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Judgment, Justice, and Art Criticism

Jolanta Nowak

Abstract
The purpose of this article is to expose a gap in the current academic discussion of visual art criticism: the lack of serious attention to the role of ethical judgment. Critics tend either to avoid discussing the judgment of art or they dismiss it as a contemporary impossibility. However, ethical criticism is nonetheless practiced, albeit only occasionally and in an under-theorized manner. This paper calls for a reconceptualization of ethical judgment in art criticism, a reconceptualization that brings art into explicit relation with ethics.

Key Words
art criticism, ethics, judgment, justice

Justice . . . is a matter of judgment, and about nothing does public opinion everywhere seem to be in happier agreement than that no one has the right to judge somebody else.[1]

When Arendt wrote this she was reflecting on responses to her book Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil. As Arendt explains, justice demands judgment and it was Eichmann’s inability to judge the moral status of Nazi ideology which paved the way for him to commit the crimes he did. On this understanding, the exercise of judgment is central both to guiding our behavior and to our understanding of relationships with others. If this is true, there is an ethical imperative to judge.

1. A judgment of Christian Boltanski’s Missing House

Leaving Arendt in the background for the time being, let us consider an example in visual art criticism of one form of judgment, a form I will call 'ethical judgment.[2] This example, written by Abigail Solomon-Godeau in 1998, examines Christian Boltanski’s installation Missing House, 1990.[3] As Solomon-Godeau explains, the work comprises two parts. The first is a site-specific installation in a vacant block in Berlin. On the block a house once stood that was bombed during the allied attack of 1945. The two houses on either side remained standing. Boltanski’s work consists of plaques on the walls of the remaining houses adjacent to the destroyed building. These plaques name the last inhabitants of the missing house, their occupation, and time spent living in the building. The second part of Boltanski’s work consists of (now dismantled) vitrines on another bombed site: a former arts and crafts exhibition building. These vitrines contained specific, detailed information relating to the former inhabitants of the missing house. Since the vitrines have been removed the only extant elements of Missing House are the plaques on the vacant block.

In her analysis of the installation, Solomon-Godeau raised the serious objection that Boltanski’s work does not make the fate of either the building or its inhabitants sufficiently explicit.
Solomon-Godeau argues that we do not know, just by looking at Boltanski's work, that the house was bombed (though an argument could easily be mounted that we do, as the dates referred to in the work and its location should be enough of an indication for anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of twentieth-century history). And, she goes on, the inhabitants of the house have included both Jews and Germans—many Jews occupied the building initially, and were replaced by Germans as the Jews were almost certainly removed and then killed prior to the bombing of the building.[4] This information was supplied explicitly only in the vitrines (though, again I would argue that it is implied in the site of the bombed house.)

In her article Solomon-Godeau analyzed other works by Boltanski in which she noted that this lack of differentiation between individuals, types of people and their fate is a common theme: a work such as Les Archives: Detective, 1987 does not make distinctions between victim or murderer; and Boltanski's modes of representation in general do not distinguish between, for example, someone who died of natural causes and someone who died as a consequence of Nazi ideology.[5] For Solomon-Godeau, this refusal to make distinctions between groups of people is extremely problematic since "it implies a bottom line equivalency from which ethical distinctions are banished."[6] This means that we are unable to cast judgment on those represented. A defense of Boltanski's work might argue that evident in the work is an acknowledgement of a bottom line respect for all individuals regardless of their deeds.

