

Bernardo Ortiz Campo
**Criticism and
Experience**

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Criticism and Experience

By Way of an Introduction

This text is an essay, and as such, it is also an exercise in speculation. To speculate here means to take the following question seriously: why would an art magazine only publish photographs in black and white? Insofar as this question implies the possibility of critically interpreting a design decision, this essay can speak about graphic design – but in an oblique way. What is really at stake here concerns the relationship between art and writing – a relationship that begs to be viewed broadly, and in such a way that we might consider the means, media, and channels through which writing on art circulates, hence the possibility of taking the question seriously.

It is seldom that art writing becomes involved in a debate about its own means and media, as has always been common with art-making. And although I do not address the political implications of this scarcity here, I do believe that it is something that warrants further consideration. Art writing, especially in the context of the last few decades, with its determination to erase all vestiges of belletrism, has renounced its experimental condition, which resonates with the Spanish word *ensayo* (which means “essay,” but also “attempt”). In any case, this essay, or attempt, aims to suggest there to be more of a relationship between art and writing than simply what is implied by the conjunction “and” between the two words – in other words, a relationship surpassing that of a discipline and its object of study.

One can say that there is writing about art, above art, across art, after art, against art, along art, alongside art, amid art, among art, around art, as art, atop art, barring art, before art, behind art, below art, beneath art, beside art, besides art, between art, beyond art, by art, concerning art, despite art, except art, excluding art, failing art, following art, for art, from art, in art, including art, inside art, into art, like art, minus art, near art, next to art, notwithstanding art, of art, off art, on art, onto art, opposite art, out of art, outside art, over art, pace art, past art, per art, qua art, regarding art, since art, through art, throughout art, to art, towards art, under art, underneath art, unlike art, until art, upon art, versus art, via art, with art, within art and without art (and vice-versa). I assume that the act of writing allows one to understand things that can only be understood when written, just as there are things that can only be understood in the presence of art. The relationship between writing about art and experiencing art do not exclude each other. But at the same time, neither can be completely subsumed by the other. And both contaminate one another.

I.

October

There is a journal of art theory, criticism, and history that has a rather curious editorial policy: all the images that it publishes – which don't amount to many – appear in black and white. Since the journal in question has had a decisive influence on the ecosystem of contemporary art during the past twenty years, asking why they would make such a decision is hardly an outlandish question. Their editorial of their first issue addresses the matter:

October will be plain of aspect, its illustrations determined by considerations of textual clarity. These decisions follow from a fundamental choice as to the primacy of text and the writer's freedom of discourse. Long working experience with major art journals has convinced us of the need to restore to the criticism of painting and sculpture, as to that of other arts, an intellectual autonomy seriously undermined by emphasis on extensive reviewing and lavish illustration. October wishes to address those readers who, like many writers and artists, feel that the present format of the major art reviews is producing a form of pictorial journalism which deflects and compromises critical effort. Limited and judicious illustration will contribute to the central aim of October's texts: the location of those coordinates whose axes chart contemporary artistic practice and significant critical discourse.¹

Beyond this paragraph, not much has been written on the subject. This should come as no surprise; there seems to be little interest in decisions that are apparently formal and consequently lack importance. After all, the simple – and even boring – design of that journal is clearly intended to direct the reader's attention exclusively to its content.

But why should one shy away from these formal questions? Shouldn't those decisions – even if they are merely formal, or precisely because they are merely formal – be consistent with a position regarding the relationship between text and image? Positions that, instead of being articulated in writing, are materialized in the design of a journal about art? And, when thinking about an art journal, shouldn't one consider its form?

First I must state that there are most likely no technical or economic reasons behind the editorial decision to publish reproductions of

artworks in black and white. Such rationales can be discarded if we consider that this journal, published by the MIT Press, boasts a long list of prominent benefactors, listed just as they often are in museums. This method of financing has, in fact, an important consequence of allowing the journal to maintain its editorial independence, thus liberating it from the multicolor advertisements that plague other journals and magazines. However, let me underline that this consequence must not simply be seen as a pleasant collateral effect of its financing scheme: if the design, as inconspicuous as it may be, is directed at emphasizing the journal's content, then it is the financing that makes it possible in the first place, precisely by avoiding unnecessary editorial pressures that typically demand that a layout use color photographs.

