

The Artist/Critic of the Eighties, Part One: Peter Halley and Stephen Westfall

by Jeanne Siegel

In thinking about the artist/critic, questions come immediately to mind. Is there something special that the artist as critic has to contribute? Does the artist/critic effect a specific methodology? What is the relationship between the writing and the art? How does the criticism relate to the broader context of the '80s critical thought?

There are a number of young artists today who are functioning as critics (by this I mean those who have been writing fairly consistently on contemporary art for the art periodicals). When one examines them as a group, what seems to be characteristic is diversity in approach, both in style and methodology—a diversity which, I suppose, could be predicted in light of the situation in the art itself. It is in contrast, for example, to criticism by artists in the '60s when young Minimalists such as Judd, Morris, Bochner, and Graham were writing. They wrote in a stylistically minimal mode and argued for art that related to their own work. Smithson was the first to step away to develop paraliterary texts in the late '60s.

Peter Halley represents one pole of this discourse. He prefers to be thought of as a theorist rather than a critic. Two articles in 1981 introduced his career as a writer. In the first, "Beat, Minimalism, New Wave, and Robert Smithson (Arts magazine, May 1981), Halley argued that contrary to New Wave art thinking, all of the above share concerns with the same issue: "America's fascination-repulsion for its shallow cultural roots and its vulnerability to the impact of technological change." Despite different responses, they share a preoccupation with post-industrial culture, a fascination with media images rather than a nostalgic conception of nature to inform them on reality. Pointing out the importance of printed matter to the Minimalists and New Wavers like the Talking Heads, Halley relates these groups to Beat writers Ginsberg and Burroughs obsessed with urban life, the terrifying products of science and industry, and the structure of society.

According to Halley, Smithson's genius lay in his ability to go beyond the initial statements of Minimalism, serving as a link between these seemingly different movements. What he particularly responded to was Smithson's insistence on the fact that artists must be conscious of the motivations that guide their work, of their role in society, and of the role their work plays. Artists, Smithson said, must try to describe what they believe to be the nature of reality and not be seduced into creating escapist "dream worlds" which he tied to reactionary political values. Finally, Halley has adopted Smithson's position that the artist must acquire a coherent methodology.

In this first article are the seeds of Halley's theoretical position: his belief in intertextuality which elucidates art developments through connections to other cultural, scientific, and political directions; his stress on the shift from nature to culture--a post-industrial culture which focuses on technology and urban life; his ironic atti-

tude toward art, conceiving it as a simulacrum rather than real. To establish these principles, Halley had a driving need to understand what had changed in art thinking from the 1960s through the '70s to the '80s.

In his second article, "Against Post-Modernism, Reconsidering Ortega" (Arts Magazine, November 1981), Halley extends this historical investigation to explore the relationships between 19th and 20th century thought. He spells out more clearly his own political/theoretical positions by supporting Ortega's modernism in contrast to Greenberg's which "provided a positivist, determinist theory to support American art" that was tied to the values of both 19th century capitalism and 19th century Marxism. For Ortega, the primary intellectual force in the 20th century is relativism which, premised on doubt, requires political liberalism. It is anti-populist.

Halley wrote that Ortega's "new style," modernism, tends "to dehumanize art, to avoid living forms, to see the work of art as nothing but a work of art, to consider art as play and nothing else, to be essentially ironic, to beware of sham and hence to aspire to scrupulous realization, and to regard art as a thing of no transcending consequence." He validates the applicability of Ortega's theory by tying together artists of different persuasions on the basis of similar mechanisms of meaning rather than the unity of formal concerns. In the visual arts he cited Picasso, Duchamp, Jonas, Reinhardt, and Warhol as historical threads in this broader definition of Modernism, but he saw it most alive in contemporary music, where "irony and doubt to political and social issues" serve the purpose of preserving the possibility of liberal democracy.

Halley is against writing reviews. "I've never been really too interested in evaluating the quality of works of art, although I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing to do. I like the way Donald Judd does that in his critical writing--he makes it a radical form--but I never wanted to get involved in that. I try to do the opposite in that I try to talk about specific works of art as little as possible, which is a little perverse, because academically I was trained to concentrate on what is actually going on in the work."