Whether or not Boltanski's work can be defended against Solomon-Godeau's claims is not, however, the subject of this essay. What is of interest here is the nature of her discussion of the work. Solomon-Godeau is making a judgment about Boltanski's Missing House and about an aspect of his practice in general. Solomon-Godeau's key concern here is with justice. She perceives that there has been a lack of recognition given to the original Jewish inhabitants of the building and a lack of recognition given to the specific history of the war. She calls Boltanski's work a "generic elegy" which is "wholly inadequate to the historical, indeed to the ethical requirements of historical commemoration."[7]

What is needed instead, says Solomon-Godeau, is an acknowledgement in the work "of the singularity and irreplacibility [sic] of what has been lost."[8] Solomon-Godeau’s main concern is with the extent to which the artist has paid just attention to the history of the Second World War and to the individuals who are referred to in the work (these people include those who are referred to explicitly through the use of plaques, and those who are referred to implicitly by the absence of any mention of them). Solomon-Godeau has made what she herself terms an "ethical" concern, a concern in this case about the appropriate representation of individuals, central to her reading of the work." Solomon-Godeau’s discussion is an example of a kind of art criticism which, as Emmanuel Levinas has put it, "measure[s] the distance" between representation and human life.[9]

Solomon-Godeau’s forthright judgment of Boltanski’s
installation is significant for several reasons. It is significant most obviously because the subject-matter of the work deals with questions of justice. Boltanski's work sets out to provide (an opportunity to remember those who suffered grave injustice, and in this sense it deals with ethical concerns and thus invites ethical evaluation. Solomon-Godeau’s response to this invitation is important because it draws attention to the need for an ethical approach to writing about art and because it illuminates the notion that some kinds of art works demand such an approach more than others.

Solomon-Godeau’s example of ethical judgment is also significant because it is based on the assumption that, from an ethical and historical point of view, it matters what art does. Her reading assumes that art is fundamentally linked to politics and history, and that art plays a role in these domains. This means that art’s role is ripe for evaluation and that art does not exist in a discrete realm separated from the demands of ethics. In so far as this kind of criticism recognizes that art is at some level heteronomous, ethical judgment is invited by (but not exclusively by) art practices that have emerged since the end of modernist claims to art’s absolute autonomy. Artistic practices that claim that art is engaged with society and the concerns of individuals, communities, history, and politics are particularly open to the kind of ethical judgment of which Solomon-Godeau’s work is one example.

This kind of judgment of art works, based on an acknowledgement of art’s relative heteronomy is, by necessity, distinct (but not necessarily completely divorced) from historical forms of judgment. This includes Greenbergian judgments of artistic quality and Kantian versions of aesthetic judgment. Therefore, Solomon-Godeau’s work is significant because it illuminates a gap in the discussion of the role and nature of one significant type of judgment in art criticism: a type of ethical judgment that asks about the relationships between the representation of others and their history, and about the nature of our experience of art. This issue, the position of ethical judgment in visual art criticism over the last twenty-five years, is the focus of this essay.

I suggest here that judgment in general should be understood as intrinsic to the task of art criticism. I argue that judgment is under-theorized in contemporary visual art critical circles and that the ethical judgment of art is of particular importance. My position is something of a departure from dominant understandings of judgment in these circles, for since the end of modernism, judgment (of whatever type) has been widely held to be either outmoded or inappropriate. This is especially true for critics who write for academic art journals. The reasons for this, as I will explain, are both historical and ideological. I want to show that despite judgment’s ‘bad name,’ critics do on occasion judge art works, and they judge these from an ethical point of view. This is often the case when art works deal explicitly with questions of justice, but I also want to suggest that ethical judgment should not be restricted only to controversial art works. Ethical judgment requires, therefore, both acknowledgment and theorization. After developing my discussion of ethical judgment, I will then argue that this kind of art criticism allows substantial questions to be asked of art, and to the extent that it does
that, a specifically ethical form of judgment has a significant role in criticism.

2. Judgment and art criticism

Judgment, understood broadly, is intrinsic to the nature of criticism. James Elkins is one writer who argues for the relevance and centrality of judgment. In describing the place of judgment in criticism, he put it this way: "Art criticism is a forum for the concept and operation of judgment, not merely a place where judgments are asserted, and certainly not a place where they are evaded. At the same time, criticism cannot become exclusively a forum for meditation on judgment, as Krauss once said, because then it would lose itself in another way—it would dissolve into aesthetics."[11] Elkins identified art criticism as an evaluative discipline, and criticism’s task of interpreting and judging works of art is what distinguishes it in emphasis from art history and aesthetics, even while there are important overlaps between these three disciplines. By definition, criticism’s primary concern is with judgment.[12]

