

13 Retro Keywords

...And Why They're Worth a Second Look

Art

In what follows I would like to examine the changing meanings and usages of the term “art” (as well as the concept “art”) since Raymond Williams encapsulated its historical etymologies and political contexts in *Keywords*. Such a re-examination necessitates, I think, a consideration of Williams’s method in the 1970s, and what his materialism means or how it functions today. His conclusions regarding the status of art must be placed in a historical context vis-à-vis twentieth-century Critical Theory and Marxism, for Williams’s ideas inform or reproduce or anticipate the “art world” conceptualism of such theorists as Arthur C. Danto and Pierre Bourdieu.

Williams’s technique in *Keywords* was to trace a material history of words’ meanings in usage. Or, rather, he was interested in words that contained in their history a conflict that was symptomatic of larger struggles. His most important methodological statement in *Keywords* may be where he links the semantic and the social:

the issues could not all be understood simply by analysis of the words. On the contrary, most of the social and intellectual issues, including both gradual developments and the

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most explicit controversies and conflicts, persisted within and beyond the linguistic analysis. Yet many of these issues, I found, could not really be thought through, and some of them, I believe, cannot even be focused unless we are conscious of the words as elements of the problems. (16)

Here we see Williams veering between the Scylla and Charybdis of twentieth-century Marxism: economism vs. idealism. At one extreme, we have the economism of Stalin, and at the other, cultural studies.¹ The idealism in Williams is that which stretches from semiotics to cultural studies: by which I mean stressing the necessity of the letter, of the word. But Williams is hardly some Brit *naïf*. His semiotics comes via Volosinov/Bakhtin,² and thus he locates his idealism in a class situation: "I was given the impression ... that these [differing uses of *culture*] arose mainly from the fact of an incomplete education" (16). Williams's bourgeois interlocutor assumed people using the word "culture" in an anthropological sense were merely scholarship boys. Williams's sense of class struggle is also to be found in the anecdote which opens *Keywords'* introduction, the origin if you will of the text: his return to Cambridge after military service (in a tank! like Billy Bragg!) during World War II. Williams's narratives are relevant because they place in a historical situation his methodology: looking at the meaning of keywords as a symptom of class struggle.

This technique resolves momentarily the great Saussurean binary of synchrony and diachrony. For, while Williams never makes the historicist error of arguing that we know the etymology of the word "art" when we use it now, we are nonetheless using a word that arrives sedimented in those moments of dissension. As well, Williams is quite Bakhtinian in that he avoids Saussure's idealism by situating words in the moment of the utterance: i.e., the class structure that obtains in academic speech genres or *habi-*

- 1 Therefore, "most **works of art** are effectively treated as commodities and most **artists**, even when they justly claim quite other intentions, are effectively treated as a category of independent *craftsmen* or *skilled workers* producing a certain kind of marginal commodity" (42): this is Stalinist, or economist, in the sense that Williams mistakes an economic transaction (the purchasing of art) for a determining condition. Some art is sold: but the differences between that which is sold in a mall gallery/framing shop to a lay purchaser and that which is sold by a more prestigious gallery to, say, a major institution (the National Gallery of Canada, the Museum of Modern Art) is vast.
- 2 Thus "the fusion of formal element and meaning ... is the result of a real process of social development, in the actual activities of speech and in the continuing development of a language. Indeed signs can exist only when this active social relationship is posited"—Williams's theorization here, in *Marxism and Literature* (37), is where his debt to Volosinov is most fully evident (35–42).

tus. In Mikhail Bakhtin's essay "The Problem of Speech Genres" (60–102), not available in the West until the 1980s, speech genres are conceived of at the level of the utterance, which exists in a social situation with the listener, as much as the speaker, integral to the process (since utterances are marked or framed by a change in speaking subject).

As we will see below, such a dialectical theory of the use of language is particularly pertinent in the case of art, which exists in a similar binary relationship between the aesthete and the philistine—or what Adorno, using an imperial vocabulary, called the barbarian (1–44). In spite of all this heady pedigree, or, rather, because of it, Williams's method is no longer radical; it has become mainstream even while its politics, and its theory, have been dropped. For Williams belongs to a different time, one of paper and *OED* supplements,³ which have now been replaced by PalmPilots and the Web.