Nevertheless, he did write a sustained piece on one painter, Ross Bleckner, in 1982, crediting Bleckner with a great deal of ideology in his paintings while locating him in a temporal/ideological/historical framework that speaks for Halley himself. Using '60s Op Art which tied Bauhaus formalism to the modernity of the American corporation as a symbol of the failure of positivism, Halley established Op as the sociology of the mid-Sixties that '80s artists like Bleckner as well as musical groups relived. He discussed Bleckner's ironic stance, lauding the artist's ability to make art in which the inconsequential and the transcendental coexist.

In "Nature and Culture" (Arts Magazine, September 1983)," Halley explored the underlying changes in culture as they are reflected in the art world from World War II to the present, explaining it in socio-political terms. This is his first attempt at sorting out the distinguishing characteristics of structuralist and post-structuralist thought, its influence on American culture and art, and its potential limitations. He touched on Baudrillard's theory of "simulation" which he would expand upon in his next piece.

"The Crisis in Geometry," (Arts Magazine, Summer 1984) comes closest to articulating Halley's views in ways discernible in his paintings. Here he questions to what purpose geometric form is put in our culture. He examines geometry in relation to its changing role in cultural history rather than as an a priori ideal of the mental process.

He separates today's use of geometry from both the formalists' (Constructivist and Neoplasticist) doctrine of form as form and from Minimalism's geometric form emp-

tied of its signifying function. Halley says that we are launched into a structuralist search for the veiled significances that the geometric sign may yield. "Why," he asks, "is modern society so obsessed with geometric form that for at least the last two centuries, we have striven to build and live in geometric environments of increasing complexity and exclusivity?"

He finds the answer to this question in Foucault's Discipline and Punishment and Baudrillard's Simulations, texts which he believes have influenced the production of geometric art and may aid in decoding the geometric work produced during these years of crisis. He presents Foucault's argument that space in the industrial society became geometrically differentiated and partitioned to establish orderly movement. These geometric patterns are ones of confinement and surveillance present in industrial society. In relating this to the art of the '70s, Halley sees it in opposition to the geometric mysticism of Mondrian, Malevich, Rothko, and Newman. It is relevant to the geometric art of the '70s because it reinterprets Minimalism's claim that it had achieved intellectual neutrality. Halley supports Post-Minimalism's confrontation between idealist geometry and the actual geometries of the industrial landscape, its proximity to Foucaultian critique in the introduction into sculpture of monuments as instruments of sado-masochistic confinement, threat, separation from reason, fictive ideological programs, awareness of power and violence.

He offers Baudrillard's text as relevant for the geometric work of the 1980s. These '80s artists, exemplified by Halley, are products of a post-industrial environment where the experience is not of factories but of subdivisions, not of production but of consumption, Foucaultian confinement has been transformed into Baudrillardian deterrence; the hard geometries of institutions have given way to the soft geometries of interstate highways, computers, and electronic entertainment.

Halley discusses the relevance of Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum which in the geometric art of the '80s has manifested itself in mocking the mechanisms of response that earlier art thought it had, namely, a transformative effect on society. He elaborates, discussing his own art in this context and separating it from other current media-oriented art.

JS: Can you discuss how these ideas relate to your own evolution?

PH: I was very interested in Minimalism and very interested in Pop art. But I felt that Minimalism especially was really to do with issues about social and industrial development and the modern landscape rather than being hermetic the way minimal artists thought it was. So wanted to transform some of those issues into a vocabulary where that connection becomes more explicit. I tried to take that simple geometry and transform it into figures such as jails and cells with smokestacks, and put it in a schematic landscape-type setting that would point to the connection between those configurations and actual configurations in the world. The jails came about as a way of describing the minimalist square as a confining structure. I thought if I put bars on the square, it would very quickly go from being a classical or pure element to a sort of negative one, or one that would be a quick way of making it into a critical element. The other part of the iconography is the idea of the conduit. I'm using shapes that refer to buildings or structures that you can't enter or leave, but information or something can get into or out of them by means of a conduit that goes into and out of the cell from underground. I think that's a description of a psychological condition, and it's very relevant to industrial and post-industrial social structure in which you have apartments and subdivisions and telephone lines that come in, and water and radio and TV.