While the concept of judgment is inseparable from the discipline of art criticism, the nature of criticism and, in particular, the role and nature of judgment in criticism are not without controversy. The question of judgment in art criticism has been the topic of much international debate with a recent spate of books, articles and conferences on the subject.[13] Rarely has judgment (of any kind) been championed in these forums.[14] Indeed, the overwhelming response to the question of judgment, not only ethical judgment but also aesthetic judgment and questions of judgment of quality, is to argue that it is, if not impossible, then at least undesirable.[15] As Elkins has noted, art criticism in recent times has been marked by a "flight from judgment … and [an] … attraction …[to] description."[16] Most (of what is referred to as) art criticism is not concerned with judgment.[17] Judgment is most usually dismissed as no longer valuable or central to the critics’ task.

Nancy Princenthal gave voice to a negative attitude toward judgment in 2006, writing that "judgment is simply not the most important thing a critic does. The question of whom, and what a categorical judgment serves has no clear answer. . . . it tends to shut down fruitful discussion."[18] Princenthal’s statement is not only dismissive but also belies a limited conception of the significance and nature of judgment. This is an understanding of judgment that implies an unjustified, unreflective pronouncement and refuses to allow for elaboration or discussion. It is an altogether different understanding of judgment from that, for example, which a person might make of him- or herself after moral reflection on his or her own actions, or which a critic might make of art works as a result of considered ethical questioning.

Dependence on a denuded understanding of the nature of judgment goes some way in accounting for why judgment in general (and not just ethical judgment) is largely absent in contemporary criticism and the discussion around that criticism. There are also two deeper reasons why judgment is often dismissed. The first is related to the relationship between the history of judgment in art criticism and changes in art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. References
to judgment in art criticism are often understood to refer back to the work of Clement Greenberg, whose writing is understood as paradigmatic of a style of criticism that is no longer regarded as appropriate: the most important or interesting things in contemporary art are not typically related to questions of quality, technical innovations, or the formal aspects of the work. Greenberg is also regarded as exemplifying an absolutist style of judging, one which is a long way from contemporary subjectivist approaches to writing.\[19\] On this reading, Greenbergian judgment is neither appropriate nor worthwhile. Similarly, neo-Kantian aesthetic judgment is generally not regarded as significant. At least since the advent of conceptual art, it is less about formal qualities and aesthetic experience and more about ideas.\[20\] The object of judgment in art criticism has altered, leaving the critic with the sense of being bereft of an object to judge.\[21\]

The second key reason why judgment is regarded with a high degree of suspicion is ideological. The concept of judgment is deemed to be outmoded since it presupposes a claim to an objective standpoint from which to judge. To judge is to judge against a model or an ideal and, in this sense, judgment implies metaphysics.\[22\] This implicit metaphysics stands at odds with what is, as Solomon-Godeau put it in a discussion on art criticism, the contemporary "institutionalization of the notion of pluralism."\[23\] This hegemony recoils at the notion of an expert art critic who claims to make judgments against a pre-determined standard. Boris Groys also noted that "The development of art in this century has ended in a pluralism that relativizes everything...and no longer allows for critically grounded judgment."\[24\] The invocation of metaphysics leads, then, to perhaps the most significant reason for the rejection of judgment as a key feature of the critic’s task. Skepticism regarding the possibility of a stable, objective vantage point and the widespread contemporary rejection of metaphysics and the acceptance of relativism precludes the possibility of judgment. Judgment is deemed no longer relevant because it is coextensive with normative claims: to judge is to declare that something is good or bad.