If the reason is not economic, one could allege that it is a matter of taste. A rather conservative or nostalgic taste. Perhaps it is a snobbish way to differentiate itself from other journals and magazines. As if black and white were the undisputed symbol of seriousness. But if that were the case, their editorial criteria would be arbitrary and frivolous. And if its founders went to great lengths to devise a financing scheme that guaranteed both editorial and advertising independence, it would be absurd for the journal's layout to be determined by taste. The journal's design should spring from the critical apparatus that gives form to the journal itself. One should recognize that critical writing is not devoid of formal issues.

The decision to only publish black and white photographs had to be the fruit, the material condensation, of an idea concerning the relationship between text and image in critical writing. It's as if the editors were saying, "Our position is such-and-such, therefore the journal has this format, these texts, and these photographs. That is why it takes this form." Understood in this way, an editorial policy becomes open to aesthetic appreciation. And for a while, this small twist turned into an obsession for me: I had to understand the logic behind that form, the logic in the decision to only publish photographs in black and white – a Logic that I would have to derive from the journal itself.

Rodchenko

In the spring of 2000 in an article on Nikolai Tarabukin, the journal reproduced three monochrome paintings by Alexander Rodchenko: *Pure Red Color*, *Pure Yellow Color*, and *Pure Blue Color*.² These three paintings, reproduced in black and white, resulted in three rectangles showing different shades of gray. As I looked at them, I found myself asking whether it made sense to reproduce them at all. I even

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entertained the possibility that the reproductions weren't images of the actual paintings, that perhaps they had been "rendered" by the journal's photomechanical process, and that the only thing that identified them as paintings by Rodchenko were the captions. I intuited that this extreme case could offer a reason for the black-and-white reproductions – hypothetical, of course, for being the fruit of my speculation, but a reason nonetheless.

Parenthesis

In retrospect, it turns out to be significant that it was an article on the Soviet avant-garde that shed some light on the subject. Not just because the journal is called *October*, but also because it has published quite a few papers on the subject of the Soviet avant-garde and its relationship to design. After all, it was the constructivists themselves who looked for a greater correspondence between material forms and the processes that give rise to those forms.

Proust's Grandmother

In truth, what came to light at that moment wasn't the Soviet avant-garde, but rather a scene from *In Search of Lost Time*. It's a paragraph near the beginning of the first part of the first volume. The narrator, still a boy, has managed to convince Françoise, the maid, to bring a note to his mother requesting her presence (under false pretenses). This whim irritates the mother. Nevertheless, she agrees to a goodnight kiss and to read from a Georges Sand book that his grandmother had given to him on his birthday. He goes on to describe what he calls "grandmother's art of making presents":

The truth was that she could never permit herself to buy anything from which no intellectual profit was to be derived, above all the profit which fine things afford us by teaching us to seek our pleasures elsewhere than in the barren satisfaction of worldly wealth. Even when she had to make someone a present of the kind called "useful," when she had to give an armchair or some table-silver or a walking-stick, she would choose antiques, as though their long desuetude had effaced from them any semblance of utility and fitted them rather to instruct us in the lives of the men of other days than to serve the common requirements of our own. She would have liked me to have in my room photographs of ancient buildings or of beautiful places. But at the moment of buying them, and for all that the subject of the picture had an aesthetic value, she would find that