JS: Do you see the work becoming more complex?

PH: I see myself as having set out elements of an imaginary or theoretical world and that slowly I'm building in more and more elements. It's sort of a through-the-looking-glass thing, as if one were inside this imaginary world and gradually walking around and discovering or finding out more and more elements. I'm reminded of that movie Tron that came out a few years ago; it described somebody playing a video game who was actually thrown into the video game environment. This person was walking around in an entirely synthetic geometric world, and that's what I'm trying to describe in my painting more and more.

There's one other thing about the geometry that I really would like to emphasize. I don't think of my work as abstract at all; instead of using the word abstract I always use the word diagrammatic. The issue to me is that at a certain point when all these artificial systems of communication and transportation were being laid out, that was the age of abstract art. So in a Mondrian or even in a Frank Stella, what you have is an ideal depiction of what circulation and the flow of information or transportation would be like if this goal of circulation were completed. But I think in the contemporary world this has been completed and the geometric has become the real in terms of what's out there in the world. Geometry is backtracking and enclosing the old idea of the natural in the diagrammatic. I think the video game is very important in this regard, as are computer graphics. In a video game you might have a little geometric man walking across the screen and you have a situation in which these ideal geometric elements are being deployed to represent an old kind of organic natural reality.

JS: Another compositional feature which appears often is the division of the canvas into two component parts. Usually the gridlike structure appears in the bottom. This is eccentric in terms of our usual association with grids as an all-over pattern. What does it mean?

PH: For me the canvas underneath is always underground; it is the underground element. When I generate the imagery I'm really thinking in terms of a sectional view. In other words we're seeing something from the side and we're seeing it straight-on so that it's a very frontal situation and the shapes are built up on the canvas. That implies three-dimensionality but it also implies a sort of facade. Then there's a break and below that the section continues and we're getting into a world underground, a hidden world, and that usually involves the conduits and things flowing from one of the cells to the next.

JS: What do you see as the relationship between theory and art that is obviously important to you and your art work? Do you use Foucault or Baudrillard as theoretical guidelines?

PH: I'm interested in getting ideas or information from different kinds of sources. In fact, reading Baudrillard is very similar to looking at Andy Warhol's paintings—I get almost the same thing out of them. It's very natural for me to equate one medium with the other.

JS: The relationship between your theory, paintings, and writings seems close.

PH: I see my work over the last few years as being about working through a change in the way geometry functions socially, from an industrial type of geometry to a post-industrial type. I started with a situation of coercive geometry symbolized by the jail. Then I moved to a more seductive geometry, symbolized in the day-glo colors, the systems of conduits, and the sort of video game space that I think my painting has now. That corresponds to a movement from Foucault, who mostly talks about the coercive geometry of industrialism, to Baudrillard who is more interested in seductive geometry.

JS: This sounds like the theory came first.

PH: No, just the opposite. Before I'd read Foucault, I was doing these jail paintings, which were inspired by a totally subconscious situation. I lived in a building on 7th Street. On the ground floor on the street there used to be a bar or a pub that had a stucco facade and windows with bars over them. I began to do the jail paintings, paintings of prison-type facades. I was out in front of my building waiting for a friend one day and realized that I had, in fact, been using this image which I had never consciously noticed before—it was completely subconscious in origin. But I think of myself as not a very good conceptualizer. So when I read Foucault's Discipline and Punish, some of the things I was trying to get at in the paintings were very clearly conceptualized there and it helped me make conscious my own feelings about the subject. For me, things surface from subconscious sources and then I try to find out what they're about, essentially. In terms of Baudrillard the same thing happened. The colors had become day-glo, which I think of as simulated colors, and the stucco material (rather the Roll-a-tex material which is simulated stucco) had become a consistent feature in my work. Finally I read Baudrillard a year or two later and it gave me a framework in which to understand how I had used these elements.