This suspicion about judgment is often intensified when that judgment is of an explicitly ethical or moral nature. The culture wars debates of the 1980s and 1990s in the US, the debates in the media which have courted the work of Andres Serrano internationally, and the public furor that erupted in Australia over the work of local photographer Bill Henson, all hinged on competing judgments, most usually conducted in the mainstream media rather than in academic art journals (the latter tended to shy away from making direct judgments about the works in question).\[25\] The consequences of the judgments published in the mainstream media have proven in some instances to be severe: the cutting of funds to arts programs and the threat of censorship. These kinds of experiences have contributed to the art community’s wariness about judgments made in the name of ethics, and this, in turn, has asserted (on the part of the mainstream media) an understanding of art’s heteronomy which goes beyond what is acceptable for that community: an understanding of art as being at the behest of tabloid-style moralism. In this way, ethical judgment is often taken to be an activity circumscribing
art practice in a way that runs counter to claims for artistic freedom.

While critics are wary of ethical judgment and of judgment in general, this wariness should be understood in the context of the changing role of the critic. Judgment is associated with a potentially antagonistic relationship between the critic and the artist, rather than the collaborative relationship which many contemporary academic art critics seek. This collaborative approach is a long way from the critic's task which, from the late eighteenth century until the mid-twentieth century, was when the critic was to act as an arbiter between the art work and the public, as an independent voice to guide the public. Judgment was central to this role. Criticism is now often understood as a practice that is either coextensive with art practice or is a benevolent commentary on art works.

Many of the above reasons for judgment’s displacement from art criticism were identified in a roundtable discussion published in *October* in 2002. George Baker, for example, stated that “Never has it been more difficult to practice art criticism.” The root of this difficulty lies in the issue of judgment. As David Joselit put it: “what is hard to maintain today is criticism as a mode of judgment that carries weight.” Later in the discussion, Joselit explains that while judgments are based on interpretation, “one of the crises of criticism might arise from the fact that the concept of quality has lost its legitimacy for people like us. So you can’t say this is good and that is bad, at least not in the ways in which it was possible [in the past].” This goes to the heart of the problem with judgment, since judgment is precisely about deciding on the basis of some concept of quality. As the participants go on to discuss, the difficulty, or as Joselit suggests, impossibility for a certain kind of art historian, in practicing criticism as it has been understood historically is related to the lack of consensus regarding criticism’s function, and to the lack of serious attention to the implications of judgment and the capacity for contemporary critics to carry out such judgment.

According to those involved in the discussion, one reason for the lack of serious interest in criticism (and hence in judgment) is that the critic’s historical role (of judging good art from bad, and thus of deciding which art should have currency), has now been taken over by the curator. The historically deeper reason, implied in the discussion, is that Joselit’s “people like us” appears to refer to art historians and critics who understand the history of art since modernism, and who are not attempting to judge art against predetermined criteria. Art criticism is presented with particular problems related to the current post-conceptual art climate. Judgment is now regarded as internal to art since the art work performs its own self-critique of its relationship with the institution and with the history of representation.

The investigation into art’s nature instigated by Marcel Duchamp and later pursued by conceptual artists’ desire to create work which would both insist that the meaning of the work exists in the mind of the viewer and that would avoid the apparent elitism of formalist art means that much recent art has taken on board the evaluative and investigative function
previously assigned to criticism. Indeed, since the 1960s and 1970s artists, including Joseph Kosuth, have claimed that the criticism of art is conducted by the work itself, leaving the art critic without a role to play. The task of the critic under these circumstances is, as Elkins noted, to describe rather than judge the way the work operates. In the 1980s, this descriptive role was reinforced with the advent of artists’ direct engagement with theory, which has also been taken up by many critics. Once again the self-reflexive analysis of much of this work, along with the complexity of the material, means that the task of criticism has moved into explication.

Since the 1990s, judgment has been more or less out of art criticism’s official picture and we have been left with varying, and often anemic understandings of the critic’s role. For Joselit it is to “judge what constitutes an object;” similarly, for Baker one task of the critic is “to delineate the field of artistic practice” as well as “to bring into public discourse practices that are being silenced.” For Rosalind Krauss, criticism involves “scanning the horizon for some new blip appearing on it.” For Helen Molesworth, good criticism is “a dialogue between texts and objects.”

