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Postcritical or Acritical? Twelve Steps for Art History Writing in the Anthropocene

Dan Karlholm*

What our discipline is arguably in need of in the epoch of the Anthropocene – save for contributing to saving the world – are new ways of composing histories of art. Such models should not only be free from the patent rhetoric of negative critique but of other modern tropes and practices as well; from the urge to conquer the world and suppress nature to progress, develop and advance, at all costs. Such imperatives are correlated to the spread of global capitalism, and the compulsion to valorize art that succeeds in beating other art at being cutting-edge. Looking at both critique and postcritique in relation to art history, in general, and art historiography, in particular, this article suggests that art history’s critical heritage runs longer and deeper than a “hermeneutics of suspicion” signals, and that this state of affairs is therefore a deeper and wider problem than how to overcome and replace critique. The latter term, for art history, is of a piece with the modernity/modernism/avant-gardism of this discipline, which – despite declarations to the contrary – is not over, and which therefore makes today’s critical (in the sense of dangerous and urgent) situation of imminent climate disaster even harder to come to terms with.

In order to finally present the contours of a more unbiassed model I will first connect to literary theorist Rita Felski’s discussion of critique and postcritique, and especially the temporality implied by the latter prefix. Other temporal conceptions, such as that of the Anthropocene itself as well as historian François Hartog’s ideas on “presentism” are discussed. I argue against the employment of postcritique in favor of a synchronic acritical alternative, on which to build historiographically. To reconcile our alleged “regime of historicity”, presentism, with the Anthropocene is difficult since the latter is the past haunting our present, to the extent that it is not likely to remain “present” or the same for very long. The next part of the argument revisits how the “critical” tradition has been dealt with in modern art history, as a term of praise and the unspoken goal of our scholarly pursuits, i.e. to trace and make sense of the most outstanding and critically advanced art in time and space. I call this tendency art history’s generic “avant-gardism”. An influential proposal to come to terms with certain biases of this historiography is art historian Piotr Piotrowski’s attempt at a spatially extended “horizontal art history”, as opposed to the...
hierarchical West-centered one. I will discuss it briefly in order, finally, to propose the outlines of an alternative – a twelve-step sketch that is horizontal in a more neutral and material sense, and which responds to the keywords anachronic, amodern and acritical.

**Critical in what way?**

The title of Rita Felski’s *The Limits of Critique* is almost timid, in contrast to her lively, sharp and provocative book. This is a brilliant essay and I sympathize with its overall ambition to build, create and compose other relations between readers and texts than the tired routines associated with critique. The anthology *Critique and Postcritique*, co-edited with Elizabeth S. Anker, has a less timid title, suggesting instead two prevailing modes or even disciplines. To transfer this discussion from literary studies and cultural studies to art history requires some amendments, since what is literally a case of reading texts in Felski et al risks becoming a textualist cliché for art studies, devoted to viewing images etc. A tougher general problem is that the anthology editors’ new keyword threatens to undermine their expressed intentions. The chief limits to the coinage of the temporal term “postcritique” is that it suggests a collective and definitive plea for turning away from critique or leaving it behind instead of proposing a synchronic alternative to this still occasionally valid practice and venerable tradition.

The word critique as an abstract noun is what Felski’s book title contains, a noun which corresponds to the activity – the verb – of offering a critique or critiquing. The more widely used verb form criticize is not applicable here, since this refers to criticism (as in deliberations on the merits of artworks in art criticism), which is not targeted as such in her text. On the contrary, she prefers criticism to critique, and the latter is first and foremost associated with what the phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur summarized and advocated as a “hermeneutics of suspicion”. This refers, broadly, to the ability to read between the lines, to reach below the surface, to unpack and uncover, deconstruct and debunk, and to not take things as given or at face value. A keyword, a key verb, here is denaturalize, which is the aim of an activity that must first detect something as naturalized, e.g. as ideologically papered over or psychically covered up. The task of the critic, then, is to identify and expose false truth claims in the name of a real or deeper truth. While this may still be valid or relevant, at times, as it has been in the past, the problem, I agree with Felski, is that it has become virtually identified with intellectual labor as such in the humanities, something students learn to practice and program themselves to even before choosing what to work on, in short: a methodological default mode. Should you challenge this, you risk being “associated with the bad smell of the uncritical”.