While recognizing that Halley links his use of color to Baudrillard, it is important to point out that he has other authority figures in the form of modernist painters who have been a strong influence. As a Yale undergraduate, he owned a copy of The Interaction of Color and remains interested in color from a Bauhaus point of view, although he thinks his paintings satirize some of those issues rather than taking them seriously: "One of the things I got from Albers which I don't think you're supposed to get was the sense of detachment about how color could be used. Because oftentimes I make hypothetical propositions to myself such as: if this painting were blue instead of red, what would be the difference in its effect on the viewer? I feel that I got out of that kind of treatment of color a linguistic or semiotic idea about how to use color."

He admires early Judds, particularly those combining day-glo colors and texture. At the same time, he likes '60s Color-Field paintings and tries to bring a little of the spirit of those into his own work. In referring to Noland's early painting, he describes "its light-on-its-feet approach." He sees it as not too humanistic, not too pretentious, even casual, but it has a presence in a room that can change things and create a little energy.

Halley's day-glo colors have other sources. "They've become universal," he says. "I noticed them in advertising first. For years, rather than use regular inks or pigments, consumer packaging has used day-glo because it's brighter, more intense, and more noticeable [e.g., Halley's tennis ball yellow]. Now it's in video games."

There are other obvious references. Halley likes Reinhardt's seamless look, considering him a virtuoso. He is attracted to Newman. And on and on. At the moment he is mulling over Mondrian, seeing the latter's late work as depicting some sort of ideal urban environment which Halley interprets as a distillation of the schematic elements of that environment. Surprising, perhaps, is his responsiveness to late Guston whose work he sees as a sort of endgame modernism—a quality which he thinks his own work possesses.

Halley is a synthesizer within a post-modernist dialectic. The connections must be understood in part in light of Halley's adaptation of theories of Baudrillard based on the simulacrum. Thus, according to Halley, there can be only a simulacrum of art,

not the “real thing” re-splendent with transcendent significance and referents, only a simulacrum with “orbital recurrence of the models” (nostalgia) and “simulated generation of difference” (styles). In lifting techniques from hard-edge and Color-Field styles, Halley explains that within the simulacrum, “nostalgia, the phantasmal parodic rehabilitation of all lost referentials, alone remains.” For Halley, “Those styles used as a reference to an idea about abstraction and an ideology of technical advance replace reference to the real.” Through the simulacrum theory, he identifies with other ‘80s artists such as Sherrie Levine, RM. Fischer, and Jeff Koons.

JS: Do you still feel the same theories apply to the artists whom you cited in earlier critical writing?

PH: With those artists I was quite consciously imposing a theoretical structure of my own onto their work. Particularly with Minimalists, it would have been a theory that they’d be pretty hostile to. Fischer and Koons aren’t very dependent on the kind of readings that I am, but I still think their work very closely conforms to those models, particularly Koons. I think it’s remarkable how Baudrillardian his work is.

JS: In recent work, those two artists have become more political.

PH: That’s true. A writer who comes to mind in terms of Fischer’s new show is Virilio and his interest in the military, because Fischer seems to be addressing the militarization of contemporary life.

JS: How did you get into writing in the first place?

PH: When I came back to New York in 1981 my first article was about & Colab show that I saw. I was interested in how this work related to previous work—to other nearly contemporary art like Minimalism and Pop. I was also interested in relating works of art to issues about society at large, and the Colab work offered a very direct way of doing that since it had a good deal of directly social iconography.

JS: Wouldn’t you say that generally what you choose to write about has that as a primary quality?

PH: Until about last year I was principally writing essays that were motivated by wanting to reinterpret the history of post-war and 20th-century art with an eye to integrating it with changes that were taking place in culture. But in the last year I’ve almost stopped writing about art; I’m more interested in writing about patterns in culture and patterns in society directly. I’m writing about how cities are put together and how post-industrial society is organized.

JS: Have you written for publications outside of art ones?

PH: I’ve always seen myself as addressing the art world; I’d be very uncomfortable writing for another audience because there’s an assumption that my audience shares a certain body of knowledge that I have with me.

JS: Has your involvement in writing influenced your work?

