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Editorial: 'judgement'

In my first year of undergraduate study at the University of Auckland in 1994, I wrote an art history essay about impressionism—handwritten, with that extra big margin for the marker's comments. I cannot now remember what it was that I argued, but I remember that I had an argument. I deliberately tried to shoot down a particular interpretation that I found pervasive in whatever books I had read at that time. I remember that Claude Monet's eyesight came into it somewhere. And I suspect that, if I read it now, I would be embarrassed at the holes in my argument, albeit with some admiration for my eighteen-year-old self at making the attempt. I know I was both naïve and headstrong. I had, after all, lived most of life to that point in Hamilton, where the cacophony of cowbells ringing in support of the local rugby team was what counted as "culture." It had not yet dawned on me how immeasurably greater than mine was the knowledge of my lecturers and of the art historians whose books I was subjecting to inchoate critique.

The tutor (Teaching Assistant) who marked the essay was generous and genuinely interested. She wrote plenty of both encouragement and rebuttal in those wide margins, which made me feel not only that I belonged in academia, but that academia was the most perfect place imaginable. The whole point of the thing, it seemed, was that academics could freely contradict, provoke and attack other academics, without harming them at all, because it was, as they say, purely academic—in a world of ideas and theories, not "reality." I threw myself into this abstractly adversarial world with considerable gusto.

I soon discovered, to my surprise, that the reactions to what I said and wrote were uncontrovertibly "real." Not only did people disagree with what I said, they plainly found me disagreeable for having said it. My argumentative principle—of saying the opposite of whatever was the most widely held opinion—was liable to cause irritation. Even that gentle and genial art historian, Francis Pound (who always seemed to have time to talk with the lowly undergrad who dropped by his office with impertinent questions and outlandish theories), used to say that I was "perverse."

Now, I feel a twinge of nostalgia in telling this story, as well as some fear of judgement (because it is unbecoming of a serious scholar to indulge in such autobiography). No doubt academia is still a world in which critical thinking has value, and judgement,

at least theoretically, can operate at a remove from the personal. But times have changed. There is a growing realisation that critique, criticism, critical theory and critical thinking are not only impotent but self-defeating and potentially harmful in the face of the contemporary realities. We thought that these were useful tools for furthering progressive thought and countering unreasonable and entrenched beliefs. It turns out that they also further entrench oppositions between competing ideologies and reaffirm existing paradigms and conventions. Critical judgements perpetuate combative, competitive modes of being, while leaving the prevailing positions on the field of battle relatively unchanged.

In contemporary culture, there is evidence of a growing realisation that judgements get in the way of empathetic and cooperative relationships between people. They operate under the guise of reason and rationality, as an intellectual game that separates mind from body and fosters the repression of non-discursive feelings and experiences. Yet they incite highly emotive reactions, get people's backs up, sometimes hurt them and certainly have real impacts. Strategies such as mindfulness and non-violent communication encourage us to recognise the judgements we habitually make, but to acknowledge and appropriately express our own and others' feelings. There are compelling arguments for care and compassion to take precedence over intellectual point-scoring. Mental health and neurodiversity are increasingly handled, by younger generations especially, with acceptance and candour, regarded not as symptoms of weakness or failure but as positive attributes that afford new ways of seeing the world—even as drivers of activism and social change, as advocated by Kai Syng Tan.[1]

On the other hand, the staunch refusal, on the political left, to allow space for anything that carries the whiff of, or bears some resemblance to, discredited attitudes, particularly with regard to cultural or gender identity, arguably constitutes an uncompromising form of judgement. And it has provoked a newly virulent opposition. Right-wing populist movements thrive on a backlash against "woke" and "political correctness" and the "extremist" cancelling of a "commonsense" world view (read "conservative" or "bigoted"). Indeed, we are now overwhelmed by violent judgements that bring with them not only a gleeful dismantling of the gains made for marginalised identities and communities in the post-1960s period, but an undisguised, fascistic reimplementation of persecution and oppression.