Now, whereas the activities of critiquing and of thus producing critiques are sometimes referred to as “critical” work by Felski and in this whole discourse, it is another sense of this term that I find most or, well, critically important. The adjective critical as in an urgent or critical condition: “of the nature of a crisis, in a condition of extreme doubt or danger” is derived from the but still applicable in e.g. medical contexts. This is about “being in or approaching a state of crisis”, which is exactly the sense that is activated by anthropogenic climate change or what philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour refers to as the “New Climatic Regime”. In view of this prospect, what Felski termed
“postcritical reading” in 2015 and later “post-critique”, to name the broader phenomenon, seems neither responsive to the present ecological crisis, nor to an older but still problematically lingering tradition of “critical” art history.

The temporal presence of “post-” and past

The chief problem with a term like postcritique is that all such post-terms, are historicist by obeying a unidirectional chronology, where things and phenomena succeed each other along a metaphorical line of time. Post- or literally after-critique (or after-critical) implies that once upon a time it was relevant or at least possible to be critical or to practice critique of this or that but that this is no longer so; something new has taken or should take the place of critique. As if critique was an event or a period that is over or a territory that no longer exists (like in expressions such as post-war or post-Soviet). Applied to critique the post-prefix rather indicates that an intellectual fashion is over, which is of course a softer and less definitive usage, especially considering the prospect of retro returns, but whatever this next thing is that succeeds critique it is or will be virtually tattooed with structural belatedness, with a coming after the critical. The burden of all post-terms is thus not only that they are negatively defined, which applies for amodern and acritical as well, but that they seem somehow justified by time itself, like historical facts (like post-war).

Why not conceive of critique (e.g. as in critical theory) instead as a still possible, still possibly valid, option alongside other ways and alternatives? That is: as a true alternative, and not as a stigmatized or obsolete position and procedure. In certain passages, this seems close to what Felski and Anker are seeking, but to suggest a “postcritical turn” is not just to invoke another, actually a double, historicist cliché, it logically prohibits further co-habitation between what you turn to and thereby turn away from. I would rather label alternatives to critique acritical in the sense of other than critical, different but on the same analytic level. Acritical marks a small sideway step, neither a melodramatic turn away to signal that a phase is (definitely) over nor that we have moved very far “beyond” critique. The latter is not an evacuated land, not a former acquaintance; it is still our good neighbor. It seems to me that the temptations to bid farewell to, turn away from, leave behind or declare over (“post”) are all part of the same crudely categorical modern(ist) ethos, i.e. indistinguishable from critical operations based, according to the term’s etymology, on clear-cut divisions between false and true, imaginary and real, new and old, subjective and objective, etc. Notwithstanding that Felski adopted the expression “postcritical” with some unease, “weary” of such usage (in 2015), post-terms are extremely catchy, not to say contagious and hard to get rid of once released. To me they constitute a form of lazy theorizing, and the linguistic equivalent to an invasive species. Contemporary art discourse, spawned by critical theory in various forms, is littered with such terms, by the way, which is a sign of how much this conceptual universe is indebted to the modern period it claims to have left behind (first by the postmodern, then by the contemporary). But it is precisely the wishful desire to “leave behind” which is foreclosed, sadly no longer an option, in the Anthropocene. This proposed name of our current geological epoch has been subject to a lot of terminological critique, almost all of
it adhering to the Greek root word *anthropos* (human). Certainly all humans cannot be blamed for what were in fact the enterprise of the modern – fossil-fueled – Western world of colonial power and global capitalism. The term, however, regardless of the geological community’s final verdict, seems here to stay, and we have grown accustomed to the term anthropology, another derivative of the Greek human, well knowing that it does not include all humans (and nor does Latour’s “anthropology of the moderns”). What seems largely unconsidered in humanist or paradoxically anthropocentric discussions of this term, however, is the latter part of the word, *cene*, meaning recent (i.e. past). The Anthropocene, likely to replace the Holocene (meaning entirely or wholly recent) as the most recent epoch, is a highly complex temporal figure. The term was suggested some two decades ago, indicating extremely “recent” past activities, geologically speaking, by (some) humans threatening to bring disaster upon the present and future of (all) humans (Fig. 1).