PH: In the piece about Ross Bleckner I talked extensively about the concept of modernity, which was something I was wrestling with in my own work. In the post-modernist piece, “Reconsidering Ortega,” I was wrestling with the ideas of the role of irony in a work of art, which applied to my own work. In my more recent work, especially “On Line” and “The Deployment of the Geometric,” I’ve tried to record my ideas about how post-industrial society functions. These kinds of thoughts directly effect the type of images I make. So in a sense I’m trying to give the background

behind the art-making more and more.

JS: As an artist, aren't you especially sympathetic to other artists' critical writings?

PH: Definitely. My favorite is Smithson. I'm sort of a Smithson fanatic. I really adore his ability to work in a fictional mode. His ability to write about lived experience in terms of his ideas about culture and his ideas about art is really amazing to me. And I like Barnett Newman.

JS: What about critical writing today?

PH: I'm very involved with Collins' and Millazzo's writing I find that it's the closest equivalent in writing to the type of art I'm interested in.

JS: You described it as coded. I think there's more coding in this writing than in your work.

PH: It is highly coded. It is also highly theoretical and more involved with concept than mine. I admire that about it. The fact that it's radical in form also interests me. For a lot of people it's hard to read, but for me the fact that it has such an unusual syntax and rhythm makes it a positive thing.

JS: I belong to a school of thought that believes, unlike fiction or other writings outside of criticism where I would accept and might even be intrigued by such obfuscations, criticism should be clear. The reader should not have to labor over criticism to appreciate the ideas being expressed.

PH: That's a good point. But while at first it is hard to read, once you understand the rhythm and the ideas behind it, it becomes a lot of fun. And it seems so interesting—the idea of inventing a different style.

JS: Do you think Clement Greenberg was a good critic?

PH: I'm very interested in Greenberg; I guess the reason is that his work is so stylistically good—that he has such an interesting voice in terms of style—and also because of the way he was able to integrate Marxian ideas into the general vocabulary of post-World War II American art, enabling them to stick around for thirty years, from 1945 to 1975. It can almost all be attributed directly to Greenberg who I guess got it from Meyer Schapiro. My own thoughts on Schapiro are influenced by Serge Guilbaut's book on Abstract Expressionism, which explained very well the widened role Schapiro created for abstraction—the fact that he was able to create a relationship between abstract art and social issues, cultural issues. I guess the essential idea in Greenberg for me, although I'm sort of against this idea, is his materialism. I'm interested in what a strong force he makes of the idea of materialism and how much mileage post-war American art got out of that. The most amazing thing about Greenberg is his ability to integrate the idea of quality, which is extremely capitalist, with his Marxian ideas. That synthesis is extraordinarily courageous and for that reason interests me.

JS: Do you think Greenberg was totally aware of it?

PH: No, I have a theory about that: on a conscious level the work was Marxian and on a subconscious level it was haute bourgeoisie in its ideology. He never was willing to acknowledge the idea that the subtext was haute bourgeoisie, and for that reason the idea of quality in his work has to remain unspoken—the whole idea of quality had to be beyond the verbal realm. I disagree with Greenberg in just about everything in terms of his ideas about what's important in a work of art. Almost none of it

makes sense to me anymore. But nevertheless I find it a cogent theory.

JS: Although you're ideologically opposed to Greenberg, you share with him an oracular urge in that you too make pronouncements on what you think art should be.

PH: I find after I write an essay that I've tended to be very provocative and condemn everything that doesn't conform to my way of thinking. On an informal level I don't feel that way. I like a wide range of things. But I do think that the function of an essay is to be provocative and so I tend to exaggerate my ideas. Actually Ortega said that to think is to exaggerate; I really like the idea of creating an exaggerated statement of what I advocate and condemn—it creates a little bit of energy or interest.

JS: What do you see as behind the pervasive need to use an authority figure to substantiate theory today? You share this critical approach.

