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Craft, Critique, Culture Roundtable Discussion October 1, 2000

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ALAN GOLDING, MARK LEVINE, BOB PERELMAN,
THOMAS SWISS

"Craft, Critique, Culture" Roundtable Discussion
October 1, 2000

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THOMAS SWISS: I want to come back to the word "aesthetic." The word itself as a key word or concept didn't really show up in any of the sessions I went to. Mark, I wonder what is your sense of that, and is that a divide between a certain pedagogy of teaching creative writing or teaching literature? Does it divide in a way of thinking about these processes?

MARK LEVINE: I brought up the word "aesthetics" to Bob, and he seemed uncomfortable with it. When we talked around the construct it became clear that from his position there's got to be a certain amount of discomfort with the word, but those types of discomforts wouldn't have occurred to me. I'm not trying to use the word in some kind of way that separates what I think of as aesthetic considerations from all kinds of other considerations, but on the other hand I feel that part of the struggle in not only academic culture but culture generally is to rescue some kind of terrain for the aesthetic in a somewhat large sense. Early in his talk on Friday night Bob used the word "exhilaration." That, to me, is very often one effect of aesthetic engagement. It's a feeling of being in contact with something that produces a sense of vitality, that brings you into an emotional or intellectual complex that can't quite be accounted for, and yet it's obviously produced out of the way in which words are combined on the page and the various kinds of force fields that those words together will mount. And so I'm primarily interested in having aesthetic experiences, by which I don't mean experiences that are removed from culture, history, and so on. We all have this sensation. I can't hold this notion up against all kinds of arguments, but I don't really think, and this is a repetition of what I was saying the other night, that at a certain point when you have that experience it really matters whether somebody can say, "No, you were actually experiencing something else." There's a kind of knowledge that the aesthetic encounter produces

in the body, a kind of experience where you feel like you are thinking with your body and feeling with your brain, that it just doesn't matter whether you say, "No, that's regressive," or "No, that's the kind of traditional accounting for this sort of experience that has been long ago dismantled by this and this and this..." So, for me, that's a difficult thing, because on the one hand I'm obviously interested in being as smart and as knowing as I can be, and yet on the other hand, I don't want to deny what feel to me like rare moments of experiences of primacy. I don't want to pretend that those experiences don't exist.

BOB PERELMAN: It reminds me of what I said in my talk. I was trying to give my sense of why so much theory provokes such strong feelings of fear and disgust, and sometimes language writing gets put in that category too. I was saying you can categorize many kinds of theory as kinds of demystification and the scenario that seems so scary, painful, and wrong is that one's own experience, what one really knows, is said to be mystified—I think I'm being accurate to what you were just saying—and that the specter of these theorists are saying, "Gosh, you're deluded when you put on Mozart's Hofner symphony and get all excited. Gosh, you're wallowing in your bourgeois subjectivity, which is really narcissistic and solipsistic. What a fool!" And I do think it's very complicated historically, because on the one hand certainly a lot of theory does revel in attacking this notion of the deluded bourgeois self and wants to debunk ordinary values, and this is certainly true of early language writing, like some of the widely circulating sound bites about "Let us wage war upon the bourgeoisie." So on the one hand there's this whole conger of, you can call it avant-garde but in lots of quotes, theory, language writing, overturning, demystification, attack on normalcy, the bourgeois, also attack on the normalcy of the students, which makes for very odd pedagogy, but that happens all the time where students are attacked by the pedagogy, like "You poor deluded, cornfed ignoramuses. Here is Duchamp, or here is whatever..." And we can't deny that that's part of the dynamic of the avant-garde, of theory, of many things. So there are all sorts of complicated emerging, reemerging conversion narratives that often come into conflict with one another, and I don't think exhilaration and the experience that we're all valorizing is a primary given. I do

think somehow something happened to us where we learned about it or stumbled onto it. I'm not at all close to finishing this thought, because it's so contradictory, but there's the scandal, the transgressive, the theoretical overturning and debunking, that also does lead, in theory and sometimes in practice too, to exhilaration, and there are various states of exhilaration and good feeling.

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MARK LEVINE: What I was saying is that the kind of aesthetic exhilaration that I was talking about feels subjectively like a scandal, in a way. It feels transgressive. It doesn't confirm your subject position; in fact, it tells you that your subject position has been rigidified and that there's so much on the other side of your own boundedness that is being held out.

ALAN GOLDING: So you're trying to put your finger here, Mark, on an element of surprise.

BOB PERELMAN: There's a word, a French word—*jouissance*.

ALAN GOLDING: That could be the pleasure in the familiar, but it also sounds like you're talking about a different sort of pleasure or exhilaration that puts you in some other place, like someone taking the top of your head off.

THOMAS SWISS: I think this is one of the reasons why writers often feel out of place in institutions. In my MFA program I had this sense that I was among all these people who were demanding of me different things than I could produce at that particular moment, or wanted to produce. That's why I think sometimes museums are better models than academic institutions for this kind of work to be done across stations. That is, the best museums find ways to have artists working within them. They have curators doing what they do, they have the art educators doing what they do, and they have even the art critics, all in the same building, all respecting the different spaces that we are talking about here, without dismissing them or judging them the way I think MFA work often gets dismissed by Ph.D. work, or without that competition.