

**DISCREPANT CRITICISM. INTERVIEWS ON ART AND CURRENT
THOUGHT (2000-2011)**

**INTERVIEWS with Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh, Douglas Crimp,
Thomas Crow, Arthur Danto, James Elkins, Hal Foster, Serge Guilbaut,
Rosalind Krauss, Donald Kuspit, Lucy Lippard, Griselda Pollock**

2000-2011¹

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HAL FOSTER²

(2000)



¹ Spanish versión: Anna Maria Guasch, *La crítica discrepante. Entrevistas sobre arte y pensamiento actual (2000-2011)*, Madrid, Ensayos de Arte Cátedra, 2012. ISBN:: 978-84-376-3066-3.

² "Entrevista a Hal Foster", *Lápiz*, nº 166, October 2000, pp. 45-53

Covering Hal Foster's (Seattle 1955) intellectual personality requires more than entering his complex, versatile and committed individual path as a thinker and a teacher. His story is also the story of a whole generation of young critics and art historians educated in North American university classrooms during the early 1960s (Foster studied at Princeton University in New Jersey and Columbia University in New York) who questioned the dominant formalist discourse and Greenberg's "modernism" in the United States –and outside the United States– for over more than three decades and who, straightforwardly criticising the notion of representation, created the postmodern discourse.

Holding a position in the Art History Department at Cornell, as a professor at Princeton University and part of *October's* editorial board, Hal Foster developed a critical theory where postmodernism, rather than denying the modern project or, what is somewhat the same, the history of the avant-gardes, investigated its deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction.

However, the continuous and accelerated changes of reality caused its theoretical principles to stagger and lose ground eroded by a scepticism closely related with the awareness that postmodernity –or its concept– had succumbed to the lure of the market and industrial culture. Increasingly more frequent and explicit and from a canonical tradition and dogmatism that have earned him a certain disapproval, Foster defends his condition as a thinker separated from the powerful cultural industries weaving the American cultural and artistic structure. In fact, Hal Foster has actively participated in the most interesting and influential open debates regarding the creation and reception of late century art, although not without repercussions. He has been attacked by those working in the fields of Cultural Studies or Visual Studies –whom Foster criticises for their anthropological and ethnographic model of contemporary art– and by those defending a strictly aesthetic or formalist approach of the work of art based on the "rediscovered" concepts of the sublime and beauty, which, according to Foster, only fuel a depthless romantic subjectivity.

The long conversation held with Foster, herein presented as an interview, took place in his office at the Department of Art and Archaeology at Princeton University. We also attended one of his classes. Both in the face-to-face interview as in his classroom, a casually dressed Foster, who is rapidly becoming more influential in the United States, is distant and determined. Dialogue is not abundant in his well-prepared and accurate lectures. He gives everything he has but does not expect to receive anything in return or to be demanded something else than what he gives. He is a good professor, but perhaps his academic authority and reserved personality prevent him from being a teacher friend. His mix of shyness and pride make him an ice floe that barely melts when addressing subjects like “trauma” or the “abject”. Then, his highly theorised discourse acquires a certain mischievous tone that escapes through an evident but discrete smile.

We asked him to trace a path of his theoretic journey over the past 20 years where he has assumed the double role of art critic and historian, journey where his understanding of criticism, seen almost as a militant act, evolved into a clear rejection of interdisciplinarity for the sake of what he calls “critical lack of disciplines” (absolutely less disperse than interdisciplinarity), in order to, based on Roland Barthes’s insight in favour of textuality and Walter Benjamin’s defence of the producer’s discourse over that of the author, culminate in the discovery of a Lacanian-oriented “new subjectivity” and, ultimately, of a new reality supported by the abject and the traumatic. In this *rite of passage*, Hal Foster showed an interest for some artists –although not many– and most of all, attempted to formulate new approaches and methodological models in the art history field where genealogy, historicity, the discipline/anti-discipline and socio-reality, are challenges which, according to him and opposite to his detractors’ affirmations, have nothing to do with neo-conservative positions nor with Marxist postulates.

AMG: If it is all right with you, we’ll start with your intellectual formation during the 1970s, a moment dominated by a certain cultural pluralism but still anchored in the formalist paradigm defended by Clement Greenberg, in spite of the

offensives presented by Rosalind Krauss in her 1972 article "A View of Modernism" published in *Artforum* magazine.