**Post-critical presentism?**

Adding to the terminological turmoil of the temporality in question here is that the neat distinction between past and future with which modern culture and modernism operated – where the former was abhorred and the latter the aim of cultural production and avant-garde creations of the new man – crumbled decades ago. The missing link between them, the present, has been hailed in recent years in the name of “presentism”, referring to “the sense that only the present exists, a present characterized at once by the tyranny of the instant and by the treadmill of an unending now”. According to François Hartog, this cultural phenomenon is not a successor to, but a part of, the modern period, beginning in the eighteenth century and eventually closely connected to futurism, which was “also (already) a presentism”. Two key dates figure in his argument on shifting “regimes of historicity”: 1789 and 1989, and it is to the latter date our present form of presentism belongs, i.e. in what has also been termed a “post-historical” situation after which some even project a state of “post-future”. Now, how is the convoluted feature of the Anthropocene, not dealt with in Hartog’s 2003 book, related to presentism? And how do both of these phenomena relate to an allegedly “postcritical” state? It seems that presentism and the Anthropocene emerged parallel to each other in time, not the former a complacent diagnosis of our contemporaneity (after 1989 or so), and the latter the latest game-changing call for alarm from
some time after the millennium. This contention would require a temporal definition of the Anthropocene as unfolding from the invention of the steam engine in the 1780s (and neither from the first agricultural revolution more than 10,000 years ago nor the “great acceleration” after 1945), which was the one suggested by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen, who invented the term. As the modern world evolved, then, these two phenomena (if only later to be identified and named as such) emerged alongside each other, which suggests that presentism might not be without responsibility in bringing about the steadily evolving, if also accelerating, phenomenon of the Anthropocene. Hartog’s account is thus so long that presentism is hard to disentangle from modernity. In a sense, of course, capitalism, the chief engine behind the modern development, is a presentism, based on short-sightedness and immediate profit rather than long-term gain. Such an extended sense of presentism, however, threatens to make the term indistinguishable from modernity or the modern, which complicates the many attempts to link it specifically to our contemporaneity. The parallel is deceptive, however, since presentism à la Hartog grows gradually along with the modern movement, as one of its key elements, while the Anthropocene, once we realize what it is in the twenty-first century, marks the final dissolution of the dichotomy of nature and society/culture, on which modernity relied for its constitution. The Anthropocene is literally a time of reaction, temporally speaking, where we are forced to react to actions of our more or less recent past, which is not over, has not ended or terminated, but is ongoing. The past passes on, in which case pastism would perhaps be the more becoming label for our time?

Civilization and critical art history

How are we, not only as private individuals but as professional art historians as well, supposed to respond to threateningly irretrievable climatic deterioration and the critical prospect of an end to civilization? While there is so little we can do, as individuals and maybe even less as historians of art and visual culture, is it acceptable to merely relegate this situation to some place outside of our profession, a profession, we should remember, that sprung from scholars in the German-speaking world of the mid-nineteenth century for whom the fate of civilization/culture was key, and who, a few generations later saw it crumbling.