vulgarity and utility had too prominent a part in them, through the mechanical nature of their reproduction by photography. She attempted by a subterfuge, if not to eliminate altogether this commercial banality, at least to minimise it, to supplant it to a certain extent with what was art still, to introduce, as it were several "thicknesses" of art: instead of photographs of Chartres Cathedral, of the Fountains of Saint-Cloud, or of Vesuvius, she would inquire of Swann whether some great painter had not depicted them, and preferred to give me photographs of "Chartres Cathedral" after Corot, of the "Fountains of Saint-Cloud" after Hubert Robert, and of "Vesuvius" after Turner, which were a stage higher in the scale of art. But although the photographer had been prevented from reproducing directly these masterpieces or beauties of nature, and had there been replaced by a great artist, he resumed his odious position when it came to reproducing the artist's interpretation. Accordingly, having to reckon again with vulgarity, my grandmother would endeavour to postpone the moment of contact still further. She would ask Swann if the picture had not been engraved, preferring, when possible, old engravings with some interest of association apart from themselves, such, for example, as show us a masterpiece in a state in which we can no longer see it today (like Morghen's print of Leonardo's "Last Supper" before its defacement). It must be admitted that the results of this method of interpreting the art of making presents were not always happy. The idea which I formed of Venice, from a drawing by Titian which is supposed to have the lagoon in the background, was certainly far less accurate than what I should have derived from ordinary photographs. We could no longer keep count in the family (when my great-aunt wanted to draw up an indictment of my grandmother) of all the armchairs she had presented to married couples, young and old, which on a first attempt to sit down upon them had at once collapsed beneath the weight of their recipients. But my grandmother would have thought it sordid to concern herself too closely with the solidity of any piece of furniture in which could still be discerned a flourish, a smile, a brave conceit of the past. And even what in such pieces answered a material need, since it did so in a manner to which we are no longer accustomed, charmed her like those old forms of speech in which we

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can still see traces of a metaphor whose fine point has been worn away by the rough usage of our modern tongue. As it happened, the pastoral novels of George Sand which she was giving me for my birthday were regular lumber-rooms full of expressions that have fallen out of use and become quaint and picturesque, and are now only to be found in country dialects. And my grandmother had bought them in preference to other books, as she would more readily have taken a house with a Gothic dovecot or some other such piece of antiquity as will exert a benign influence on the mind by giving it a hankering for impossible journeys through the realms of time.³

Grandmother wanted to make evident that there was a time and a distance between that object and her grandson. Photography, she surely felt, could give him the pernicious illusion of immediacy; the illusion that nothing stands between the image and the thing. Grandmother's concerns are in fact my hypothesis. The photographs are reproduced in black and white in order to remind the reader of a distance between himself or herself and the work being

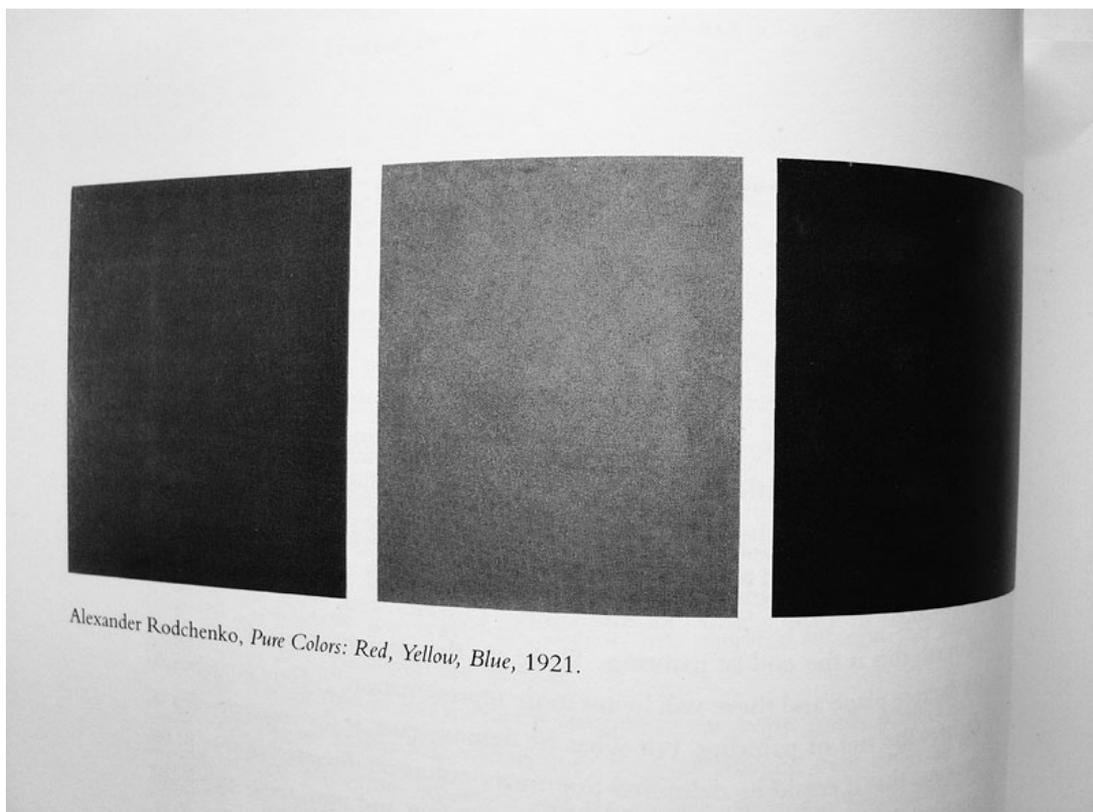
reproduced – a distance that one knows is there, but which is occasionally masked using reproductions.

