

## Radical formalism

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The question of formalism often gives rise to well-rehearsed notions of political indifference, autonomy, and ahistoricity. Yet what if a radical formalism was deployed—against these normative understandings—as a contextual practice and subversive method of critique? Mobilized into action, “Radical Formalism” proposes that institutionalized understandings of form may be hijacked from within as an alternative strategy of resistance. Examining the work of Charlotte Poseneske as one practitioner of radical formalism, this essay offers ways of considering formalist art objects as carriers of the political. By welcoming contextual readings of form, we move past the superficial and facile readings of the relation between aesthetics and politics, enabling ourselves to understand what form can perform.

**Keywords:** radical formalism; institutional critique; active form; Charlotte Poseneske; Adrian Piper; Pierre Bourdieu; Amelia Jones; Juliane Rebentisch; Keller Easterling; Andrea Fraser

Formalism is a dirty word – a bad object – and perhaps this is what makes it such an exciting, yet slippery, site to engage. Plagued by universalist goals of purity, autonomy, self-reflexivity, and political indifference, formalism certainly seems bankrupt. Yet despite the apolitical and tautological rhetoric that surrounds much Anglo-American formalist discourse, is it possible to offer a theoretical and political claim in defense of a new formalism, and what might it mean to conceive of a *radically* formalist practice? What political implications does form carry within our accelerated neoliberal moment, and even better, how might form behave differently today than in the past? The imperative of these questions applies to new directions in critical aesthetic theory, particularly in attempts to imagine form on a grand scale – the form of the anthropocene, of the contemporary crisis in capitalism, of the hyperdevelopment of global cities. All such questions seem to suggest that form is far from an inert and neutral container but a highly charged political and ideological field. Rather than recuperating formalism as a nostalgic project, how might we reframe it as a mode of engagement with the material conditions of our physical world, and reimagine its potential for being deployed “*along side of,*” as opposed to “*rather than,*” other modes of socio-political critique? In pursuing this question, Chantal

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Figure 1. Alan Ruiz. Hunter Green 1390. 2016.

Source: Courtesy of the artist

Mouffe’s distinctions of critique as either a “withdrawal from” or an “engagement with” constitute a generative point of departure.<sup>1</sup> If we embrace the latter critical approach, troubling the distinction between form and content by addressing their mutual entanglements and contingencies may perhaps open out, towards a radical formalism that neither fetishizes historical precedents nor abandons them completely in normative Modernist succession. Following Mouffe’s call for engagement as a form of *détournement*, I would argue that an effective critique, rather than reactionary practice,<sup>2</sup> can only take place through an intervention within the fixed institutions that we wish to change radically. In proposing the idea of formalism as *détournement*, an elaborate form of disguise,<sup>3</sup> or a kind of counterfeit cultural capital, I’d like to problematize its traditional associations and consider the notion of form as a *carrier* of the political. I will conclude by briefly turning to the sculptural work of Charlotte Posenenske as one example of the operations of a radical formalism. Engaging formalism as a context-specific practice rather than an autonomous and self-reflexive system might offer opportunities for generating alternative forms of resistance and political engagement.

The history of formalism is well rehearsed in the canonized discourse of Western art. In short, the promotion of formalism can be traced through the writings of Adolph Loos (who linked decorative hedonism and superficial decadence with a colonialist imaginary<sup>4</sup>), or certainly Clement Greenberg (who famously advocated the eradication of literary content and mimetic reproduction through painterly abstraction). By the 1960s, however, Greenberg’s modernist ideals were under interrogation, giving way to an array of aesthetic practices that reimagined<sup>5</sup>, and at times rejected, the tenets of formalism. The rejection of formalism’s obsession with pure morphology and vision can be located in the “anti-aesthetic” and “dematerialization” of 1960s Conceptual Art and 1970s institutional critique. This suppression and de-privileging of vision and form was motivated in resistance to the Romantic mythology of the artist’s inner-genius advanced by Modernism, but, more significantly,

visual art's inability to account for pressing real-time material conditions, as well as a growing discomfort with its increasingly commodifiable nature.

Critiques of formalism have also been significant in exposing an overwhelmingly white and masculinist logic. For instance, Adrian Piper has described formalism as a self-enclosed value system informed by a "socioeconomically determined aesthetic" and "Eurocentric" model of education.<sup>6</sup> According to Piper, not only the production but also the very appreciation of form is a field-specific competency afforded by a set of symbolic and material privileges. Furthermore, Piper argues that this kind of privilege "encourages us to evaluate art in terms of [...] line, color, and so on, independently of its subject matter"<sup>7</sup> resulting in "politically-neutral interior-decoration-style high art."<sup>8</sup> Piper's critique is a necessary intervention in both the predominance of whiteness and patriarchy within the infrastructure of Western art history and the ever-growing field of art. A critique we are still learning from today, the work of Adrian Piper – alongside Michael Asher, Andrea Fraser, and Fred Wilson (to name but a few) – offers a necessary critical perspective on the way form reproduces privilege and systems of value. Often these illuminations of the systems of institutional legitimization operate by revealing the way form contains certain raced, gendered, and class-based privileges. While artists that have questioned these systems of legitimization have employed subversively visual positions as their preferred critical delivery method – such as text, appropriation, and performance – form more often tends, in this way, to be occluded by content. What is at question here is not simply whether there is a presence of form in these works, but rather a question of its value in relationship to a work's other properties, and how form plays a profound, and at times unacknowledged, role in our understanding these works.<sup>9</sup>