The task of criticism might be summarized as an attempt to articulate the place of a work in art history. This task is essential to understanding the meaning and significance of a work, but it is a long way from judgment. It is worth noting that the logical extension of this very limited understanding of judgment in art writing is that once something is deemed to be art (or “our” kind of art), it is protected from the responsibility that judgment (and ethical judgment in particular) entails. It is implied that art is a privileged practice beyond the reach of the ethical judgment being argued for here. When judgment does come into play for these critics, it is often limited to choosing to ignore some kinds of art. Therefore, the kind of judgment at work here is minimal; it is concerned with sorting out and describing what will count as art.

What, then, are the limitations of this minimal understanding and use of judgment in art criticism? As Elkins pointed out, there are interesting questions to be asked of works of art, including “What is the art’s present relation nowto the social sphere? How does this work enlarge my perception of reality?” and, we could argue, these questions are the kinds of questions which would result in a peculiarly ethical form of judgment, if that judgment is concerned primarily with understanding art’s relationship to and impact on the realm outside art, including politics, history, and our relationship with others.

Following Elkins’ lead on this issue, we might also ask about the extent to which a particular work threatens to diminish one’s perception of reality, and it is this latter kind of question that seems to have motivated Solomon-Godeau in her ethical critique of Boltanski’s practice. Solomon-Godeau’s work opens a space for the discussion of art’s relationship with the world. Her criticism provides a way of articulating the meanings and effects of the work. This, in turn, provides the viewer or reader a forum with which to engage and within which to test analyses of the work. The key significance of ethical judgment
is, however, the basic assumption that underpins its practice, namely that art cannot be divorced from the ethical. A refusal or hesitancy to judge presupposes not only a romanticism about art and its role, but also an impossible autonomy for art that presupposes a strange understanding of ethics.

At this point there are two things to note. First, if the argument that we need ethical judgment in criticism is persuasive, then we need to rethink the need for and consequences of judgment in the light of the criticisms and hesitations about it cited above. In other words, the dominant discussion about judgment is inadequate to the practice of art criticism. Michael Newman hit the nail on the head when he wrote that “The aporia of judgment in modernity—in modernity as a historical fate—is...that we must judge, but “we” cannot.”[40] Our current situation, he explains, is one where “the role of critical judgment...is thrown into question.”[41]

The second point to note is that ethical judgments in particular, despite all the arguments against them, are, in fact, made about art works (as we see in Solomon-Godeau’s writing), and in this sense it is clear that “we” can, and do, judge. But what is needed is a deeper investigation into how and why to make such ethical judgments.

3. A contemporary tradition of judgment

Before considering what ethical judgment might be and why it might be significant, it is useful to look briefly at two other examples where critics have judged art works with questions of justice at the forefront of their discussion. This will illuminate something of an unacknowledged tradition of judgment in relation to art since the end of modernism and the alleged end of judgment. As with Solomon-Godeau’s work on Boltanski, other influential academic art critics have been concerned with analyzing the nature of artists’ representations as they compare to historical facts, particularly when the work in question is related to issues regarding historical commemoration and justice.

We can see this in Benjamin Buchloh’s reading of Gerhard Richter’s, Uncle Rudi, 1965.[42]

This painting is, famously, a blurred copy of a family photo that shows the artist’s uncle in Wehrmacht uniform during the Nazi period, thus inscribing the artist himself within Germany’s recent history. The work, says Buchloh, marks an awareness of “the necessity of representing this subject.”[43]

In other words, for Buchloh, Uncle Rudi plays a role in the construction of an understanding of Germany’s sense of its own history through the manipulation of the image itself and the manipulation of the context in which the image is seen. For Buchloh, Uncle Rudi reveals the difficulties attendant to the representation of Nazism and in this sense returns the viewer to the question of how Germany might deal with its past.[44]

What we see here is both a painting of a family snapshot and a Nazi. It is a domestic image that brings us into proximity with a horrific regime. Buchloh’s passing comment regarding the significance of the work offers (at least implicitly) a judgment about the significance of this art in political and ethical terms: that Uncle Rudi contributes to the productive investigation of German history. An awareness of such a judgment encourages viewers to consider the work in relation to ethics and politics, and in this sense ethical judgment
circumvents the refusal to judge which characterizes Arendt’s understanding of Eichmann’s situation.