Parenthesis

Retrospectively, I also think about a work by John Baldessari: *The Best Way to Do Art*. The work reproduces a photograph of a Boeing 747 airplane. The caption under the photograph reads:

A young artist in art school used to worship the paintings of Cézanne. He looked at and studied all the books he could find on Cézanne and copied all of the reproductions of Cézanne's work he found in the books. He visited a museum and for the first time saw a real Cézanne painting. He hated it. It was nothing like the Cézannes he had studied in books. From that time on, he made all of his paintings the sizes of paintings reproduced in books and he painted them in black and white. He also printed captions and explanations on the paintings as in books. Often he just used words. And one day he realized that very few people went to art galleries and museums but many people looked at books

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Rosalind Krauss et al., eds. October 93. Lithographic impression, 2000.

and magazines as he did and they got them through the mail as he did. Moral: It's difficult to put a painting in a mailbox.⁴

The distance Grandmother tried to make evident between the object (Chartres Cathedral, for example) and her grandson is the same distance that separates Baldessari's young artist and the paintings of Cézanne. But that's not all: there is a distance between the two examples, a distance that reveals itself in the changing relationships with photographs between the late nineteenth-century child and Baldessari's young art student.

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John Baldessari. *The Best Way To Do Art*. Photography and text, varying dimensions, 1971.

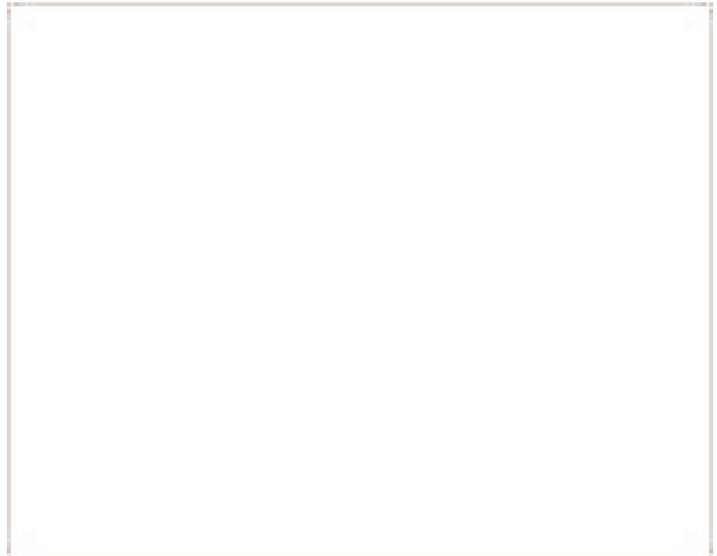
It is precisely in this interplay of various distances that I find solid reasoning for the journal's image policy, even with regard to Rodchenko's monochrome paintings. With its black-and-white reproductions, the journal is using what appears to be a technical limitation, an anachronism, to expose a distance between a critical text and the work of art it portrays. But this distance is not identified to reveal a limitation in writing, but rather to make it clear that this distance will always be insurmountable in the end. Nevertheless, this insurmountable distance should be taken as a starting point. A luscious and flawless color reproduction may give the illusion that there is no distance, and that, I contend, is the reason why the editors decided to publish only black-and-white reproductions in the journal.