HF: The 1970s, with its never-ending list of prevailing creative modes and styles: abstraction, realism, performance art, the new image, the site specific, the pattern and decoration movement, etc., defined, in fact, a very passionate moment that consequently favoured the art market. The motto *anything goes* seemed to convince and agree with everyone. However, from the very beginning, all that effervescence seemed false to me, even dead. I saw it as the product of consumerist inertia. I thought it was necessary to find non-traditional paths to develop new and creative critical points of view. It called for the opening of a new debate that assumed, starting with the critics, the end of modernity and the beginning of a new reality: postmodernity.

AMG: In what way was this concern for the crisis or end of modernity and the need to define a different stage within the contemporaneous generate into a debate? Was it born in the university circles or did it emerge from the art criticism world?

HF: At that time I was an art critic, not a university professor. The debate did not emerge in the university context. The mid 1960s saw the creation of movements that questioned the formalist paradigm defended by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried and by emblematic institutions such as the New York Museum of Modern Art. But it was not until the late 1970s when we began to consolidate certain terms and concepts that served as grounds for proving that modernism was a problematic and exhausted project that had to be rewritten and, ultimately, deconstructed. Although not only on a theoretical level, since at that time, a convergence was produced between the artistic practices and the critical discourses based on the idea of representation and abstraction.

AMG: Could you give us an example of that conjunction between practice and theory?

HF: Well, I could name several examples, but probably one of the most evident is the case of Cindy Sherman whose reflections on the idea of representation fully coincided with the coetaneous post-structuralist trend of art criticism or, to put it more exactly, of a certain group within art criticism.

AMG: What role did magazines like *Art in America* and *October* play during these processes?

HF: Craig Owens and I were senior editors of *Art in America*. We began writing articles confronting the ideas of postmodernism and pluralism, following the same direction as other collaborators of *October* journal like Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh, one generation older than us. In this regard, I think my article "The Problem of Pluralism", published in *Art in America* in 1982 was very significant. In it, I presented pluralism, which had been construed at one time or another by characters like Harold Rosenberg, Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss, as the corruption of certain definitions of late modernism, the consumerism of the cultural industry and, in short, the absence of a critical discourse.

AMG: The idea of pluralism as a problem, as a false or masked liberty where in lieu of culture we have cults, was consolidated in your book *Anti Aesthetics: Essays on Postmodern Culture* published in 1983. Would you agree?

HF: Not exactly, although your interpretation is not entirely misguided. The prologue of *Anti Aesthetics* attempted to provide alternatives to the lack of ideology and dialectics entailed by pluralism, alternatives which, in short, were defined in the need to deconstruct the order of representation. Nevertheless, the book's essential purpose was to, for the first time, align different fields of study and disciplines aimed at providing a global perspective of postmodern culture and critiques, essentially in relation to philosophy (Jürgen Habermas), architecture (Kenneth Frampton), the post-colonial discourse (Edward W. Said), feminism (Craig Owens), the new technologies, cultural capitalism (Frédéric Jameson) and critical Marxism.

AMG: Setting aside the circumstantial, did this intention for a global perspective go against or respond to a new cultural or epochal discourse?

HF: First and foremost, I raised the question of multidisciplinary, of the relation between the different disciplines that had, or could have, a common decisive anti-formalism. It wasn't a matter of denying, for example, the aesthetic concept as understood by modernism, but simply questioning an aesthetic detached from history or politics. In fact, the term "anti-aesthetics" and "postmodernism", which I used cautiously at that moment, represented a standpoint in a cultural present influenced by local disciplines, such as feminism or colonialism, that denied a

single and privileged cultural domain. In other words, facing a reaction culture, the forms of resistance were the only things that could initially be queried.

AMG: In the new postmodern discourse, it is well known that you did not accept, or at least did not intellectually sympathise, with neoexpressionist artists like Julian Schnabel or Anselm Kiefer whom, on the other hand, strongly prospered in the North American art scene of the early 80s. What reasons led you to, in your article “The Expressive Fallacy” published by *Art in America* on January 1983, consider neo-expressionism as a “false idea”, following a line of argument similar to the one championed by Benjamin Buchloh in his “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression” published by *October* journal?

HF: Actually, you are talking about a second stage of the postmodern declaration where, although it is true I expressed a more biased viewpoint, or more committed if you will, this was no other than the result of the logical evolution experienced by the theoretical work developed during the early 1980s.