Accompanying the spread of internet knowledge formations has been the diversification of the (English) language, beyond both the national confines that Williams restricted himself to, and the global or imperial status of the language today. How, in the tradition of Williams, are we to consider words with some currency in what Chuck D called "black people's CNN," or hip-hop: "def," "fly," "gat," "crib." Or, what is probably more challenging, how do we evaluate how this musical movement has resulted in any number of neologisms—from Missy Elliot's "ga-donk ga-donk donk" to the West Coast's "beeyatch" and Snoop Dogg's "fo' shnizzle"? In the first case, hip-hop has mined the vernacular: thus "fly" for instance, as in "flygirl" or *Superfly*, goes back to Dickens (*Bleak House*) and before, according to the *OED* (indeed, both the *OED* and the 2nd edition of the Merriam-Webster give "sharp" or "quick-witted" as meanings of the adjectival form). Similarly "gat" goes back at least to hardboiled and film noir vernaculars of the 1930s and 1940s. When, in the early '90s, "def jam" made it into an American dictionary, the record label of that name (famously started by Rick Rubin in his NYU dorm; home to RUN-DMC, the Beastie Boys, Public Enemy, LL Cool J) had a mock ceremony in which they buried the phrase. All of this is to demonstrate that Williams's claim that

We find a history and complexity of meanings; conscious changes, or consciously different uses; innovation, obsolescence, specialization, extension, overlap, transfer; or changes

3 In Williams's closing anecdote to the introduction to *Keywords* (26), he thanks a student in an adult education class, one Mr W. G. Heyman, who provided him with some suitably ragged version of the *OED*.

which are masked by a nominal continuity so that words which seem to have been there for centuries, with continuous general meanings, have come in fact to express radically different or radically variable, yet sometimes hardly noticed, meanings and implications of meaning. (17)

Hip-hop's neologisms, however, are a different matter—if they are neologisms at all. In addition to Missy Elliot's and Snoop Dogg's we can add the near-scattering of the Sugar Hill Gang's 1979 hit "Rapper's Delight": "I said a hip hop the hippie the hippie / to the hip hip hop, uh you don't stop" (from whence the genre's name came) or Snoop Dogg on Dr Dre's *The Chronic* (1992): "Bow wow wow yippy yo yippy yay." For in such instances we reach again the limits of Williams's rationalism, with discourse as a form of signifying (as African and African-American practice) or Kristevan semiotic (that pre-symbolic utterance which retains traces of the maternal imaginary).⁴

These limits and revision noted, how can one approach Williams and art at this juncture?

In terms of what art means today, a critic inspired by Williams might be tempted to trace its history as an ideologeme or unit of meaning in a social context of the globalization of the art market concomitant with the retreat of the avant-garde from the art object. Such an analysis comes from how Williams is quite confident and competent when showing the changes in its meanings; and yet he never quite reaches the analysis of Benjamin or Althusser. His work demonstrates the limits of sociological inquiry by pushing to the limit the notion of the artist as functionary; it's a form of literary Stalinism from without (and I mean that in the nicest of ways: hence Bakhtin). For what Williams's analysis pushes up against is the notion of an institutional theory of art, one that sees it purely in terms of a formal and material history. This was indeed the analysis that developed in the twilight of Williams's years, not so much in the work of John Berger as in what came out of institutional critiques from Arthur C. Danto on the right, to Craig Owens, *October* magazine, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement, Dick Hebdige, and Pierre Bourdieu.⁵

4 See, for "signifying," Henry Louis Gates, esp. 236–246. Julia Kristeva develops her theory of the semiotic in her book *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

5 A good bibliography of this period/tendency can be found in Owens 329–369. Douglas Crimp specifically provides a materialist account of the museum as institution. Berger, on the other hand, falls into the trap of demystification that Bourdieu has criticized. See also Michelson *et al.* for an anthology of writings from *October*.

