***Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*. Hal Foster. London: Verso, 2015. Pp. 196 (cloth).**

Reviewed by Mark Steven, University of New South Wales

During one of the now overly familiar episodes in Marxist aesthetics, Bertolt Brecht accused Georg Lukács of abandoning thought to ahistorical formalism because of an adherence to generic stricture. While Lukács held that the great realists of the nineteenth century would ably guide proletarian and socialist writers in the twentieth, Brecht dissented, arguing that, since the age of Balzac and Tolstoy, the social reality of capitalism had undergone massive structural transformations, which both superseded the social systems depicted by those realists and superannuated the narrow canon of representations Lukács sought to champion. In Brecht's view, if we are to establish "a living and combative literature," the challenge is "to "keep step with the rapid development of reality."[1] The vitality of that literature was context-specific: it took inspiration from the political vanguards and popular movements of the Left, whose forces were rallying all across Europe and in the United States, and it became all the more animate in the face of contest, for this was a moment in history when the great working masses were facing off against the reactionary powers of capital as they devolved into fascism. It was within this context and as an alternative to Lukácsian formalism that Brecht delivered one of his clearest axiomatics for an assuredly political artistic practice: "It is not linked to the good old days but to the bad new ones."[2]

This practical suggestion, which would be taken up elsewhere by Walter Benjamin, is a good working definition for the avant-garde: those militantly path-breaking artistic practices that affirm an alternative modernity in the face of irreducible catastrophe. It is in precisely this sense that Brecht's phrase has been redeployed for the title of Hal Foster's new book, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*, which maps the present state of European and American art against the historical backdrop of neoliberal capitalism. "Part of the story told in this brief book," its introduction plots our course, "turns on a recent move away from

[1] Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukács," *New Left Review* 1.84 (March-April, 1974): 53.

[2] Brecht, 40.

the primary assumptions of postmodernist art, in particular away from its privileging of the imagistic and the textual and toward a probing of the real and the historical" (1). The historical period that informs this move runs from 1989 – a year made decisive by the collapse of the Berlin Wall and by the uprising at Tiananmen Square – through to the present moment. The period is also punctuated, in this narrative, by the events of September 11, 2001, which redoubled the devastating force of a geopolitically unrivalled capital by combining it with an imposed state of emergency. Most importantly, however, these two and half decades are defined by global realization of financial deregulation: "in retrospect," Foster clarifies, "1989 represents the full dominance of neoliberalism more than anything else, which is to say an assault on the modern social contract, with welfare slashed, unions attacked, health care gutted, income equality promoted, and so on" (3). All of this is what darkens the skies of our very own bad new days.

Foster's idea of a contemporary avant-garde is, he acknowledges, necessarily eccentric. In its high-modernist moment, during the first decades of the twentieth century, the avant-garde sought either to transgress the established social order or to affirm a new one. Its artistic energies mapped to a time when, in Brecht's formulation, "the masses are beginning to attract to themselves everything valuable and human, when they are mobilizing people against the dehumanization produced by capitalism in its fascist phase."[3] That hard ideological cleavage between the anti-capitalist Left and the fascist Right is virtually non-existent in the contemporary avant-garde as presented here. Instead of allying itself to political force, we are told, "it is immanent in a caustic way" (4). While other art critics – mostly famously Clement Greenberg but more recently T. J. Clark – have bid farewell to the avant-garde because now, in the age of total subsumption and absolute reification, there is simply no revolutionary consciousness with which it might correspond, Foster provides a more optimistic view of things. But the optimism is hard-won. His avant-garde is very much of the present situation and knowingly registers that in the political consciousness of its forms, while still offering that darkling glow of utopian iridescence. "Far from heroic," he clarifies, "it does not pretend that it can break absolutely with the old order or found a new one; instead it seeks to trace

[3] Brecht, 40.

fractures that already exist within the given order, to pressure them further, to activate them somehow" (4). That final adverb, "somehow," quietly discloses the real improbability of political activation by way of art.

The book is arranged into five terms through which contemporary art is said to articulate its corrosive worldview: abject, archival, mimetic, precarious, and post-critical (this final adjective is furnished with a question mark). While these terms each occupy their own chapters, Foster is emphatic that they are not being elevated to the status of paradigmatic –isms. Instead, they are more like compositional strategies or, better still, tendencies whose emergence as common to several artists might indicate their status as organically reactive to a shared historical moment. "Like paradigms," however, "these terms have served as guidelines for some artists and critics, and in this way they imply that art is not merely a matter of disconnected projects" (1). What unites the projects considered within the book's five chapters and its manifesto-like afterward is the turn away from a critique of the signifier and toward a newfound preoccupation with the material substances of history and of historical experience. "This shift," we are reminded, "was driven by motives intrinsic to art, to be sure, but it also speaks to conditions extrinsic to it, often extreme ones…" (1). If that shift can be described as a turn away from postmodernism in art, we are invited to ask the big question: what comes next?