AMG: Why this commitment?

HF: Keep in mind that just one year after publishing the mentioned text, an event occurred which, although in spite of having nothing to do with the postmodern process, it did influence its development. In 1984 Ronald Reagan came into office with a conservative and affirmative cultural program. This program allowed limited cultural critique and, derived from pluralism in the seventies, it elevated the artist’s individual expression to the category of hero, supported the idea of the artist as a genius, claimed the “naïf” conception of expression and subjectivity and shamelessly sponsored the commodity culture ideology: express yourself in this dress, in this car, in this computer, etc. The article you mentioned and my standpoint on neo-expressionism must be understood in this regressive context. My only intention was encouraging its deconstruction as an operative language in the recent art scene, in the metaphysical tradition and in popular culture.

AMG: According to these words and applying the conventional terminology at that time, postmodernism could be interpreted as being progressive *per se*. However, in the article “(Post) Modern Polemics” published in *New German Critique* (fall 1984), you already differentiated a progressive postmodernity from a reactionary one. Why?

HF: Yes, in fact, this text coincided with the crucial moment when the debate on postmodernism's different factions was rising. One of these factions was aligned with a certain neo-conservative policy and the other, which can be called progressive, was related to the post-structuralist theory. The magazine where I published the article, directed by Habermas with the objective of promoting the School of Frankfurt's thought in the United States, was very interested in this debate also active in Germany and France.

AMG: Based on what we are talking, I sense a certain admiration for Habermas on your part, or at least an intellectual dependency, although many people identify Habermas with a neo-conservative thought. Is this also your case?

HF: In my opinion, Habermas cannot be branded as a neo-conservative. The cultural debate rising in the United States, contrary to what happened in Europe, was not based on the opposition between Habermas and Lyotard, and occupied a limited place within a specific sector of the North American intelligentsia.

There is no doubt that Habermas was interested in the project of modernity, of Enlightenment, as I also was and continue to be. Habermas was not a neo-conservative since he was not against the modern project or the postmodern project in itself, but rather against certain attitudes within postmodernity: he was against architectural ornamentation or pastiche, against representation in art, against narratives, fictions, etc.

AMG: Leaving Habermas aside, which thinkers influenced your view of post-structural postmodernism?

HF: Mainly Roland Barthes. For me, Barthes was the first to divert his line of thought towards new territories like photography and towards new issues like the "author's death", the idea of originality or the defence of text beyond painting and sculpture. Also essential for me was Michael Foucault's knowledge regarding artistic institutions. Additionally, Jean Baudrillard strongly influenced my critical standpoint on the commodity culture.

AMG: The French thought was undoubtedly relevant and influential. But what about the general European or North American thought?

HF: The French thought undeniably laid down my intellectual coordinates, although I must also acknowledge my debt to pre-war German philosophers like Walter Benjamin or Theodor Adorno who generated lively debates around the

work of art's reproduction. Actually, I think this pre-war era was very important since the critical discourse became probably more relevant than the artistic discourse.

AMG: All that in regard to the pre-war era. But what was your opinion on the dominant, or at least most recognised artistic discourses at that time like Peter Halley's, Haim Steinbach's or Jeff Koons's? Where you really interested in these?

HF: I'm going to be completely honest. I was not interested in them. Actually, I never felt identified with that generation of artists who seemed to be concerned solely with what I would call "artistic-financial speculation". The commodity culture was interweaved and wrapped in such a commercial euphoria that it suffocated any possible critical discourse. It was a moment when even the market entered the academy. What still concerned me was the debate between the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic, between the political and the formal, and I did not find this in the generation of artists you mentioned but rather on a simultaneous generation.

AMG: Do you mean the generation of postmodern activists whom you strongly championed?

HF: To an extent, yes, although I was not a mere defender of activism, of an art that was ultimately purely propagandist. What I advocated was an art sophisticated in its form, politically committed and, above all, criticising the representation discourse, the artistic institutions and the political economy.

AMG: In keeping with this diversion of the post-structuralist discourse and the critique of representation towards social aspects and political debates that could provide a historical dimension to the artistic work, which were your theoretical anchorages?

HF: In articles like "For a concept of the Political Art" (*Art in America*, 1984), I developed a thesis stating that the artist model suggested by Walter Benjamin in his text "The author as producer", -article translated into English during the late seventies- could be extrapolated to the current North American situation, and that its ideas concerning the avant-gardes and modernity and the dialectic relation between high art and popular art, could shed some light on a new political concept in American art. In this sense, Walter Benjamin, represented a paradigm, a great

contemporary critic who helped me propose and develop debates circling modernism.