The institutional theory of art postulates that art is not (only) the paintings themselves, not (only) a *category* for those material objects, but rather designates a social process whereby certain material (and immaterial) objects are made into art objects or discourses. Art is created institutionally: it is funded by public or private galleries or foundations; it is responded to by criticism in the media or academy; it is taught in official as well as unofficial venues; it is bought and sold by institutions (galleries, auction houses) as well as individuals; it is placed on the white walls of the white cube of the gallery and it is discussed in the ghetto (or is it a gated community?) of newspaper art sections. And finally this process or structure culminates in the “christening” of some object: at some point, overdetermination happens. Danto named this system of aesthetic confirmation the “art world”: he came up with the idea, famously, after seeing Andy Warhol’s Brillo boxes, objects that in their pop referentiality broke with the purity of modern art. If there was nothing intrinsic about the object or project or performance that made it art, Danto reasoned, therefore it must depend entirely on the institutions that together establish what art is. A similar argument can be made for culture in general (as does Hebdige, following Williams, in his book *Subculture: 5–19*) or for literature (as Eagleton, following Machery, did back in the 1970s and 1980s, in such works as *Criticism and Ideology*, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, and *Literary Theory*⁶).

Bourdieu has criticized Danto’s theory for its institutional indebtedness to the philosophical tradition (Bourdieu’s weak side was always his paranoia vis-à-vis other projects of demystification: but see also Perry Anderson’s recent connection of Bourdieu with Williams [Anderson 15]) and especially for its ahistorical nature: Danto’s “art world” is, according to Bourdieu (and it’s hard to disagree), merely there, an objective social structure (Bourdieu 254–7). We can test “art world” theories by looking at a local example, in this case the Canada Council, which recently instituted policies that require all persons applying for a visual art grant to have a show upcoming at a gallery or “recognized professional venue.” Neither the status of the “artist” nor “art” has to be defined, and instead the “venue” itself becomes both conceptual and actual gatekeeper. In effect, the Council abdicates its responsibility and outsources the conceptual definition to other agencies, to the galleries.

This finding seems to verify Williams’s hunch that concepts acquire meaning in a social situation (in this case, the evolution of arts bureau-

6 Eagleton, of course, was famously dismissive of Williams in *Criticism and Ideology*, characterizing Williams’s work as “an idealist and academicist project” (25); that this is not far off from Eagleton’s own work is argued by Alderson in his study of Eagleton.

cracies in Canada). It should be no surprise that once we penetrate the workings of these institutions, these venues, these galleries, the conceptual labour of “deciding” what is art becomes, not tautologically arbitrary (which can just be liberalism in disguise), but further evidence of the role of context. When I was working at an archive in an academic gallery in the mid 1990s, I came across a box which seemed to contain the long-lost film of a 1970s art event: there was a *frisson* in the room as we tried to determine if, in fact, that was the contents: both aesthetic and economic questions hung in the balance. More recently, another academic gallery transferred to DVD an artist’s “home movie” along with an art project from the early 1980s; again, physical objects’ status oscillated between “art” and “non-art.” Such liminality was only possible in the “art world” institutional context of a gallery: when the home movie sat in a box somewhere, it was not (yet) “art.”

These theories of “anti-art” come out of the art schools and gallery systems. And it is in the high theoretical art discourses of Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens, of the journal *October* and the critic Rosalind Krauss, that one finds the severest criticisms of the gallery and museum systems.⁷ Such ideologies were the end-product of a generation of material and historical inquiry that criticized the dominant institutions and uncovered the bloody context for culture in general. But these still fundamentally elite discourses are also met by the resistance of the popular. This resistance ranges from the elite classes using popular vernaculars and ideologies (hence Rudy Giuliani) to the masses themselves adopting such ideologies once made popular via elite channels. And it is in that dialectic between the official and the popular that Williams’s interest would lie, as does my own.

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7 To use a Canadian example, the *Vancouver Anthology* offered a historical critique of the role local and international institutions play in constructing the school of photoconceptualism. Danto, I should add, is an editor and critic for *The Nation* as well as *Artforum*.