

Against Art as a Radical Subjectivity

(an excerpt from the 2019 O:JA&L interview)



2020 Pamphlet Series

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Rachel Custer

Editorials on Issues of Poetic Practice

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My critique, then, of mainstream contemporary artistic practice is a critique of an ideology that would argue against the existence and/or necessity of objective truth, much less the importance of seeking it. That ideology is rampant in the artistic mainstream of the day, especially in the academy, where the basic idea that there exists objectively *good* art has been all but disposed of in favor of a radical subjectivity – and this among people who believe they are teaching art!

At its root, it is inconsistent: if art is entirely subjective, entirely rooted in the identity of the artist, then it can't be taught. Moreover, there's no *reason* for it to be taught. There is no improvement of craft if objective excellence does not exist, because there is nothing against which to measure whether we are improving or getting worse. In that way, can MFA programs as they are currently structured and tied to the academy be anything more than the most callous grift?

Worse, art rooted in critical theories that embrace a stance of radical subjectivity becomes nothing more than a mirror for the most popular critical theory, a way to signal that one believes the current thing. In that way, academia and its effect on the arts represents an institutionalization of art, an erecting of a status quo. Worst of all, this status quo has somehow managed to convince itself it is subversion, and its art subversive. I recently got flak for telling several editors of well-read publications that they *are* the poetry status quo – and I was right. Identity aside, if one is earning enough money to put him at twice the cutoff for the top 1 percent of the world (or more!) by teaching and writing poetry, and if that person has access to daily interaction with poets, and if that person has the ability to influence the publication of others, that person serves the same function in poetry as do the police in society – they keep it safe from the riff raff as an institution.

I have no use for poetry police. I find censorship of art, even at the level of thought, abhorrent, because it hinders another person in her enactment of that part of her that most resembles God. Of course, we all sometimes support the institutions of which we are a part, and sometimes subvert them. But my critique is of the full-on denial that is happening among much of the current “art community” as far as *who*, exactly, is currently benefitting from the structure of its institutionalization.

We have reached the point where much of the poetry being written and lauded is, above all, firmly rooted in the right beliefs in the right academic theories. If you write a poem that says acceptable things, it will be loved and lauded – even if it’s terrible. To even say that is to risk censure, harassment, and blacklisting. But anybody who speaks the truth knows that a good deal of this poetry is simply not good poetry. It’s little more than propaganda and glad-handing. We tie ourselves in knots to avoid that knowledge, out of some perverted sense of justice, but art has nothing to do with justice. Art has to do with Truth, and the Truth is that the world is not fair.

Not everybody can write well. To the extent that we continue to sacrifice excellence in art to “right thinking,” our art will become more and more degraded. What once was a publication that introduced an artistic genius like T.S. Eliot will begin to publish poop poems and pop nonsense. It’s a larger societal issue, too, of course, because we have stopped seeking Truth as a society as well. If I critique art, I must critique myself, because it is a fearsome thing to speak the Truth in a world full of deceit. But if I seek art, I must seek the Truth, and there is no point in knowing the Truth if one does not speak it.

As a gay woman, I refuse to label myself as “marginalized,” personally – *especially* when it comes to art. And that is because that is so far away from all that I am, and all that I want my art to be. But mostly, it’s because I want my art to be objectively excellent as often as it is possible for me to make it so. And if I imprison myself inside subjectivity, I fear I will limit my ability to brush up against the Truth. Excellent writers will write excellently from inside any ideology (e.g. Danez Smith, Kaveh Akbar, & Jericho Brown are all poets whose work is firmly rooted in identity theories who write great poems), but as for me, I choose liberty. In my mind, that ideology suggests that I, as a gay woman, am unable to write as objectively well as, for instance, a straight

white male. I reject that. If I truly cannot, let me be sifted out and let art thrive. If I can, then why would I make myself anybody's victim? I've been made a victim by force in my life; as far as it falls to me, I choose to label myself a survivor as often as I can.

We must take poetry back for Truth, if our poetry is ever to matter beyond our own follower count. To do that, we must stop lying to ourselves about who is writing good poetry, and about who is currently rewarded in the arts and why. Sometimes, no matter who writes it or publishes it, a poop poem is just a poem about human waste. My critique of artists is that we do not say it.

Finally, and most stringently, anybody who would blacklist another artist I do not consider an artist. That, to me, is thoroughly evil. That being said, the best way to know who is enacting art in truly subversive ways - in this or any environment - is to look at who is being actively silenced. Though I detest blacklisting, I almost want to always be on somebody's blacklist, or on the verge of being "unpublishable in polite literary magazines." Otherwise, I am probably speaking more about what is popular than what is true.

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<https://ojarart.com/>

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Alternate theme: “Nocturne”

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January 1-December 31

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Call for Prints/Lithographs/Engravings

January 1-December 31

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Call for Watercolors

January 1-December 31

2020 theme: “Military”

Alternate theme: “First Responders”

Call for Oil, Acrylic/Other Paintings on canvas/other

January 1-December 31

2020 theme: “Lovers”

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January 1-December 31

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