AMG: All in all, you still haven't talked about the artists who complied with your postmodern canon, and who, from which I understand based on your previous comments, had to assume the concept of the artist as a producer, according to Benjamin Walter, and the author's death according to Roland Barthes. Can you give an account of these artists?

HF: First of all, I want to clarify that although I have mentioned Benjamin and Barthes as intellectual paradigms, I am fully aware that they represent very different contexts and methodological approaches. Back to your question, it is in fact during that time when I began to become interested in creators from my own generation like Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine or Jenny Holzer, artists who somehow entailed a continuation of minimalism, being this movement perceived as the first big rupture of the post-war period, a time when critics and creators worked in a common project.

AMG: But in spite of defending an encounter between practice and theory and your enthusiasm for this generation of artists, at a given point you left New York, renounced your curatorial and critical studies director position at the Whitney Museum of American Art and pursued an academic career at Cornell University. It seems that you abandoned a militant position to take shelter in the atemporal nature of art history. The content of your essays undergo a noticeable shift. You now address surrealism in articles like *Compulsive Identity* (1991) and in books like *Compulsive Beauty* (1993), and, based on articles published in *October* journal, it even seems you come to question and doubt postmodernity. If this is the case, can you explain this change of personal path and to some level of intellectual trajectory?

HF: During the early nineties, at a time when art seemed to be too conditioned by the market, when dealers imposed themselves in the artworld beyond theoretical authority and the museum was immersed in corporatism, I began to become interested in historical matters, but always searching for links between the past and the present, between history and contemporaneity. This explains my interest for surrealism and psychoanalysis, an interest shared with Rosalind Krauss and others collaborating in the journal *October*.

AMG: Then, your standpoints agree with those of Rosalind Krauss?

HF: Not exactly. In my case, the interest for surrealism was more connected with the uncanny concept developed by Freud than with Bataille's version of surrealism defended by Krauss. Moreover, Freud, and specifically his notion of deferred action, led me to become concerned with the avant-gardes' transgressor nature and study the new subjectivity associated with the idea of trauma. It was then when the lineal discourses of progress stopped making sense. These discourses had both dominated the neo-avant-gardes emerging after the Second World War and revised the early 20th Century avant-garde movements.

AMG: If memory serves me right, you then published "Postmodernism in Parallax" in the journal *October*, article where you state: "Postmodernism is relevant but no longer in fashion since it does not promote the relations between past and present".

HF: What I sustained was that postmodernism was not merely a group of clichés or a stylistic concept as presented by a segment of critics. It was necessary to reconsider postmodernism, not in heuristic or stylistic terms, but as a path for glancing into the past and revising its periodization. Therefore, it was not so much about denying postmodernism but about denouncing the way in which specific critics linked to a certain type of journalism had banalised the same. Summarised, my proposal consisted in permeating postmodernism with new critical discourses: feminism, alterity, the technological discourse, etc. Fundamentally, making everything clearer, stronger, but at the same time more complex, and further eradicating the idea that postmodernity was prehistory or that history had come to an end, in order to recover the idea of genealogy.

AMG: Since 1993, following the streak of surrealism and Freudian psychoanalysis, you penetrate other areas established by theoretic referents like Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, and expressed by artists such as Mike Kelley, Kiki Smith, Robert Gober, John Miller, etc., a process which, one way or another, moves parallel to that simultaneously undertaken by Rosalind Krauss, Dennis Hollier and Yve-Alain Bois, materialised in exhibitions like *L'Informe.Mode d'emploi* and which breeding ground are the round tables organized by the journal *October*. What was your viewpoint regarding this redefinition of postmodern theory and artistic practices?

HF: My interests back then, which actually transcend to present time, indeed steered onto another tack: that of the abject, the traumatic, the wound culture. You could say I experimented a reaction to the obsession with simulacra and to the idea of representation defended by some sectors within postmodernity. I also experienced a rejection to a superficial notion of subjectivity. Consequently, this led me to become fascinated with the idea of trauma, the recovered subjectivity crosscut by symbolic or pre-symbolic residues. The abject and the wound culture absorbed me as well as the generation of critics and professors communicating ideas through the journal *October*. We all shared an anthropological idea of culture that made no distinction between mass culture and modern art. In this way, our interests ranged from programs appearing on TV to Cindy Sherman's work.