The Anthropocene is part of a convoluted, anachronic temporality, slow and gradual, on the one hand, and shockingly abrupt and unpredictable, on the other hand. It is reminiscent of trauma or the Freudian return of the repressed, this time on a planetary level. No one knows how this frightful return will play out, although it has been vividly imagined based on science. That humans have managed to impact the very geological foundations of earthbound living in a couple of hundred years or less would have been inconceivable for most people just a few decades ago, e.g. when Western humanists were busy debating postmodernism and the death of the avant-garde. Today, the literal meaning of the postmodern must be the Anthropocene, which is Earth’s response, or Gaia’s revenge, on the modern. Ours is a haunted house. Ours is a past which we are destined to realize (and hopefully survive) now and in the future. This past is not recent, it is present. This future is not nearby, it is ongoing. This present is not present, it is a future perfect, it is already a will have been.
under fascism? Art [history] and civilization is a recurring theme from Jacob Burckhardt in the 1860s to Erwin Panofsky in the 1960s. To Oswald Spengler, of course, in the early twentieth century, each phase of civilization of any high culture (whether Indian, Arabic or Western) was a degrading one, a sliding slope toward its “natural” death. Such organic viewpoints are heard again today, although all appeals to what is natural or not have been upset in what must be understood as the natureculture we inhabit. Is it, furthermore, acceptable to merely carry on as before, conducting business as usual, confident that the warming world is largely irrelevant to a humanistic discipline as the history of art? Can we still quietly muse on our “beautiful, dry and distant texts”, to invoke James Elkins, in a world which is getting wetter and hotter as we speak? Some of us, of course, have chosen to pay art critical attention to how artists or image makers relate aesthetically to the climate catastrophe, while others take pains to critiquing and dismissing the concept of the Anthropocene. What interests me – beyond aestheticization and critique – is to work out a model of doing history in spite of all. Before doing so, however, let us look at how art history, has handled the concept of critique and what this has implied in practice.

What Michael Podro summoned as “the critical historians of art”, from the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, was a group of philosophically minded scholars, Kantian mostly, who were less keen to investigate formal matters, authorship and archaeology. This group constitutes the core canon of art history masters. The importance of Kant here highlights judgement and aesthetics, which is significant to note, not to mention the reference to critique (Kritik), which was used by Kant in a different way than the one discussed by Felski – as the opposite to dogmatism, for short. While critical – as in critical theory – today has a distinct leftist air, due to the Frankfurt school legacy, mainly, politically it can go both ways or any way. This was true of the “critical historians of art” as well as the artists contained in the following quotation from Stephen Eisenman:

… a knowledge of cultural crisis and change – featured in the art of conservatives such as Ingres as much as in the work of radicals such as Blake and Goya, or later in the century Gustave Courbet – is the distinguishing trait of the most salient art of the nineteenth century; this is the art I am calling critical.

Not only political art, as such, left or right, is deserving of the epithet critical, it seems. Critical art is more importantly reserved for the best or most “salient” art of this category, which underlines what a strong if vague positive term this is for the author. In this, he expresses the common sense, I would say. The critical impulse of art studies – to search out salient art through the ages – precedes modernity, furthermore. Indeed, it is a primordial ambition, followed by various ways to connect, make sense of and historize such art. For instance: Pliny the Elder was chiefly interested in singling out the most skillful artists, Vasari took pains to honor the most eminent painters of his day and Hegel was consumed by tracing the spiritual rear end of a universal teleology. Art history’s modern (i.e. nineteenth-century-) claim to be a historical discipline is founded upon a denial of its critical, aesthetic substructure. According to Benedetto Croce, however, the history of art is the critical history of art. The critical tradition, I contend, is the spinal cord of academic art history (i.e. from the nineteenth century onward), which is of a piece with its
modernity, its historicism, its causal narratives on continuously expanding canons. Not least distinctive are its uncompromising either/or options that work as narrative structuring devices (forward–backward, classical-modern, radical-reactionary, modern-antimodern, critical-uncritical, etc.), which are indicative of art history’s avant-gardism. While this tradition and its binary categories have been severely criticized since the 1970s and 80s, at least, often under the banner of New Art History, both are due for reconsideration again, on several accounts. What we need is a new New Art History (but to call it that would be to utilize the old commodification rhetoric of the moderns).

Art history’s avant-gardism

A very short definition of the term avant-garde is this: “avant-garde Seeming to be ahead of its time.” Without being so? Yes, since no one can, literally speaking, be ahead of his or her time. The avant-garde is a metaphor on the desire to be and value of being ahead of – what exactly? Time is also a metaphor in this sentence, one which could possibly be exchanged for place, life or “life world”. The temporal imperative for the avant-gardist is thus to be somewhere before everybody else, granted that this position is deemed important, at least by some players on the field. How could an artist literally advance to this place/time? Well, to be most advanced of course, in terms of how one’s art is made and received. This does not just mean complex or complicated (advanced vs. general, qualified vs. basic), but to betray signs of (formal) experimentation, to be “most ‘advanced’ in their techniques and subject matter”. This is a completely West-centered concept rooted in Romantic notions of originality, genius and rudimentary historicism.

