

its body. In the catalogue, indigenous activist Don Genaro, who was involved in establishing the local museum, describes how the community appoints someone to guard and care for sacred spaces, including the volcano. Genaro says, “I always considered that protecting our patrimony was done for our Volcano, who is the Sacred Lord.”³

Smaller but no less remarkable are the occupants of a fish tank that sits in a corner of the gallery. These are axolotl, a marvellous amphibian, about a foot long, with short legs and extravagantly decorative external gills. Native only to this region, they are near extinction in the wild due to pollution and loss of their primary habitat, Lake Chalco. As such, it functions in the exhibition both as an indexical sign of a unique species—a threatened survivor—and as a metaphor for the many regional particularities that may yet be lost or regained.

All of this fluid movement through time, across boundaries of nature and culture and conventions of display is not a sign of confusion. It is how things are. The present constantly traffics with the past. Nature is constantly read through culture and culture is constantly informed by nature (so many human-made “natural” disasters occur that we ignore their inextricable connection at our peril). And finally, no mode of display can contain or control experience absolutely or forever. Things erupt and return.

NOTES

- 1 Maria Thereza Alves, *The Return of a Lake* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012), 7.
- 2 Margarita Loera, *Colección de Divulgación* (INAH Gobierno del Estado de México, 1987).
- 3 Quoted in Alves, 178.



BOOK REVIEW:

MATTHEW FLISFEDER,
Independent Scholar

GAIL DAY

Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory

(New York: Columbia University Press, 2011),
320 pages

Gail Day's *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory* is a wonderfully enjoyable examination of some of the key figures, debates, and points of intrigue in art theory influenced by the New Left, the fate of which was to become the mere shadow of postmodernism following the so-called “linguistic turn” in the late 1960s. The theory that Day engages has its grounding in political and aesthetic thought that departed from Soviet models in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, the new avant-gardes, the influence of Guy Debord and the Situationist International, the *Tel Quel* collective, and later, in the 1970s and 1980s, those radical Marxist and feminist film and culture scholars writing for

Screen, Camera Obscura and *October*. What Day, as a Marxist art historian, wants to show is that, despite the poststructural shift towards figures of affirmation (Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche, for example), negation "is part of the routine language of art, and arguments about negativity are thoroughly embedded in accounts of culture and the debate on modernity and avant-gardism." And furthermore, that "negation continues to animate approaches to contemporary art," even after the postmodern turn (6).

Postmodernism has been defined in different ways, but Fredric Jameson's explanation is that the postmodern should be understood as that moment *within* modernism when the cultural institutions, canons, museums, and the university, become complicit and coextensive with modern art, thus reducing its radical potential.¹ The postmodern condition may equally be thought in terms of what Slavoj Žižek has proposed as a shift from the *prohibition* to enjoy in modernity to the *obligation* to enjoy in postmodernity. The interpellative call of postmodern authority is not "no!" but "yes!" Postmodernism is that which occurs when *the negation of bourgeois ideology* (the political ethic of modernism, with its vocation to not be commodity) *itself becomes the norm*; or, as Žižek puts it in the title to one of the chapters of *The Ticklish Subject* (1999), when "perversion" is no longer subversion. Here we have, on the inverse side of things, the *affirmation* of negation, which perhaps has done more for the cultural logic of capitalism's persistence.

It is worth considering Day's project in the context of Jameson and Žižek's theories on postmodernism, which both posit the 'end of negation' as one of its institutional and ideological features. What she demonstrates is that the history of the dialectic and of negative thought is still unfinished business. *Dialectical Passions* has as its primary focus a social and political offering of the kind of postwar art criticism that did not succumb to the cynicism of the postmodern. If one

of the central aspects of postmodernism is the abandonment of the dialectic, then Day shows that negative thought has continued to add significantly to postwar art and cultural theory (particularly between the mid- to late-1960s up until the end of the millenium), at a time when it appeared to be suffering from a crisis in self-confidence. It is this feature that makes *Dialectical Passions* a worthwhile read.