PH: In one short piece, "Notes on Nostalgia," I spoke about Baudrillard's idea that nature has been completely wiped off the slate, and what we're left with is just de-contextualized history. When you're in that sort of situation all you can do is refer to other people's thoughts. You can't really make reference to any sort of absolute and so the intertextual situation becomes very intense. I think that is the current situation and can't be avoided. There's another situation we're in right now which is that the idea of an original utterance is also much under attack, and I think for the same reason: an industrial age of original and unimpeded action is at an end, and we're in a much more circular situation, where interrelationships between ideas become very important. I also consider my paintings extremely intertextual, and in order to understand the paintings one has to be aware of the intertextual relationships. In other words, if I have a centered image with two bands on either side in a painting, if you know that's a device used in Newman, you can go more quickly to my meaning. If you didn't know that was a device used in Newman, the meaning of my painting would be less strong.

JS: Then you want your audience to bring information to both your painting and your writing.

PH: I do, although for both the art and the writing I do see two audiences. I think on one level it's addressed to somebody who shares most of the information that I have. On another level, it's not a problem for me that my work might be hermetic.

JS: Do you think that there were always these levels of misunderstanding?

PH: Yes; I'm not one of those who believes in a golden age of populist painting, and I think this is supported by recent art historical research. I remember reading one book by Michael Baxandall concerning iconographic issues in Florentine painting, which made it clear to me how interrelated this painting was to the coded knowledge of the bourgeois and aristocratic classes of that society, and how the imagery in a lot of that work would have been almost senseless to the peasantry or to a popular audience.

JS: Do you admire Robert Morris' writing of the '60s?

PH: His writing's too straight. There's not enough humor or any sense of irony. Contrary to the role of criticism in the '60s and '70s, the most interesting project in the '80s is the artists who have more directly injected themselves into the economic and distribution system of art—the artists who are running galleries, curating shows, writing newsletters to collectors.

JS: Why do you find that significant? PH: Because it's something that's always been mystified for artists and that artists have been excluded from. It's not that I think artists should take over in a populist way. I just think it's a provocative gesture on their part, one that's yielded certain interesting issues for the artists who are doing it, like Meyer Vaisman and Peter Nagy whose art to some extent has been about the actual distribution system and issues of the art world.

JS: With the exception of Thomas Lawson, you are the only artist/critic writing as a theoretician.

PH: I'm always surprised that more artists don't write theory. It's not too remunerative but certainly it's an easier way to get a forum than show-ing work. But it's not that open. ... Another phenomenon that interests me very much now is some of the newer magazines that are floating around like ZG, which I've written for, Effects, and Real Life. I think they have a more immediate voice in terms of what artists are thinking about.

JS: Are there other links between your writing and your art?

PH: I do drawings that are clear lines on black acetate which are either just words or use words in relation to diagrammatic images. They rep- resent a bridge between the writing and the painting. One of these draw- ings is just two words, power and volume, in capital letters. I came up with those words looking at my radio—the idea of the power switch and volume and the overtones of those words, and it's on the left and the right. I continually do these paintings with cells on the left and the right. It seemed to constitute a bridge between an observation about some- thing cultural, making it into something visual, and then in the painting it becomes more distilled or more generalized.

--
Halley's art and criticism interlock. His is an elitist stance obeying Ortega's dictum that "art ought to be full clarity, high noon of the intel- lect." While drawing on the-ory for substantiation, he doesn't bend the theories, but he does select out from the sources what he needs. His style is a bit stilted, his mental set, bookish. He assumes the role of rhetorician with the writing becoming a commentary. But he avoids being academic by virtue of a quirky and exploratory turn of mind.

One of the inevitable questions that arises when an artist writes close to his own work is how the work measures up to the word. Halley doesn't see this as a problem because, with an ideological turn of mind and his commitment to intertextuality, he believes any information out- side or alongside of the art, rather than interfering, ex-tends and gives greater breadth to the work. Nevertheless, the challenge in viewing a painting by Halley is to get beyond his rhetoric which is so carefully or- dered and detailed.

In one of Halley's more recent unpublished articles, he uses a formal element "line" as a pivotal point around which to formulate ideas. In another, he distills previous thoughts on the role of geometry in order to describe its new deployment. As he indicated, his writing is changing, becoming more personal in concerns and socio-logical in thrust. Although he plans to continue, I predict that it's on the decline. Nev-ertheless, he has already made a considerable contribution to the critical lit- erature of the Eighties.