In the still authoritative 34 volume The Dictionary of Art, released by Grove Press in 1996, “avant-garde” was absent as an entry, indicating that it has led a rather limited and subcultural life within the discipline. The same year, the term “avant-garde” was included in the book Critical Terms for Art History (the second edition of which appeared in 2003). Ann Gibson wrote the following:

Members of the avant-garde who worked in [the] modernist vein often sought a way to accept the flux of modernity with its ruptures and fragmentations. This is a part of the modernist criteria by which Picasso’s abstractions – along with those of Manet, Cézanne, Proust, Torres-García, Pound, Kandinsky, Joyce, Benn, Mondrian, Eliot, Pollock, Stella, and other artists from the Enlightenment until at least the 1960s – remain of critical interest. It is curious to think of avant-gardists aiming to work in a modernist vein, since modernists are typically seen as the wider category, but this is explained in the text. The exemplification of artists, from the literary as well as the visual arts field, is broad, as it should be, but to have it include the Enlightenment (or “other artists” from this period without having named one) is a less common extension. A case in point of what I call art history’s metaphorical avant-gardism is the reference to what remains “of critical interest”, i.e. today. Why is that important for a historian to decide? Should we only work on artists that inspire us or that we identify with or feel attached to since they conform to our own “critical” interests? Why, furthermore, are Picasso’s abstractions still critically relevant or interesting to us? Apparently, since they derive from “modernist criteria” such as the acceptance of modernity as a ruptured and
fragmented “flux”. The idea of modernity as fraught with “ruptures and fragmentations” approximates what in 1996 was embraced in terms of postmodernity, while modern art was typically dismissed as too preoccupied with unity, purity, autonomy and medium-specificity. The phrasing could be a way to align the historical avant-garde with more currently favored attitudes, certain to “remain of critical interest”. This is art history as art criticism, but so is the most well-known research on the avant-garde as well, by Renato Poggioli, Peter Bürger and the entire October group. How the volatile “flux of modernity”, furthermore, could be cut up, ruptured and fragmented is hard to visualize. Another way to understand these ruptures and fragmentations is as a description of the capitalist mode of production, where the worker does his or her part on the conveyor belt, alienated from pre-modern forms of production, where the same person participated in the whole fabrication process, often for their own use. To “accept” these conditions, out of necessity and the daily income, however small, was hardly a positive affirmation, but a means to survive.

Our oily and carbon-driven modernity, which originated with the industrial revolution but was prepared by centuries of colonial exploitation and slavery, is basically preserved in the post-industrial world. Modernism is, roughly speaking, the art of this modernity, and postmodernism in art but an internal seismic shivering within modernity, and not the eruption or rupture it was pictured as some two decades ago. Its avant-garde ethos, its future-oriented pursuit of innovation and critical pushiness shares more than a little with the profit-driven expansionist capitalist economy. But how does this affect art history? Well, many of us seem under the pressure of similar impulses as we pick our subjects, either by basically affirming prevailing canons, to further investigate the most outstanding and doubly advanced artists, or by disputing the canon in question for not having included this or that artist or unduly marginalized phenomenon.

An example of a more recent case of scholarly avant-gardism is the ongoing project of A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries where the editors to the first volume display no qualms in identifying with the avant-garde proponents they set out to investigate. Adopting an “avant-garde point of view” themselves to study their avant-garde favorites seems like complete identification to me. It is also striking that the historical issue of where to locate the once edgy avant-garde in time is written off. The debate about the true, historical or “heroic” advances around 1910 is no longer played out against its belated appearance in the 1950s, to follow Bürger and Hal Foster. Now, the avant-garde is apparently always around (at least in the Nordic countries), never asleep, such a predictable tradition that it is best traced year by year since a century ago and more and is possibly also believed to extend into the foreseeable future as well. Another example, more recent:

… the contemporary art-historical present makes it very difficult to be untimely or anachronistic as it becomes increasingly difficult to identify a hegemonic time and history from which to differ; how can one be avant-garde without any tradition or hegemony from which to break away and distinguish oneself?