However, if vision is indeed conditioned by ideology, what are we to do with artworks that provoke visual pleasure? Perhaps an easy response used too often within art-historical aesthetic debates is to superficially dismiss these works as merely "decorative," "beautiful," or even worse "formal," therefore eclipsing any possible readings of critical content. Yet, not only does this position foreclose the possibility of difference, but it also fits comfortably within the normalizing project of globalization. Much in the same way that financialized forms of development bring about cultural and spatial homogenization in its wake, dominant attitudes toward formalism help lubricate the condition for global markets that standardize cultural outputs without yielding a greater understanding of cultural specificity and form. How might we read this presumed position against visuality as, in fact, an ideologically constructed and gendered form of common sense? Art historian Amelia Jones offers an incisive critique of this eradication when she identifies this refusal of visual pleasure as a masculinist project in which "the possibility of a work of art that is both sensual and conceptual, both corporeal and theoretical, both eroticized and politically critical is disallowed."<sup>10</sup> Indeed a feminist and/or queer reading of form might illuminate ways of thinking about sensuality as a subversively critical practice.<sup>11</sup>

On the intersection of art and politics, theorist Juliane Rebentisch has similarly questioned this kind of "either or" categorization. She writes:

[w]hen art, in the name of direct political statements, attempts to reap, as it were, a moral reward for neglecting its formal side, it not only reproduces – for the umpteenth time in history – the bad alternative between formalism and "contentism." Rather, by attempting to

extort its own importance by force of its contents, it risks falling short of the concept of art. Art does not become socially relevant by conveying particular content that could be communicated with greater success and precision by omitting “art-like” decoration – as though form were merely an external addition to such content. To the extent that objects are all experienced as aesthetic, as art, they necessarily always also engender their own formalism, a focus on form for its own sake.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than positioned as binaries, form and content should instead be understood in dialectic tension in that they are each of value only insofar as they exist in service of one another.

Any student of ideology critique will be leery of new regimes that claim to usurp the old while cloaked in hidden forms of domination. Radical formalism is not a totalizing new aesthetic category or style<sup>13</sup> but rather, it might be a process or relational way of thinking. It would be absurd to suggest that an anti-visual experience is more socially engaged or critical by virtue of its aesthetic restraint just as it would be to suggest that all formalist works are political. Yet rather than defining formalism as simply the tautological study of inherent or morphological characteristics, we might refocus our eyes to the social and historical implications form always carries. Following Andrea Fraser, “the institution of art is not something external to any work of art but the absolute and irreducible condition of its existence.”<sup>14</sup> A radical formalism might offer ways of considering the material conditions of our present moment, or as a means of illuminating a work’s institutional frame, rather than only placing a viewer in a kind of aesthetic distance. In this sense we might even evoke Marshall McLuhan’s dictum “the medium is the message” to consider how successful examples of radical formalism might be forms of media through which politics are enacted rather than represented. By welcoming contextual readings of form we enable ourselves to understand what form can *perform*.

Another way of framing this project would be to ask ourselves how might we push formalism towards its own radical ends? What tools might allow us to explore not merely the aesthetic qualities that define an object’s form, but rather its *disposition* and the way it behaves within a field? Pierre Bourdieu defined a field as a hierarchically determined space and a site of struggle containing its own laws and forms of capital where social actors are in direct competition for legitimacy. If we understand formalist production as occupying a specific historical position existing, as Bourdieu writes, “only by virtue of the collective belief which knows and acknowledges”<sup>15</sup> its legitimacy, that is, within its institutional frame, we might be able to use this established position against itself. For instance, I’m thinking of artworks that function like formalist objects yet behave like what architect Keller Easterling might call *active forms*. Easterling says “the designer of active forms is designing not the field in its entirety but rather the delta or the means by which the field changes – not only the shape or contour of the game piece but also a repertoire for how it plays.”<sup>16</sup> Put simply, it’s not just a question of what the work looks like, but what is the work *doing*? If we think of how formalism might be used to produce both material and action simultaneously, we might be able to reevaluate formal artworks as vessels of collusion. In this sense the formal can become a kind of seductive decoy, or switch, that offers a subversive tactic for political action through misdirection. It’s compliance as strategy versus traditional oppositional modes of resistance.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 2. Charlotte Posenenske, Series D Vierkantrohre (Square Tubes), 1967, First configuration, June 23 – July 5, 2010.