The first chapter, on abject art, delivers the book's clearest articulation of that transition out of typically postmodern interrogations of representation into an engagement with real objects, and it does so by narrating Cindy Sherman's evolving visual aesthetic. Sherman's conceptual portraiture is divided into three stages, which Foster explains in language borrowed from Lacanian and Kristevan psychoanalysis. The first stage, which we see in Sherman's film stills and rear projections and centrefolds from between 1975 and 1982, is the "subject-as-picture," in which the depicted subject, the woman, is captured by the gaze and is framed as an object of desire. The second stage, 1987-90, is defined by a preoccupation with "the image screen." That is what we encounter in Sherman's fairy tale illustrations and art history portraits and disaster pictures, which are concerned just as much with the tropology of visual representation as they are with the represented subjects. It is in this stage that Sherman's work first approaches the abject via grotesque distortions of generic norms, such as the

addition of pig snouts onto human faces or the horrendous substitution of one limb for another. "Here," writes Foster, "as often in horror movies and bedtime stories alike, horror means, first and foremost, horror of the material body made strange, even repulsive, in repression" (13). The works produced in the 1990s accelerate this mobilization of the abject, not least with their emphasis on genital plasticity and their superabundance of excrement. While, as Foster notes, this career-long shift from image to image-screen to the thing itself was not Sherman's alone – shared perhaps most famously by Kiki Smith and Andres Serrano – it is in her work that it enjoys the most bracing transition, from surveilled beauty (*Untitled Film Still* #2) to a pair of ocean-blue eyes peering out from clotted excrement (*Untitled #190*). According to Foster, this transition signalled, amongst other things, an artistic response to historical changes in the collective psyche, to newly domestic traumas, and especially to the persistence of the AIDS crisis, which ravaged the art world.

Chapter two, on archival art, traces a collective endeavour to retrieve and reassemble the heteroclite flotsam awash on the shores of capitalist modernity. "Drawn from the archives of mass culture," we are told, "these sources are familiar enough to ensure a legibility that can then be disturbed or redirected. Yet often, too, the sources are obscure, retrieved in a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter memory" (32). The first of Foster's archival artists is Thomas Hirschhorn, from Switzerland, whose public-space instillations – sculptures, altars, kiosks, and monuments – combine eccentric and everyday materials in attestation to life in what Hirschhorn calls "the capitalist garbage bucket," and it is through these works that Hirschhorn seeks to develop his "phenomenology of advanced reification" (41). It is, however, Foster's second example that generates the clearest thinking about archival art as well as some truly fascinating anecdotes. English artist Tacita Dean's mission is to recall the "people and places that are stranded, outmoded, or otherwise sidelined" or, in short, to commemorate "lost souls" (41). Her artworks include an eight-minute, 16mm film about an Australia girl, Jean Jeinnie, who stowed away on a ship bound for England which wrecked off of the Devon coast, and whose story develops outward from a single black-and-white photograph to include in its web of reference conversations about Jean Genet, the Bowie song "Jean Genie," and various other coincidences. After this, similarly engaging accounts are provided of several more of Dean's films, of Joachim Koester's trans-historical prints, and

of Sam Durant's multi-medial exercises in cognitively mapping post-war American culture. According to Foster, these excavations and assemblages are driven not only by melancholia but also, and perhaps unexpectedly, by a decidedly avant-gardist political impulse. "Perhaps," he suggests, "the paranoid dimension of archival art is the other side of its utopian ambition – its desire to turn belatedness into becomingness, to recoup failed visions in art, literature, philosophy, and life into possible scenarios for alternative kind of social relations, to transform the no place of an archive into the new place of utopia" (60).

Chapter three, on mimetic art, concerns itself with the culture that amassed itself on American soil in response to the September 11 attacks. According to Foster, the terror of militarization is what animates the large, multimedia instillations by Robert Gober, Jon Kessler, and Isa Genzken. "Here," he writes, "it is the 9/11 aftermath that we revisit as if in a waking dream, and as in a dream nearly all the objects exist in an ontological no man's land, in this case somewhere between refuse, relic, and replica. That nothing is quite as it appears only adds to our anxious curiosity; the material uncertainty of the things injects a metaphysical unease into the scene" (67-8). Unsurprisingly enough, the kind of art that responds to this scenario is resoundingly kitsch, for it coheres with Hermann Broch's well-known account of Nazi culture materializing a "bourgeoisie caught between contradictory values, an asceticism of work on the one hand and an exaltation of feeling on the other" (71). This contradiction, we are shown, is what took shape in the United States leading up to and during the War on Terror. But the culture to which these artworks respond has antecedents outside of National Socialism. Recalling that this book's point of commencement is 1989, it is not without a touch of serendipity that America's reactionary jingoism is accounted for as analogous to or contiguous with Stalinism. "Could it be that," asks Foster, "after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, this dictatorial dimension surfaced in American culture? Certainly in the wake of 9/11 a new order of totalitarian kitsch came to pervade this society" (72).