It is of course only from within a small theoretical bubble that it could be hard today to identify a dominant time, chronology or history, in the ordinary or vulgar sense of the word, considering that in the wake of the Anthropocene we have started to count
(down) the years until we cross too many thresholds and reach too many irreversible tipping points. To differ and break away in order to “distinguish oneself” is vintage avant-gardism. This self-centered avant-garde is precisely the “tradition and hegemony” from which we must break away today.

Art-historical avant-gardism is particularly obvious among art historians of the modernist and avant-garde-era, but as applicable, in principle, to all other art historians, in so far as they choose topics generated by a quality assessment and a favoring of the most advanced/original/groundbreaking (or, again, on artists who is not yet acknowledged as being any of this, but who deserves to be re-evaluated and arguably eventually resuscitated and incorporated into the family/history/canon/pantheon of high art.) In the anthology Critical Terms for Art History, from where I just discussed the entry “Avant-Garde”, the very term or semantic cluster of critique/critical/criticism/criticality is significantly absent. One would think that it would be rather important in such a book, and of course it is. So much so, in fact, that it is not even seen as a term or keyword at all, but as the very turf, soil or nature whereupon all the other terms are played out.

Critical conglomerate is perfectly naturalized and deserves to be denaturalized (in one sense of critical activity), which does not imply a wholesale condemnation, as far as I am concerned. Instead, it points to the need for a shifted ground, a more resilient and openly acknowledged (if fundamentally debatable) ground – less vertical and more horizontal is perhaps one way of putting it.

**Horizontal art history and its limits**

The typical history of art never explains what happened, as such, in a given era or time, which was historian Leopold von Ranke’s old question, it tells of the highest or most distinguished examples of a certain artist in a certain timeplace. This amounts to structurally disregarding most of all art in the world, most developments, most styles and expressions and local variations of certain traditions. In a recent Guerilla Girls poster, we read:

> Don’t let museums reduce art to the small number of artists who have won a popularity contest among big-time dealers, curators and collectors. If museums don’t show art as diverse as the cultures they claim to represent, tell them they’re not showing the history of art, they are just preserving the history of wealth & power (Fig. 2).

This is one expression of what a vertical account might be – a selection of the most popular artists among the economically and culturally powerful segments of the art world. In contrast, the Girls call for a fairer representation of the real diversity of art. This would require no less than “the history of art”. An art history that failed to include the cultural diversity of art, would merely be “the history of wealth & power”, and elite taste, I would add. The latter does not have to be understood as conservative or rear-garde but could just as well include the notorious radicality of the avant-garde, which is per definition an elite formation. The selected few, the big names (still, mostly Western males) stand in conflict with the real diversity, artistic ecosystem or horizontal spread out there.

The red thread through Piotr Piotrowski’s work is also about conceptualizing a more justly diverse history of art. In his programmatic proposal for “horizontal art history”, he is concerned with establishing “another paradigm of writing art history” than the dominating West-centered version that he also characterizes as “vertical”, meaning...
hierarchical. The latter history privileging Western art should, he argues, be deconstructed and supplemented with one attentive to the “marginalized” territories of the non-Western art world. The author started out with an empirical geographic focus on Europe but moved on to a global scope. As I have argued above, however, the critical impetus of taste-based value judgements, ushering in canons, is intrinsic to art history. All art history is thus vertical in the sense of hierarchical. The rhetorical move to play out of vertical against horizontal in Piotrowski’s initial texts on this subject misleadingly appears to refer two dimensions of the same space or two concepts belonging to the same scientific framework. The vertical dimension, however, is a scale of value, whereas the horizontal dimension pertains to geographic extensions in the real world. As much as it is important to acknowledge and pursue the latter routes and have them inform and reconstruct art history, it should be obvious that this by no means eliminate value judgements. There are plenty of them in Piotrowski’s own texts, and to his credit I should say that he wears his avant-gardism on his sleeve, and with pride, as opposed to most art historians, and he makes no efforts to conceal the fact that he is a “critical” scholar, in the hard and passionate sense of this word. In a later text, his geo-historically derived geometric figures shift, in that “horizontal” is now counter-posed to “circular”. Rather than circling around Western art centers, he is interested in studying “the horizontal, parallel dimension” from a transnational to a global perspective. Aiming for fair representation of art from all over the world, as the Guerilla Girls did, is one important thing, but I am unconvinced of the value in conducting what he terms “global comparative studies”. Notwithstanding the good intentions of criticizing and resisting “centralistic and
exclusive art-historical activities and [the] ability to reveal mechanisms of building hierarchy and hegemony as well as repression and denial in the global scale,” this drone perspective, nevertheless, leaves me dizzy. Inspired by the limits of critique, analyzed by Felski, and the literal horizontality of Piotrowski’s work, I will now move on to my low variant.