In art, the role of the critic has become increasingly complicated since the 1960s, when the avant-garde exploded into all manner of ways of making art (including conceptual and performance art) that defied a purely form-based judgement of artistic quality. The American critic Lucy Lippard wrote of the difficulty of determining an artwork's political value or efficacy: "Perhaps the greatest challenge to the feminist movement in the visual arts … is the establishment of new criteria by which to evaluate not only the aesthetic effect, but the communicative effectiveness of art."[2] A similar issue arises in the judgement of Indigenous art by Western critics. In Aotearoa New Zealand, former Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki curator Ngahiraka Mason has written of the ignorance of Pākehā appraisals of Contemporary Māori Art: "The New Zealand contemporary art world can be a particularly dogged place of resistance when it comes to understanding why Māori produce artworks that challenge interpretation in Western terms."[3]

In fact, the art critic's position has always been unenviable, insofar as they are trying to cope with the reality that artists are always, as it were, ahead of them. The artist brings into the world something that was not there before—that is unlike existing artworks (or existing anything-else) and therefore impervious to any previously deployed set of evaluative criteria. Art is exploratory and speculative, and even as it seeks to represent one thing, it cannot help but create another, operating materially and ontologically, altering reality. It is not surprising, then, that since the turn of the millennium, there has been a conspicuous turn in contemporary art away from the "shock of the new" and towards an ethics of care and working responsibly with materials, environments, things and beings, human and non-human. Nor is it surprising that art has come to be regarded as conducive to forms of experience that elude interpretive or analytical methods, in parallel with the "ontological turn" in philosophy and critical theory.

In 2004, Bruno Latour published an essay titled "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?" He proposed that critique, as a method used to expose mechanisms of power and ideology, had been turned against academia, its inherent scepticism of truth claims becoming a liability. The same scepticism was now more widely used to deny the realities of climate change, racism or any of the other issues that inspired such critique in the first place. In response, Latour called for a creative (rather than judgemental) critical ethos that would enhance (rather than undermine) reality: "The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naive believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is … the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution."[4] Rita Felski picked up this proposition in her 2015 book *The Limits of Critique*, a critique (for want of a better word) of what she calls (using Paul Ricoeur's words) "the hermeneutics of suspicion."[5] Neither Latour nor Felski, however, advocate for the abandonment of critical analysis altogether, but rather for extending or enriching it by way of an openness to unexpected and imaginative relationships and experiences, a speculative ethics.

Judgements can appear arbitrary and groundless, particularly in contexts (such as contemporary art) where the criteria are unclear or unstable. Judgement can be culturally blind, based on ignorance or disregard for world views different to one's own; or harmful to mental health or wellbeing (a repercussion more conspicuous than ever in today's culture of candour and diagnosis). And judgement, no matter how rigorously supported, can be stultifying, imposing the illusion of resolution, closure or an endpoint, rather than opening up more discussion. Nevertheless, there is no end to judgement. To refrain from judgement might, after all, mean allowing reprehensible or unsupportable views to go unchallenged, or signal a pusillanimous acceptance of the prevailing state of affairs. But such evaluative abstinence would be not just untenable, but impossible. I often find myself returning to Barbara Herrnstein Smith's classic 1988 *Contingencies of Value*, a sophisticated study in post-modern relativism that simultaneously challenges entrenched values and socio-political power relationships while acknowledging the inevitability of judgement.[6] In a 2013 interview, Herrnstein Smith commented: "We evaluate all the time. It's not a matter of should or shouldn't. We can't stop … We continuously orient ourselves different toward things that seem better or worse, more or less desirable."[7]

The contributors to this issue of *Junctures* all, in their diverse fields of inquiry, make their own judgements of judgement, while advocating a certain suspension of judgement that allows time and space for constructive possibilities to emerge from unprepossessing and complicated situations. Having initiated the theme for this issue and received submissions that were without exception heading in directions utterly surprising to me, it would be a neat—and nasty—trick to play if I now subjected them to unalloyed editorial critique. Perhaps I am not the adversarial academic I once was, but it seems more fitting to let them be, to linger, feel, observe, reflect, connect … and to leave them in your hands.

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1. See Kai Syng Tan, *Neuro-Futurism and Re-Imagining Leadership* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).
2. Lucy Lippard, "Projecting a Feminist Criticism," *Art Journal* 35, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 338.
3. Ngahiraka Mason, "Open for interpretation: The Art of Reuben Paterson," *Art New Zealand*, no. 116 (Spring 2005): 105.
4. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 246.
5. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).
6. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: England: Harvard University Press, 1988).
7. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, in Janell Watson, "On Free-Wheeling Careers: An Interview with Barbara Herrnstein Smith," *Minnesota Review*, no. 80 (2013): 68.