AMG: However, in spite of disseminating this lack of distinction between mass culture and modern art, I think you did oppose or at least question a discourse deeply rooted in the 1990s, that of alterity and also of multiculturalism, stance which if memory serves me right, you exposed in your article "The artist as an ethnographer?"

HF: Not exactly. I did not intend to attack multiculturalism as a whole, but rather criticise the pseudo role of the artist as an ethnographer, of the artist working from place to place, from debate to debate. In fact, what I attempted to question in that article was the danger threatening those artists, critics and curators who were only and exclusively working in preset situations, forgetting the particular historical aspect of the problem or what is called "historical memory". In this sense, multiculturalism once again fell into the pluralism characterising postmodernism's initial stages. This pushed me to protest in favour of a specific discipline, of the need of a vertically moving knowledge, in other words, a certain diachronic sense of history.

AMG: I believe this vertical axis of history leads us to the Cultural Studies which, based on the questionnaire regarding visual culture published by the journal *October* in the summer of 1996, unleashed a broad and at times bitter polemic, and further conducted to the separation between the defenders of a "canonical" art history and those implicated in gender, race and alterity issues. Is this true?

HF: It is not easy to relate all these matters. It is a very complex issue. However, I would like to clarify that I do not oppose the Cultural Studies or Media Studies and

that I believe interdisciplinarity cannot be practised without the previous domination of a discipline. Otherwise, we run the risk of falling into an eclecticism or inaccuracy in regard to what is art history's specific limits and scope.

AMG: This means being a conservative or a neoconservative?

HF: No. I do not see myself as a neoconservative, but I do believe there are certain things that need to be conserved.

AMG: In *The Return of the Real* published in 1996, apart from returning to the issue regarding the establishment of a historicity for both the artistic practices and the critical discourses, you insist on the necessity of surrounding art with a somewhat restrictive structure which, in short, signifies organising a certain genealogy that goes from minimalism and pop to present time. Can you clarify this genealogical vision of art history?

HF: In *The Return of the Real*, I tried to achieve three basic objectives that define this genealogical sense. First, interrelate the historical avant-garde concept with neo-avant-gardism to prove that during the post-war period, the neo-avant-garde was not a mere repetition of the avant-garde. Second, provide a genealogy of artistic practice and its corresponding theory, which, stemming directly from minimalism in its more "theatrical and expansive" version, could implicate the body, space, temporality and materials in its diversity. And last, outline a second genealogy, perhaps not so familiar, emerging from certain pop art works where the relation of the image with the body accentuates the dramatic problem, as can be appreciated in media-involved art and in some of Andy Warhol's work, particularly in his *Disasters* series.

AMG: In any case, this does not seem to clarify the concept of "realness" which seems to be the book's core subject. What is the exact meaning you attribute to the term "real"?

HF: The title of my book has a double meaning. In other words, it exhibits two coexisting ideas concerning the real. One stems directly from Lacan's psychoanalytical theories, of his seminars of the real, a reality that projects us to the traumatic, the abject, that which resists the symbolic, that speaks of a damaged body, of a violated individual, etc. Nonetheless, the "real" further implies the desire to move onto a socio-reality that can act as a new space for the art, where

the “real” functions as an identity and as a community and the main role is assumed by the artists as ethnographers.

AMG: What is your current field of work?

HF: I am interested in various subjects. I work with pre-war and post-war issues, always with the desire of investigating the gap between the contemporary and the historical. In other words, my work tries to combine two axes: one that is horizontal, synchronic or social, and another that is vertical, diachronic or historical. Therefore, one of my lines of work continues to be surrealism, a surrealism more related with abjection, psychoanalysis and the high modernity of the twenties and thirties, than with desire. I am also working on a project regarding post-war artists, which, focusing on the media crisis, the arbitrariness problem, the art appraisal criteria and the criticism subject matter, is perceived as a continuation of *The Return of the Real*. Some of these issues constitute the main subject of my writings included in *Twenty Century Arts: Modernism and its Discontents*, a book co-written with Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin Buchloh that will be published by Thames & Hudson³ and which attempts to provide a different vision of 20th Century art.

³ The mentioned book was published in 2005 under the title *Art Since 1900. Anti-modernism, Postmodernism* (London, Thames and Hudson).