**A manifest alternative in twelve steps**

Rita Felski’s 2008 book *Uses of Literature* is framed as an “un-manifesto”, which is still a kind of manifesto, a genre thriving on negations and paradox. This incites me to draw up a mock-modernist manifesto of my own, abbreviated to twelve points, in no particular order. After all, alternatives must not just be talked about, but fleshed out in empirical detail. Since there is no room for this here, obviously, the following suggestions will have to do. Hopefully they suffice to conjure up the picture of an alternative practice of art historiography. What I have only gradually become conscious of is that while Felski is most interested in aesthetics (*aisthesis*), in the reading, reception and affect of literary works, my interest is poetic (*poiesis*) in the old Greek sense of creation or “the activity in which a person brings something into being that did not exist before”. Art history writing attuned to the Anthropocene is such a thing. So, what are the problems with current practices in our field and what could we do about them?

**Problem 1.** Elitism and canonicity – an obsession with greatness, hierarchies and ranking. Counter strategy: study constellations, associations, links, rhizomes, multiplicities, intensities and conglomerates regardless of fame or quality.

**Problem 2.** Anthropocentrism and individualism – focusing on artists as salient, innovative and deserving of superlatives. Counter strategy: follow the works and their connections to other material agents and mediators, human and non-human; realize an art history without names.

**Problem 3.** Subjectivism and estheticism – where the chosen objects of study narcissistically mirror the refined taste and critical sensibility of the historian. Counter strategy: reserve your personal affections for other genres than linear historical narratives, such as criticism, essays and fiction, and recycle the energy from your passions and antipathies into new ways to write the history of the subjects of art we call artworks.

**Problem 4.** Linear and teleological narratives of history – unidirectionality as the norm, blinding us to “time layers” and other temporal spaces. Counter strategy: embrace anachrony or a heterochronic mindset, where each work is “polytemporal”, belonging to several times, trajectories, patterns and networks, and where old works can be as good as new, if actualized/realized anew.

**Problem 5.** Progressivism and avant-gardism – *plus ultra!* (further beyond). Counter strategy: practice detox from this modern urge to advance at all costs, by adopting amodern strategies of slowing down, circling, meandering, reusing and repeating, without being nervous about thus betraying criticality and other contemporary mandates. On the contrary, slowing down and reusing fly in the face of capitalist neoliberal imperatives. This is now subversive, if that is what you aim for.

**Problem 6.** West-centrism and patriarchalism – spawned by the old definition of high culture as white and male. Counter strategy: support
the ongoing resistance to this legacy but be alert when this critique creates its own doxa, and continues to focus on individuals, nations, the avant-garde and artistic greatness/fame/impact. Pay attention (Utopia alert!) to ethnicity, class and sex so you can ignore them.

Problem 7. Colonialism and oppression – including an unresolved relation to slavery and the fact that every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism.\(^5\) Counter strategy: explore and expose these conditions of possibility for much of art history’s material and let them inform your interpretation and representation of the past. Despite that all art and what surrounds it is political, value the endangered species of the neutral.\(^6\)

Problem 8. Nationalism and internationalism – the prioritization of geopolitical territories as determinants of art in art history. Counter strategy: supplement, on the one hand, these modern but old units with much smaller, real particularities, way below any national level, and, on the other hand, with much larger geographic regions, climate zones and ecological perspectives including the new universalism of the planetary, and its critical condition.

Problem 9. Methodological reductivism – concerning period styles, isms, schools, genres, etc. Counter strategy: although these categories are useful in big museums and archives, they risk closing the art historical imagination and turn every work of art into a predetermined, imprisoned and chrononormative entity.\(^7\) Proceed bottom-up, not top-down and try to think of categories as results, not as preconditions or premises.