Photo: Daniel Pérez

Source: Image courtesy of Artists Space

In proposing a radical formalism, I am not suggesting a wholesale departure from the existing field of art, nor am I advocating for aesthetic complacency. Existing examples of what might be considered radical formalism are many – the inventory is yet to be taken. However, to offer only one, we may consider the work of Charlotte Posenenske whose work and brief position within the field of art challenged normative strategies of both form-making and critique.

Working in Germany during the 1960s, Charlotte Posenenske was part of a group of artists engaging with the serialized industrial procedures of American minimalism. However, frustrated with visual art's inability to directly engage with emerging social crises, Posenenske ultimately abandoned her practice and pursued sociology as a means of studying organized labor and production. She bluntly stated in a manifesto written in 1968: "I find it difficult to come to terms with the fact that art can contribute nothing to the solution of pressing social problems."<sup>18</sup> However, rather than further contribute to the mystique of Posenenske's withdrawal from the art world, I'd like to think about her last works as active forms. In these works created over the span of just two years, called Series D and Series DW, a set of prefabricated units made of inexpensive sheet metal or cardboard could be combined into various simple or complex configurations. Her practice thus was not invested in creating individual sculptures, but rather she created an *operating system* for deploying sculpture. Resembling air ducts or hidden operational fragments of architecture, they seem to beg for function while simultaneously resisting it. Posenenske preferred to install these sculptures in public spaces such as train stations and airports outside of the privatized gallery space that legitimated them as artworks. Their unassuming, utilitarian appearance allowed them to merge with these environments rather than attempt to beautify or enhance the chosen site.<sup>19</sup> And though they subscribed to the minimalist logic of the 1960s,



Figure 3. Charlotte Posenenske, Series D Vierkantrohre (Square Tubes), 1967, First configuration, June 23 – July 5, 2010.

Photo: Daniel Pérez

Source: Image courtesy of Artists Space

they behaved more perversely. For instance, as a system, Posenenske's use of modularity de-privileges any fetishistic or auratic reading of these objects. In her manifesto she stated: "I make series because I do not want to make single pieces for individuals."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Poseneske left the configuration of these elements up to the collector or curator, performatively implicating them in the labor and authorship of the work, and thus distancing her own role as artist.<sup>21</sup> This radical democratization is underscored by her decision to sell these sculptures at the exact cost of their fabrication, eliminating the possibility of symbolic value. Yet while these works rejected surplus value, they were also largely disseminated through a capitalist market system – like shape-shifting active forms – illuminating the socio-political relationships between industrial and artistic production.

Surely, there are, and always will be, strains of formalism that reaffirm the neoliberal ego – especially where the question of form favors expressive, hyper-individualist practices perfectly packaged through one's participation within niche markets. Yet Posenenske's work articulates a way of deploying formalism as a kind of cultural readymade and viable method of critique. The formal in this sense is not to be understood simply as personally expressive of an artists' quirk, or mystic fetish, but rather as a consideration and cooptation of a visual language not necessarily always authored by its producer. In the case of Poesneske's Series D and Series DW, such visual language might be operational rather than expressive. It is a detouring of the signifiers of bourgeois liberal art from the inside. By hijacking formalism from within, we liberate it from its universalist and liberal goals to account for underrepresented narratives within hegemonic and material conditions. Acting as vessels of collusion, active forms might be useful in challenging the essentialism of identity and for opening up space for social and political critiques that do not rely on individualist practices or a repression of form. Instead we should work

towards a radical formalism that can be used performatively, behaves badly, towards a language we can share, corrupt, and contaminate collectively.

### Note on contributor

Alan Ruiz is visual artist who lives and works in New York. His work explores the way space is produced as both material and ideology.

### Notes

1. Mouffe (2008).
2. Benjamin ([1934] 2008), *Author as Producer*.
3. Scott (1990, 136), "Domination and the Arts of Resistance."
4. Loos ([1908] 1930).
5. The work of the Pattern & Decoration Movement should certainly be noted here.
6. Piper (2011a, 248).
7. *Ibid.*, 253
8. Piper (2011b, 243).
9. Ellegood (2013, 84), "Formalism Redefined."
10. Jones (1994, 27).
11. Mary Kelly's *Postpartum Document* is an excellent example of this.
12. Rebentisch (2012, 264).
13. Recently much has been written about the emergence of "zombie formalism," an undead style of painting generated from resuscitated Greenbergian formulas often seen haunting art fairs. Yet while these critiques of this repeatable typology are absolutely warranted, they are often positioned in relation to questions of the art market, and morphology, which is to say, art's luxury value. See Robinson (2014).
14. Fraser (2006), "Why Does Fred Sandback's Work Make Me Cry" *Grey Room*.
15. Bourdieu (1993, 35).
16. Easterling (2012, 282).
17. *Ibid.*
18. Posenenske (1968).
19. On the history between public art and urban beautification see Kwon (2002).
20. Posenenske (1968).
21. Ironically, however, in many ways, Posenenske's work anticipated the transition from mass-production to mass-customization, a hallmark of neoliberal consumption.

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