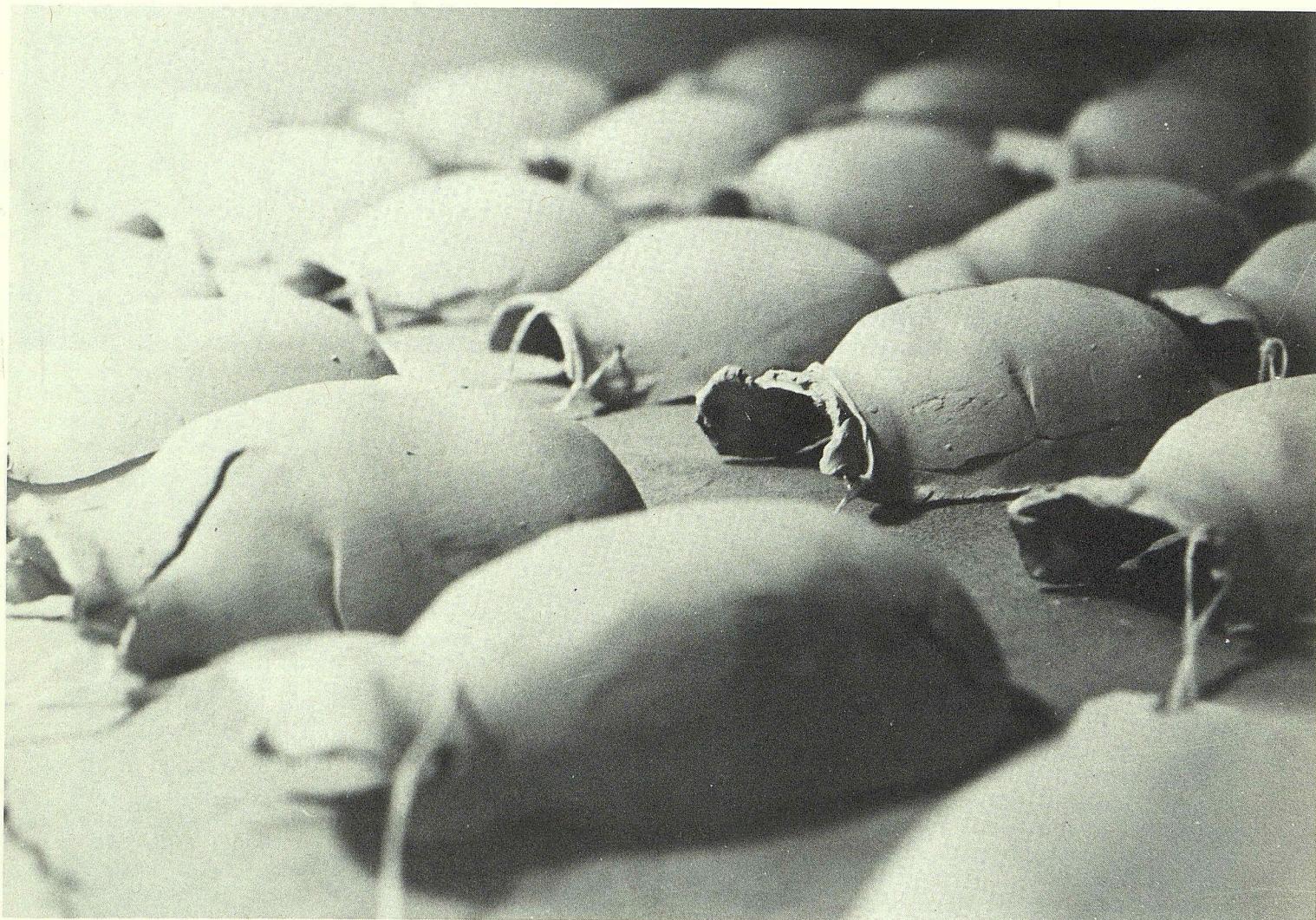
museum space, an alternate space, or in the studio; in a blue-chip gallery or one not-so-blue-chip; in New York or out of New York? The variables are infinite. It would be additionally enlightening to see how the same work would be reviewed where the gender and race of the artist are known, and not known, as well as the artist's financial status (i.e., whether the work sells or doesn't sell). A fascinating study is discussed in Vance Packard's *Hidden Persuaders*. A study of behavior and motivation revealed that the same product wrapped in different packages elicited responses such as "too strong" in a package of one color and shape, "inadequate" in another package, and "wonderful" in yet another. Racial types used to display products were found to cause the viewer to project onto the product his/her positive or negative fantasies and expectations. A

brown or black model elicited in Americans suspicion and a generally negative response to the product. The same product displayed with a blond Germanic type elicited in Americans a positive, warm, supportive response. How does the positive or negative halo effect distort a critic's judgment? (One wonders why there has never been a scientific objective study of the hidden aspects of the art world.) Who is the critic writing for and how is the critic affected and infected by the prejudices of his/her unconscious?

"Is it possible to eliminate any hierarchical relationship between artists and critics...?" As long as critics allow themselves to be used to promote "products" and the "real estate value" of art, and as long as the major part of this dialogue takes place in magazines dependent on dealer advertising, a hierarchical relationship will continue. Artist is pitted against artist, thus creating an artificial need for the critic. The IRS, ironically, continues to promote this system by defining the artist as a "profes-

sional" or "hobbyist" depending on how much work is sold. A number of "great" artists sold few works in their lifetimes.

A possible solution would be the placing of critical writing in publications which are not controlled by advertising. The alternate periodical would allow the critic to go directly to the public. A new generation of critics would emerge, a group less given to nepotism, less meshed with the cocktail circuit or bedtime grapevine, more conscious of their own limitations and prejudices. The system, itself, could be influenced by the emergence of a new buying public as increasing amounts of money, through greater employment opportunities, are made available to non-whites and women. New demands could be made on the dealer, which would force the critic, locked into the system, to be influenced by default. Artists could change the structure by working and showing in a manner which circumvents the gallery, leaving it with less power over the artist or the critic.



Gloria Rayl. *Untitled*. Clay masks pulled from manikin heads, suggests the tagging and discarding of Third World people.