Former Situationist, T.J. Clark, and the Italian architect, Manfredo Tafuri, are the focus of the first two chapters of *Dialectical Passions*. Despite some of the initial confusion that arises in attempting to decipher the terminology present in Clark's social analysis of the history of art (i.e., "practices of negation"), Day suggests that it is ultimately Clark's search for a method of thinking the *mediation* of art and the social that needs to be taken into account. His project involves trying to avoid thinking politics and history as merely the backdrop to a social history of art and art criticism, and should be read as an attempt to resurface discontinuity, fissures, gaps, and contradictions in art and art history. One cannot help but see the emergence here of a strategy to differentiate Clark from Jameson, particularly as the latter's "political unconscious" sticks to a kind of Althusserian "structural causality" in his analyses of the emergence of ideology and cultural phenomena, which Day seems to want to avoid. The championing of Clark's method, in this way, establishes the kind of critique of Jameson that comes through in later chapters, particularly in challenging his reading of Tafuri, and in the last chapter, where she debates Jameson's claims regarding the rise of social abstraction under the dominance of finance capital and the disintegration of "critical distance" in postmodernity.

Tafuri is considered alongside Clark, also for his challenge to the modern avant-garde, this time in architecture. For Tafuri, "the negativity of the avant-garde should be seen, from the outset, as wrapped up with capitalism's modern coming-

to-being, its artistic innovations ultimately playing a role in social restructuring" (80). The avant-garde, for Tafuri, "helped to acclimatize the public to the disruptions of the urban world" (82). In this sense, the modern avant-garde might be seen as a "vanishing mediator"—a prior negation that bridges the old and the new orders. Like the modernizing ethic of "making it new," Day portrays the modern avant-garde through Tafuri to indicate something of the role played by the form of negation found in the latter that failed to mount a fundamental challenge to capital, but instead aided in its efforts to make itself new: as "agents in the internal reshaping of capitalist social relations, avant-gardists' search for new forms, for new ways of making art or designing buildings, played an important role in sweeping away older modes of being." (87). In opposition, Tafuri offers a conception of "completed nihilism:" when the devaluation of bourgeois ideology is pursued to *fulfillment*; towards total disenchantment with the world, at which point it is possible "to engage actively in the creation of values appropriate to the current period" (106).

The second half of the book begins by considering the work of the postmodern art critic, Craig Owens, particularly his essay on the allegorical impulse of postmodernism. Here, Day looks at the antagonism between allegory and symbol as it was developed mainly in the pages of *October* in the early 1980s (the culmination of which is the collection of essays included in Hal Foster's *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*). Theorists of the postmodern asserted the significance of allegory as a way of bringing down the dialectic—the symbol was seen as a substitute for dialectical mediation and sublation, "whereas allegory calls up deconstructive discontinuity and deferral" (149). Looking at the way it is used in the work of Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man (drawing on Owens' own foray into postmodern allegory), Day shows the insistence of 'allegorical negativity' that flies in the face of postmod-

ernism—that is, an allegorical negativity that demystifies, and renders visible the "political unconscious" of the symbol, without resorting to the background of a master narrative.

Comparing Jameson to Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloh in the final chapter, Day challenges the lamentation of the loss of critical distance—a view that saw the waning hope of projects for emancipation. What remains curious for Day is how these figures, committed to the social and political analysis of culture, conceded to the erosion of emancipatory projects. This is perhaps understandable in the context of modernism's absorption into official culture. It is a perspective, I think, that may have been correct in the early 1980s—with the postmodern rejection of so-called grand narratives like Marxism—but today it doesn't have the same effect, as the fictitious growth produced by finance has hit its limit. The latter signals the conditions in which dialectical thought has been brought back into prominence. In this respect, *Dialectical Passions* opens up discussion on a significant, although neglected aspect of official postwar art theory; but, it is itself the mark of a significant historical moment in the present.

NOTES

- 1 Fredric Jameson, "'End of Art' or 'End of History,'" *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (New York: Verso, 1998), 75.