II.

Writing about art is a struggle with the void of distance. Of distances, to be precise: the distance between the work and the text; the distance between the artist and the writer (a critic, an art historian, and so forth); and the distance between the text and the reader. Although one can say that this void is true for all writing, in the case of art it goes both ways. There is a gap separating the text from the work and there is a distance separating the reader from the text. But art writing sees itself as if it were just a way of transmitting the work, as if the experience of writing – the struggle with the void

of distance – were subordinate to the experience of the work.

For some time, art writing has served to preserve the artwork's originality – in its most literal sense, in its proximity to the origin. While we know that a work of art has no single unequivocal origin, the myth of the artist as its sole author continues to be the cornerstone of the institutional apparatus of art. Museums, critics, art history, even popular ideas on art (to say nothing of the art market and the art industry) are almost always geared towards preserving that originality, that mythical origin. "What was the artist's intent?" "What did she mean?" These questions are asked of almost any work, as if the artist's experience were the only horizon available for interpretation. I emphasize the word "only," as the main demand of any discourse on art is for it to address these questions. Art writing, then, would seem to have a clear role: to bridge the distance separating the work from the reader. That is the benevolent – humanist – conception of art writing: that it bring the viewer closer to the work. But if that distance is ultimately insurmountable, this task cannot be fulfilled. And so art writing is condemned to being a sterile and futile task.



Paul Cézanne. *Le Mont Sainte-Victoire*. Oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 35 1/4 in., 1902–04. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

This perspective relies on the notion that art writing is purely mimetic: if the interpretative horizon is to preserve some mythical originality of the work – namely, the artist's intent – then the text must articulate in words what the artist did. The words must imitate the work itself, becoming a translation of sorts. Like a mirror, words would reflect what the artist meant to say, his true intention – and the closer the text to that intention, the truer the text becomes, the better the mirror. Understood this way, a critical text

simply hashes out the contours of whatever the artist was trying to say, as if writing were a poor substitute for the experience of art. And in the process, this text, this writer renounces the experience of writing. At this point it might be useful to remember Baldessari's piece. The young artist copied not only the reproductions – in black and white – of Cézanne's paintings, but also the captions and other accompanying text.

The marked separation between the act of writing and the act of reading is partly responsible for art writing being an imitative form – someone reading an article or essay about a work of art is doubly removed from the work. The text would be the shadow of a shadow. This is implicit in this way of understanding art criticism and also explains why the critic is so often described as a passive figure, lacking in experience – a frustrated artist, weak and haggard, condemned to living in a world of shadows. As Baudelaire wrote:

You can see a drawing of Gavarni showing a painter bending over his canvas; behind him is a solemn, dried-up-looking gentleman, stiff, with a white tie, and holding in his hand the newspaper with its serial story. "If art is noble, criticism is holy." "Who said that?" "Criticism did!" If the artist so easily plays the fine role, it is because the critic resembles all the critics who come a dime a dozen. In terms of ways and means drawn from the works themselves, the public and the artist have nothing to learn from this. Such matters are studied in the studio, and the public is perturbed only over the result.⁵

The artist indeed plays the finest role, as Baudelaire rightly asserts, because the critic has allowed himself to be caught up in "ways and means drawn from the works themselves." In other words, their writing seeks only to imitate, to be mimetic. The critic described by Baudelaire does not take advantage of his own experience, even as a writer, neglecting even what his own act of writing could bring into consideration. What lies beneath this is the myth – which is very much alive – that critical writing is fundamentally devoid of experience, stripped of the intoxicating experience of creation. When Baudelaire announces the need for a biased and enthusiastic critic, what he is really looking for is a critic rife with experience.