Problem 10. The alliance between the market and the institution of art history – especially relevant regarding big museums. Counter strategy: make yourself aware of such connections and binds, where this applies. Let them inform your work but make the effort to seek out other and broader empirical materials (most art never wind up in museums).

Problem 11. Hermeneutics and comparativism – the desire to attain closure in interpretation and the trust in the value of comparing pomegranates and plums. Counter strategy: the idea that final decisions can be reached on what artworks mean is inattentive to the fact that artworks age and transform in time. While comparison is epistemologically necessary, think hard about the reasons for comparing this to that – most comparisons are irrelevant.

Problem 12. Perplexity vis-à-vis the Anthropocene – the dark aspect of the modernity whose bright face is modern art as the sign of modern “man”. Counter strategy: consider the ecological consequences of business as usual. Modern art history needs to find ways to change its modus operandi in view of a new ontology, a new “nature” and new ways of life (“culture”), without further glorifying the slim cutting edge, perpetual innovation and artistic growth til kingdom come (or the Apocalypse).

Notes


Besides, perhaps, that certain kinds of built heritage are threatened by flooding or erosion.


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37. The floating, flowing, fleeting metaphors seem rather irresistible, not only to the modern period, pace Zygmund Bauman’s “liquid modernity”, but to the “contemporary”, as well, at least in Terry Smith’s account, where contemporary art comes in three “currents”. Zygmund Bauman, Liquid Modernity, Cambridge: Polity, 2000; Terry Smith, Contemporary Art: World Currents, London: Laurence King, 2011.


44. These are the terms from the extended 2003 edition: representation, sign, simulacrum, word & Image, narrative, performance, style, context, meaning/interpretation, originality, appropriation, art history, modernism, avant-garde, primitive, memory/monument, body, beauty, ugliness, ritual, fetish, gaze, gender, identity, production, commodity, collecting/museums, value, postmodernism/postcolonialism, visual culture/visual studies, social history of art, figuration. It should be noted that the title of the book beginning Critical Terms is generic and has been applied to other academic fields as well.


49. Piotrowski, 2015, p. 129.


52. The latter was formulated as a future vision by Wölflin in Heinrich Wölflin, Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das
Problem der Stilentwickelung in der neureren Kunst, München: Bruckmann, 1915, Vorwort, p. V.


54. The term “polytemporal” is from Latour, 1994.


55. Latour has of late wisely cautioned against ascribing too much agency to capitalism and suggested that we instead “limit the number of things that [we] can attribute to capitalism […] let’s distribute them and see what’s actually happening”, which would imply a more particular, detailed and less sweeping critique.


58. “We cannot close our eyes to the historicity of art works, and yet we sorely need alternatives to seeing them as transcendentally timeless on the one hand and imprisoned in their moment of origin on the other.” Felski, 2015, p. 154. On chrononormativity, see Elizabeth Freeman, Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories, Durham & London: Duke U.P., 2010.

Summary

Looking at both critique and postcritique in relation to art history, in general, and art historiography, in particular, this article suggests that art history’s critical heritage runs longer and deeper than a “hermeneutics of suspicion” signals, and that this state of affairs is therefore a deeper and wider problem than how to overcome and replace critique. The latter term, for art history, is of a piece with the modernity/modernism/avant-gardism of this discipline, which – despite declarations to the contrary – is not over, and which therefore makes today’s critical (in the sense of dangerous and urgent) situation of imminent climate disaster even harder to come to terms with. What our discipline is arguably in need of in the epoch of the Anthropocene – save for contributing to saving the world – is a new way of composing histories of art. In search of such a more unbiased model I will discuss temporal conceptions, including the Anthropocene itself as well as François Hartog’s ideas on “presentism”, and draw on Piotr Piotrowski’s attempt to construct a spatially extended “horizontal art history”, as opposed to the hierarchical West-centered one, in order, finally, to propose the outlines of an alternative, inspired by Bruno Latour – a twelve-step sketch that is horizontal in a more neutral and material sense, and which responds to the keywords anachronic, amodern and acritical.

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