Similarly, the discussion surrounding the work of Anselm Kiefer is in many ways exemplary of a residual acknowledgment of the significance of judgment in art criticism. In Kiefer’s notorious series of photographs, Occupations, 1969, the artist evokes historical moments while performing the Sieg Heil salute in numerous places: at the Colosseum, at the Roman Forum, in a bath tub, and so on. Concerned with the relationship between Kiefer’s representation and an appropriate understanding of history, Matthew Rampley notes that some critics (including Buchloh) argue that Kiefer “is guilty of a regressive mythologization of the question of German history.” Rampley himself rehabilitates Kiefer on this charge, arguing that Kiefer both romanticizes and questions the mythology informing Nazism, while Andreas Huyssen argues that his work grapples with the question of how to represent the past and concludes that “redemption through painting is no longer possible.”

The concern of these critics is with justice and with analyzing modes of representation in order to consider and judge the extent to which Occupations bring us into an appropriate relationship with history. Rampley does not say that it does not matter what Kiefer does. Rather, his intention is to understand the implications of this art’s engagement with history and politics. For Rampley, there is a question about the effects and meaning of Kiefer’s practice and an assumption that it is not acceptable merely to mythologize Nazism. Rampley argues that Kiefer’s work, judged against similar criteria to that of Buchloh and Huyssen, can be understood as doing something other than simply mythologizing Nazism: it is a broader investigation into the connections between German culture and Nazism. Kiefer does this with a level of ambivalence which, according to Rampley, “distances him sufficiently from the tradition [of German romantic anti-capitalism] to permit him to be regarded as interrogating it, but only just.”

In this instance Rampley judges Kiefer’s work. What Rampley is also doing is making an ethical judgment that engages with the judgments of other critics and draws different conclusions from those of others. Rampley’s judgment in this example is not at all about closing down fruitful discussion (to borrow Princenthal’s phrase). On the contrary, the various judgments made by several critics have provoked a productive and instructive debate about the relationship between Kiefer’s work and, in this instance, our understanding of history. The debate between critics of Kiefer is a collaborative investigation into how to read and judge Kiefer’s work against the demands of justice. It is precisely the kind of forum for serious ethical consideration I argued for above.

As the examples cited here suggest, critics acknowledge that there is an ethical requirement at work in the analysis of art that relates to historical questions of justice, and it is no accident that the examples cited here refer to the Second World War. Indeed, the representation of any kind of traumatic historical event demands an attentiveness to those...
involved. We can also see this in some of the literature surrounding art works that take the September 11 attacks as a central theme. For example, in her examination of works that present individuals ‘falling’ from the Twin Towers, Andrea Fitzpatrick argues for a methodology of reading these works that both acknowledges the vulnerability of those depicted and examines the impact of that depiction on viewers who see it. In an explicitly ethical move, one that echoes Solomon-Godeau’s call for just depictions of individuals, Fitzpatrick calls for art works that produce, and art criticism that acknowledges, “the dignification of the experiences of all the subjects involved” in works of art, those depicted as well as viewers.[50]

Fitzpatrick’s essay offers an example of criticism that regards art as one instance of inter-human relationships and that judges art accordingly. This is about more than the representation of history. It is about the meaning of viewers’ experience of art. Once again, this type of criticism regards art as part of the world and as having an impact on it. This criticism understands ethics as infused in all aspects of human experience and, in so far as that is true, then it is false to say that we can not judge.[51]

4. Ethical judgment

Ethical judgment does, as we have seen here, take place in academic art criticism, in spite of all the historical and ideological reasons why many critics argue that it is no longer possible.[52] But while art criticism that deals with traumatic events is illustrative of the contemporary practice of ethical judgment, it does not follow that these kinds of instances of judgment in art criticism are or should be exclusive to work that invokes overt questions of justice.