An Essay by Agamben

In an essay titled "Infancy and History," Giorgio Agamben points out two things which are relevant here. Firstly: in the modern age there has been an absolute inversion in the role of the

imagination and its relation to the act of knowing. "For antiquity," Agamben writes, "the imagination, which is now expunged from knowledge as 'unreal,' was the supreme medium of knowledge."⁶ Imagination is no longer "the intermediary between the senses and the intellect, enabling, in fantasy, the union between the sensible form and the potential intellect."⁷ And secondly: the exile of the imagination also implies an exile of desire. That is to say, the modern concept of science is lacking in both desire and imagination. As Agamben writes, "Indeed, the phantasm, which is the true source of desire ('phantasia ea est, quae totum parit desiderium') is also – as mediator between man and object – the condition for the attainability of the object of desire and therefore, ultimately, for desire's satisfaction."⁸ This latter instance seeks to achieve what Duchamp notoriously wanted, namely "to grasp things with the mind the way the penis is grasped by the vagina": the phantasm appears through writing.⁹

The critical act contains two forms of experience. One is obvious, and has to do with the experience of being in the presence of a work of art. The second is related to the first one: it is the experience of writing. The act of writing allows for a different sort of relationship with the work, one that does not have to be mimetic. In fact, it is here that the demands of a mimetic language become counter-productive. This is precisely what Baudelaire criticized: a way of writing devoid of imagination and desire, to use Agamben's words. "Critics who come a dime a dozen" are those who don't develop a means of writing *around* the works of art. In other words, they instrumentalize language, a neutral informative tone being the clearest symptom of this. That mimetic exigency is ingrained in the notion of what a theoretical discipline must be, and is a direct consequence of the exile of imagination, as Agamben puts it.

A critical text can affect its object of study. That is why art criticism, history, and theory must acknowledge a complicated relationship with art. To an even greater degree than much experimental scientific research, these disciplines can, and often do, transform the object of their study, even just by looking at it. Nevertheless, all the academic, institutional, and bureaucratic protocols surrounding art writing pretend that this is not the case. And this problem, which would seem to be a purely theoretical one, is expressed in the statutes of artistic investigation within academic institutions, in the nearly schizophrenic separation between theoretical and applied courses in art.

October, Again

To revisit the journal's editorial decision to publish photographs in black and white: we can now understand it as a way of maintaining distance, an avoidance of illusory tricks that draw us uncritically close to the object, as would a color reproduction of the three paintings by Rodchenko, for instance. Such tricks would grant writing a secondary role, making it almost irrelevant. It is a provisional solution to the problem of distance, as if it were only a matter of time until one day the work of art could be completely transmitted.

III.

And what if art writing is understood as an exercise? In Western culture the possibility of learning through exercise has been gradually lost over time, whereas exercise was one of the fundamental means of understanding something throughout all of antiquity. Art is, perhaps, the last holdout of exercise in contemporary life. One of the important consequences of art education at the university level is that it forces us to keep a form of exercise-based learning available – which, deep down, is a form of learning based on experience.

To understand the act of writing about art as an exercise does not imply that writing should abandon the rigor of established academic norms. But the notion of exercise adds another layer, another level of depth that brings with it a necessary reflection on the channels through which criticism circulates. This is why the journal's editorial decision, as I have repeated, is so important: critical content is not articulated uniquely through words – its design can also articulate a critical position, and in this particular case it is the design that opens the distance between work and text.

An (Artistic) Example

Shortly before becoming an artist, Vito Acconci published a journal of poetry called *0 to 9* together with Bernadette Mayer. The title refers to a series of drawings by Jasper Johns that are themselves called *0 through 9*. In the drawings, Johns superimposed these numbers on top of each other. A manual process. The journal was printed by mimeograph. Acconci typed all the stencils himself and found the simple act of sitting down and typing away to be pleasurable, so much so that he began transcribing other texts that he liked – texts, diaries, and travel notes by Flaubert, obscure nineteenth-century poems – simply for the pleasure of doing so. The transcription became an exercise, and was a continuation of the manner in which he had begun to write poetry: translating twelve verses by Aeschylus, which were protracted to fill

fifteen pages, with the “translation” of each verse occupying nearly an entire page. The interesting thing is that making the journal became an exercise in and of itself, and that exercise became a vehicle that returns to poetry.