Chapter four, on the precarious, develops in full a point that seemed implicit to the discussion of archives and to the shift away from postmodernist art more generally. This brief chapter argues that an artistic love of materiality, of junk commodities and of cultural detritus, speaks to the disavowed underside of an

economic system that has shifted its field of profit-extraction out of manufacture and into finance, thereby diminishing industrial production and simultaneously disenfranchising thousands if not millions of industrial workers. Those disenfranchised workers, neoliberalism's precariat (a term whose derivation from proletariat is duly noted), occupy the artworks on which this chapter is fixated. Here we are returned to Thomas Hirschhorn (familiar from chapter two) for whom the "precarious came to figure less as a characteristic of his art than as a predicament of the people [he] wanted to address with it, with ramifications that are both ethical and political" (100). The challenge, here, is in cross-class engagement, between the middle-class artist and the precarious men and women with whom he virtually squats. "In fact," we are told, "Hirschhorn does not always seek solidarity with this precariat, for such solidarity might only come of a forced union of very different parties" (103).

While chapter four is perhaps less satisfying than the previous three because it spends more time theorizing away from art and with reference to a very familiar set of thinkers (Schmitt, Agamben, Butler, et al.), chapter five abandons the artwork altogether, but instead digs deep into one of the contemporary debates in artistic discourse. It raises the question of post-critical theory, the notion of which is also presented as a symptom of neoliberalism. "Bullied by conservative commentators," writes Foster of art theory after 9/11, "many academics no longer stress the importance of critical thinking for an engaged citizenry, and, dependent on corporate sponsors, many curators no longer promote the critical debate once deemed essential to the public reception of difficult art" (115). Much of this chapter is framed as a riposte to Bruno Latour and Jacques Rancière, both of whom rebelled against their roots in scientism to promote post-critical thinking. According to Foster, by contrast, criticism is essential to the sustenance or even resurrection of a Habermasian public sphere. "Today," claims Foster, "the social bond is as pressured as the public sphere is atrophied, and criteria more robust than discursivity and sociability are required in response" (123). While the point might ring out either as misplaced idealism or as nostalgia for a bourgeois salon culture, which Foster well knows, it's nevertheless difficult not to sympathize with his call for a renewed understanding of subjecthood and citizenship in the age of multinational capitalism and, after Reagan and Thatcher, of post-social being. "One thing is clear," he concludes: "a post-critical posture is of no use in this project" (124).

These five chapters are followed by an afterward, "In Praise of Actuality," written as a manifesto in seventeen theses. Here the field of reference is performance art, and in particular the restaging of older performances, such as MOMA's 2010 Marina Abramović retrospective. "Not quite live, not quite dead, these reenactments have introduced a zombie time into these instructions" (127). All of this is developed in relation to the abiding question of political activation – the idea is that performance, with its invitations to participation and its structuration in process, responds to Foster's hypothesis that art might still be "somehow" transformative. And yet, this is not the case. "Activation of the viewer has become an end, not a means, and not enough attention is given to the quality of subjectivity and sociality thus effected" (134). Political commitment has been superseded in this respect by distracted busyness and, because of this supersession, "we do not seem to exist in the same space-time as the event" (130). If the alternative to hyperreal distancing is a renewed interest in the kinds of actuality this book describes, it is worth remarking, finally, on the frequently cited antecedents. Fittingly enough, this closing chapter's emphasis on returns and revenants speaks to one of the book's persistent inclinations, and perhaps a tendency peculiar not just to Foster but also to the art he describes. Though the contemporary avant-garde is unequivocally engaged with its historical moment, each chapter pauses, repeatedly, to look backward over its shoulder toward earlier artworks whose origin is what we now call modernism: there it glimpses André Breton, Hugo Ball, Surrealism, Dada, and so on. To be sure, one of the ancillary implications of this book is that what comes after postmodernism might indeed be another modernism. For that reason, perhaps it is not to be wondered why the book's final sentence echoes that of another comparable work, by Fredric Jameson, which takes its coordinates from arch-modernist thinkers Walter Benjamin and Ezra Pound. For Jameson, writing in 2002: "Ontologies of the present demand archeologies of the future, not forecasts of the past."[4] According to Foster, who is also riffing on Benjamin but this time alongside a different poet, Charles Baudelaire: contemporary art "cannot be fixed on a traumatic view of the past; that is, even as it calls up past art, it must also open onto future work" (140).

[4] Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), 215.