Precisely how ethical judgment should be characterized and applied will depend on the description or understanding of ethics that is brought into play. For instance, taking up Levinas’ description of ethics as constitutive of subjectivity, means that all art, regardless of whether or not it deals explicitly with questions of justice, history or human beings, is answerable to ethics. This is because in Levinas’ view, no aspect of human experience can be divorced from the ethical. The task of Levinas’ critic is to compare the phenomenology of our experience of art with his phenomenology of ethics. This approach (one with which I am sympathetic) means that no art is beyond the reach of ethical criticism.[53] Obviously a different conception of ethics would result in a different understanding of the task and scope of ethical judgment.

What is needed in the discussion about art criticism is, therefore, serious consideration about ethics itself and about the way ethics might inform ethical judgment.

The call for ethical criticism I am making here has a direct impact on our understanding of the role and value of art. Ethical criticism asks about art’s relationship with politics and history, and about the ethical character of the relationship between the viewer and the art work. Crucially, the task of ethical criticism is also concerned with interrupting any residual claims for art’s autonomy. Such claims are made implicit in art created since modernism when it is assumed that at some level art is not answerable to ethics. While
contemporary art is understood not as autonomous but as having a direct relationship with the realm outside art, ethical criticism is inextricable from an acknowledgement and analysis of this relationship.[54]

Judging an art work joins art with ethics, it calls art out of any partial or wholly autonomous sphere it might claim to reside in and situates it instead in the realm of human needs and experiences; it renders art active in the world and therefore accountable.[55] In what other way can we have fruitful discussion about important notions of, for example, historical justice in art, other than by analyzing and then deciding on the appropriateness of representation and of experience? Any refusal to judge art in this way demands a response to the difficult question of what makes art so special that it can be situated beyond the reach of ethical considerations.

Ethical judgment, then, is not a moralizing about art but a practice that investigates the adequacy and nature of art’s relationship with reality. As Plato explained in the *Theaetetus*, the concern of judgment is with things that are, and this means that judgment is a form of knowledge.[56] So the objective standpoint necessary for judgment is reality (as well as we can understand that). For Levinas, reality and ethics are inseparable. The significance of not attending to this reality threatens to allow injustice to remain unchecked: malign stereotypes perpetuated, histories excluded, viewer’s behavior misguided, a diminished understanding of our relationship with and responsibility for each other, a denuded sense of community and, most significantly, a failure to consider seriously the character of our experience of art and its ethical implications. [57]

This essay represents a call for such consideration, a consideration that is largely lacking in contemporary visual art criticism. This situation is not unlike that noted by Arendt in her response to the reception of her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where she asserts that all around her she sees evidence of our deep-seated and dangerous fear of judgment.[58] According to her, it was the breakdown of judgment, rather than of responsibility, that characterized the early stages of the Nazi regime and which allowed that regime to flourish. It is a blind and silent subscription to the reigning ideology that entrenches injustice. In this context, judgment opens an important space for the articulation and evaluation of ideas and experiences with which art is concerned.

Many of the critics participating in the *October* round table discussion on criticism implied that contemporary criticism is concerned with understanding where a work of art sits in art history. While that is an essential project, my argument here is that criticism should be equally preoccupied with asking about the relationship between our experience of art and our engagement with history *per se*, where history is understood in the broadest sense to encompass both our relationship with the past and our daily encounters with other people. If Arendt was correct when she wrote that “one of the central moral questions of all time...[is] the nature and function of human judgment,” then this moral question will, by necessity, extend to our analysis and experience of works of art.[59] As Levinas explains in a different context, the experience of being judged
is not the hearing of an impersonal verdict but rather a summons to respond.[60] While art works are not responsible in themselves, our thinking and writing about art and our experience of art must be responsible if we take the reasons for judgment, and the potential consequences of not judging, seriously.

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Endnotes

I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer of this article for incisive questions and suggestions.