Understood as an exercise, writing fosters understanding through the experience of writing. This type of writing is not only a source of information, but is also a means of transformation.

Another (Non-artistic) Example

In Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, a teacher during the Age of Enlightenment named Joseph Jacotot has an intellectual adventure, a revelation if you will. It all began when he taught French to a group of Dutch students. As he did not himself know Dutch, Jacotot distributed a bilingual edition of François Fénelon's novel *The Adventures of Telemachus* to the students, and instructed them to learn the French text by way of the Dutch translation. “How surprised he was to discover,” wrote Rancière, “that the students, left to themselves, handled this difficult step as well as many French could have done!” This gets Jacotot thinking:

He had given no explanation to his “students” on the first elements of the language. He had not explained spelling or conjugations to them. They had looked for the French words that corresponded to words they knew and the reasons for their grammatical endings by themselves. They had learned to put them together to make, in turn, French sentences by themselves: sentences whose spelling and grammar became more and more exact as they progressed through the book; but, above all, sentences of writers and not of school children. Were the schoolmaster's explications therefore superfluous? Or, if they weren't, to whom and for what were they useful?¹⁰

“But [they were], above all, sentences of writers and not of schoolchildren” is a phrase that perfectly synthesizes the thesis with which this text must conclude. And it is this: understood as an exercise that reclaims the role of imagination in the act of knowing, criticism is a creative process in itself. Its medium is language, as well as all the mediations that occur within it, the variety of media through which language flows. One could say, therefore, that criticism is a productive act. In other words, a transformation of reality. Again, according to Rancière:

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In the act of speaking, man doesn't transmit his knowledge, he makes poetry; he translates and invites others to do the same. He communicates as an artisan: as a person who handles words like tools. Man communicates with man through the works of his hands just as through the words of his speech: [Citing Jacotot] "When man acts on matter, the body's adventures become the story of the mind's adventures." [. . .] He communicates as a poet: as a being who believes his thought communicable, his emotions sharable. [. . .] The artisan must speak about his works in order to be emancipated; the student must speak about the art he wants to learn. [Again citing Jacotot] "Speaking about human works is the way to know human art."¹¹

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Translated from the Spanish by Ezra Fitz.

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Bernardo Ortiz Campo (Bogotá, 1972) is an artist and writer. He studied at Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá (BFA) and Universidad del Valle, Cali (MA Philosophy). He was editorial curator for the 7^a Bienal do Mercosul that took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2009, teaches at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, and is a permanent member of the advisory board at Lugar A Dudas in Cali, Colombia. Recent projects *Valdez Magazine* (co-editor, featured in Documenta 11, Kassel 2007) and "41 Salón Nacional de Artistas" in Cali (co-curator).

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1
Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, "About October." *October* 1 (Spring 1976), 5.

2
Maria Gough, "Tarabukin, Spengler, and the Art of Production," *October* 93 (Summer 2000), 86.

3
Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 1, *Swann's Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library / Random House, 1998), 53–55.

4
Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

5
Charles Baudelaire, "What Is the Use of Criticism?" in *Flowers of Evil and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Wallace Fowlie (New York: Bantam Books, 1964), 155.

6
Giorgio Agamben, "Infancy and History: An Essay on the Destruction of Experience," in *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), 24.

7
Ibid.

8
Ibid., 25.

9
Duchamp said this in September 1956 to Lawrence D. Steefel, Jr., who was writing his dissertation on *The Large Glass* for Princeton University. See Lawrence D. Steefel, Jr., *The Position of Duchamp's Glass in the Development of His Art* (New York: Garland, 1977), 312.

10
Jacques Rancière., *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 3–4.

11
Ibid., 64–65.

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