

*Writers and Radicals: Selections from the "Craft, Critique, Culture" Conference*

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The excerpts that follow were drawn from essays presented at the first annual "Craft Critique, Culture" conference held at the University of Iowa in the fall of 2000. We had envisioned this conference as a meeting place for critics and writers, two groups who have become increasingly estranged, as well as a place for those critics and writers who work in both fields simultaneously, despite the fact that they might have difficulty justifying their schizophrenic careers within their own narrowly-defined disciplines. We had hoped to initiate a discussion about the role of writing in the academy and in the broader culture, but we were surprised that our presenters were more often struggling with the classic question of the historical avant-garde: what is the relationship between formal innovation and progressive politics, and is this transgressive potential nullified when it becomes coopted by the institutions of art and education?

Now, in our postmodern moment, assured by artists and critics of all stripes that art is indeed a political force in everyday life, the very idea of an avant-garde has become almost redundant. Yet, while critics and artists agree that art is a cultural force in every way caught up in its context and moment, the way in which we should understand the relationship of poetry and art to the academy, to specialized audiences, and to the wider culture could not be a more divisive subject. Focusing primarily on contemporary American poetry, experimental prose, and literary theory, it became clear that the main concern of the conference was which discourse would inherit the position of the historical avant-garde and what that position would mean in our postmodern world.

The essays collected here illustrate the varied ways in which this issue was addressed. Mark Levine argues eloquently for a return to a poetry that is in touch with a world beyond the walls of the academy, as politically progressive a position as one might imagine. Many of the other contributors, however, seem to complicate such an easy division between academic and everyday life, and many of

them also attempt to locate a space for progressive politics within the academy itself. Bob Perelman, for example, attempts to defend language writing's relationship to critical theory and academic institutions by arguing that experimental poetry is more than intellectual game playing or empty formalism, and that the function of language writing, as with poetry and theory in general, is ultimately social and utopian.

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Alan Golding examines this relationship between avant-garde poetry and the academy within an historical context and suggests that many avant-garde poets, often despite their resistance to the academy, employ didactic techniques which allow their poems to function like pedagogy. Steve Tomasula, on the other hand, focuses on how the relationship between experimental writing and the academy has been influenced by the economics of the publishing industry. Tomasula ultimately privileges the writing workshop as a potential site of resistance against "official prose culture," and Kass Fleisher similarly argues for a creative writing pedagogy which does not resist theory, but rather embraces experimental writing and radical politics.

The remaining selections approach similar questions from the perspective of critics working within the academy. Kevin Kopelson addresses the desire among critics to perform as virtuosos, investigating the ways in which such performances are both created and received. Rebecca Clouse similarly offers an example of creative criticism through the performance of a dialogue that engages her idea of authorship. This selection then concludes with a brief exchange between our keynote speakers on the ways of accounting for aesthetic experiences. We hope this discussion, and the conference itself, will help to illuminate some of the divisions between critics and writers both within and outside the academy, and that it might suggest a starting point for an ongoing dialogue.

All of the works cited have been consolidated into a single bibliography, which you will find at the end of the selection.