[2] This article focuses on the very particular discussion about judgment in contemporary academic visual art circles. This discussion is distinct from that of literature, for example.


[5] Ibid., p. 15.


[10] Certainly Solomon-Godeau is far from a lone voice in this regard. Other obvious examples of criticism that also assume that art is at some level heteronomous include feminist and Marxist criticism. It should be noted, too, that Solomon-Godeau is explicit about her view that there is a need to critique institutional structures in art. See James Elkins and Michael Newman (eds.), The State of Art Criticism (New York


[15] One example of this understanding of the impossibility of judgment is David Carrier’s remark that “we really cannot make prophetic judgments of taste or be convincing theoreticians.” (“Why Art Critics don’t Matter Anymore,” 32)


[17] Ibid., p. 12 and pp. 42-50. Here Elkins also sets out some reasons for critics’ move away from judgment into descriptive criticism.


[21] In this context it is important to note that the concept of aesthetic judgment in contemporary visual art criticism raises a distinct set of problems relating to its history, particularly that of the twentieth century. It is for this reason that this article does not address the question of the relationship between aesthetic and ethical judgment of the kind raised by several writers (including James Anderson and Jeffrey Dean, Noël Carroll and Robert Stecker) since the 1990s in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* and elsewhere.

[22] This has been noted by several critics and theorists, including Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Oxford
“Even in its most naïve form, that of evaluation, the critical act is concerned with conformity to origin or specificity.” Benjamin Buchloh, speaking at a 2010 symposium organised by *Texte zur Kunst*, noted that “the criteria of distinction, of qualitative differentiation, have always been dictated from above, from the judgment seat of power.”


[28] Ibid., p. 203.

[29] Ibid., p. 209, emphasis added.


[33] For example, David Joselit has argued that postmodernist art has taken on the role once claimed by art criticism. See David Joselit, “An Allegory of Criticism,” *October*, 103 (Winter 2003), 3-13; ref. on 3-4. For more on Kosuth’s position see, Joseph Kosuth, “Statement from *Information,*” in *Art After Philosophy and After*, ed. Gabriele Guerico (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1970), pp. 73-74. See also Andrea Fraser’s remarks in *October*, “Round Table,” 213.

[34] “Round Table,” 209.


[36] Ibid., p. 216.

[37] Ibid., p. 222.

[38] As Danto puts it, “the fact I write about one show rather than another is already a value judgment.” See his *Unnatural Wonders*, p. 366.

Newman in *State of Art Criticism*, p. 51.


For a reproduction of the image see http://www.gerhard-richter.com/art/search/detail.php?5595


Buchloh, 1996, 64.


Rampley, 95.


Rampley, 95.


Jacques Rancière, too, has noted that there has been an ‘ethical turn’ in recent art criticism. For him, the understanding of ethics at work in such criticism is too indistinct to be valuable, and is one that situates itself beyond the rule of law, where the distinction between fact and law is blurred. This understanding of ethics is distinguishable from the one under discussion here. See Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Stephen Corcoran (London and New York: Continuum 2010), chapter 13.

Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow.”

When this bridge between art and the extra-art realm is not made, there can be some difficult consequences. For example, a controversy erupted in Australia in 2008 when a postcard advertising an exhibition of the work of photographer Bill Henson came to the attention of the mainstream media.

As Kate MacNeill has shown, the debate was, broadly speaking, drawn between the arts community and the public, with neither side engaging effectively with the terms of the other’s argument. It appeared almost as if each side was engaging not with the same image, but with two things of radically different orders. See Kate MacNeill, “When Subject becomes Object: Nakedness, Art and the Public Sphere,” *Media International Australia*, 135 (May 2010), 82-93. In this
case, one of the consequences of the failure of critics to judge is a rift between the arts community and the public.

[55] Much of this call for ethical criticism is drawn from Levinas. See his “Reality and its Shadow.”


[57] The role of judgment in the creation of community is discussed in Menke, “The Aesthetic Critique of Judgment.”

